



“Why Church: The Church Plays a Critical Role in Society”
Scripture – Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 8, 2017

These are tough times for the Christian Church in the West. Surveys to determine religious commitment reveal that a growing number of people check the box that says, “No Way. Absolutely not. By no means. Been there, done that and not going back.”

Many are delighted to see the Church wither and cannot wait to attend its memorial service. They eagerly anticipate the obituary of the Church, thinking that all Christians are anti-science, anti-environment, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-Muslim, anti-intellect, anti-pleasure, and anti-joy.

The first group of such folks we might name **The Liberated**. They grew up in a community of faith that did little more than batter their psyche. Week after week their self-image was shredded as the preacher declared that, in God’s eyes, they were nothing more than worthless sinners. Their portrait of God was a tornado ripping through a mobile home park. Any mention of God’s love was obliterated, so when they stepped out of church and slammed the door on the ruthless almighty, they could breathe again. As they began to rebuild their self-image, they felt the euphoria of emancipation.

A second batch of people thrilled to watch the Church die is **The Betrayed**. This group was taught that God had everything under control and would protect them from suffering. When that thin ice cracked and they plunged into the icy cold, it nullified the contract they had forged with God to keep them and theirs safe from calamity.

Then, there are **The Skeptics**. They walked away from the Church because – try as they might – they could no longer swallow a literal six day creation, an ark overflowing with animals, and Jesus strolling across a lake without getting wet. Failing to grasp the deeper meanings to which the poetry, parables, and metaphor pointed they fancied they had graduated from a religion for intellectual pygmies.

We also have **The Naïve**. They dropped out because a particular minister failed them. They had identified their pastor far too much with Jesus, and when it turned out that the pastor had clay feet, their frail faith melted as rapidly as a frozen margarita on an August afternoon.

Lest we not forget, the shrinking ranks of the Church are also due to **The Indignant**. They became riled whenever the Church stuck its neck out on a controversial issue. Rather than taking the safe road of coddling everyone’s conscience, the Church made the mistake of sounding too much like Jesus or one of the prophets when it came to war or racism or refugees. They marched away and created their own brand of spirituality devoid of demands to “do justice,” to “liberate the oppressed,” and to “love our neighbor.”

Perhaps the largest group no longer connected to the Church is **The Distracted**. They did not exit for any particular reason. They simply drifted away because there were too many other things vying for their attention. Children's sports, the beach, the Sunday paper, the tennis court, the internet – an endless array of diversions lured them away.

The Church is not now, and never has been, perfect. We are all too aware that the Church has had times when it was horrifically unChrist-like. We are appalled and embarrassed when we remember times when the Church demanded that people convert or die, roasted heretics at the stake, supported slavery, suppressed women, and fanned the flames of anti-Semitism. There is no doubt that the Church has a checkered past. However, while some believe that saying good-riddance to the Church would be a blessing, the truth is our world would suffer immensely.

Lest we forget, over the centuries, the Church was the primary institution that cared for people's needs. The Church created schools, cared for the sick, built orphanages, and fed people who were hungry. Today, in developing countries, the Church still plays many of these same roles. Think of the way our church family is making an impact on the lives of many Guatemalans by helping them secure clean water, improving their sanitation, supporting a health clinic, and encouraging micro-loans.

However, in the developed world where we live, the government, modern universities, and big business provide the lion's share of these functions that the Church once furnished. So, what is the Church's role in the developed world today?

One of the key roles the Church can play is to serve as a counter point to skewed values that destroy lives and undermine the trust that binds a society together. *Greed* led to the subprime mortgage crisis which put the economy into a tailspin. *Lust* destroys marriages. *Deceit* breeds divisiveness. *Strife* prompts violence. *Revenge* perpetuates it.

In Paul's Letter to the Galatians, he provides counsel on what ravages community and what bolsters it. He is writing to a church that is fracturing. They have become argumentative and accusatory, which has resulted in them splitting into warring factions. Paul believes the root of their problem can be traced back to self-indulgence, which he calls the "desires of the flesh." He lists some of these negative impulses – sexual recklessness, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, envy, bickering, and character assassination. He warns that these impulses sow seeds of destruction, and we see the proof throughout our society today.

There is no doubt in my mind that society suffers when religious faith diminishes. Surely it is not a coincidence that while membership in churches declines, we see an epidemic of drug use, the rise of hate groups, the fragmentation of communities, a surge in suicides, a waning concern for those Jesus called "the least of these," a growing alienation among people who hold different opinions, and we are no longer surprised when we hear of another mass murder.

Over the past week the news has been filled with the slaughter of innocents in Las Vegas. Many in the Church do not want pastors talking about guns. If we do, we are accused of being too political. If we question the sensibility of allowing our citizens to own semi-automatic rifles which can legally be turned into automatic weapons that fire like machine guns, we are stepping on someone's God-given rights to own lethal weapons.

Yet, if you know anything about Jesus, it is impossible to picture him witnessing hundreds of innocent people gunned down, and his only response being, "Let us light candles and pray for the families of the victims." Jesus had harsh words for people who ignored the poor. I can only imagine how caustic his words would be for Christians who cannot even take the baby steps of advocating a ban on semi-automatic weapons and armor piercing bullets.

Many congregations in our country will not hear a single word about guns this morning. Neither will preachers ask their members to reflect on why the United States has become one of the most violent nations on earth. Pastors will not question if there is something wrong in our souls if we have come to expect mass killings as part of life in 21st Century America. They will not ask such questions because they fear people will leave, or their job could be in jeopardy because many members want to strictly limit Christianity to a personal religious experience, rather than taking concrete steps to reduce violence and racism and homophobia and the evils that prevent us from creating a more just and merciful society. Thanks be to God that our community of faith fights against the forces that try to make the Church irrelevant by tackling a number of the problems that are shredding the fabric of our country.

The Church plays a critical role when it critiques society from the stance of Scripture. The Church plays a vital role when it holds up the values of God and asks not only if *individuals* are on the right path, but if the *nation* is heading in the best direction. The Church does not ask what is popular or what has the support of the majority. It asks what is right and true and good according to God.

When the Church is no longer the arbiter of values, others step into the void and push their own version of ethics. The entertainment industry, political groups, the business community, and pop culture all have their agendas and promote values that are not always the best for a society to thrive.

In today's passage, Paul clarifies the role of the Church when he contrasts the toxic desires of the flesh with what he calls the "fruit of the Spirit." If we will open our lives to God and allow Christ's Spirit to fill us, our self-indulgent impulses wither and are replaced by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are not merely "ideas to hold in our heads or sentiments to keep in our hearts,"¹ these are the values, attributes, and actions that strengthen bonds, boost confidence, reveal solutions, and inspire hope.

Theologian Charles Moore says, "We need a spirit-filled life that is capable of combating the corrosive ideologies of our age. Only when the Church lives out its original calling, as a contrast community and foretaste of God's coming reign, is there hope for the world."²

Because when the Church is faithful to its basic teachings of truth and goodness, when it carries out its core missions of mercy and justice, and when it is filled and fueled by the loving Spirit of Christ, it exposes evil, diminishes violence, improves overall living conditions, gives people a reason to get up in the morning, and instills hope that the world truly can move away from darkness and toward the light of a new day.

The Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia* and it means "those who are called out." We are those who are called out of ordinary lives to become the extraordinary body of Christ. We are called out to become the light in a world that is in the throes of darkness. We are called out to remind the world that those who live by the sword, die by the sword. God calls on us to show the world a better way by casting out the demons of racism and drugs and xenophobia, by healing wounds, spreading joy, loving generously, and showing the world the things that make for peace.

The Church can play a critical role in society, but only if we are faithful to our calling.

NOTES

1. Eugene Peterson's translation of Galatians 5:25-26 in *The Message*.
2. Charles E. Moore, *Called to Community*, (Walden, New York, Plough Publishing House, 2016), p.xvii.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! We join the chorus of creation in singing your praises, for you are steadfast in your love for us, and faithful to all generations! We give thanks, O God:

that you claim us at the font, and nourish us at your table,

that you draw near to us through prayer, and transform us by your Word,

that you call us to ministry, and send us out to bear your blessing to the world.

By your Spirit, we strive to be beacons of light in a world shadowed by despair. But, we often feel powerless in the face of senseless violence and unspeakable tragedy. So we lift anguished voices in prayer, as we await the day when *no* one will have cause to cry: How long, O Lord?

God With Us — whose heart breaks at the suffering of your children — we pray for the people of Las Vegas in the aftermath of a massacre that has left us all asking, “Why?” Be with the families who grieve loved ones lost, and with survivors who must live with scars, both seen and unseen. Be with first responders, who rushed towards the carnage, and with medical teams who worked tirelessly to save and preserve life. And be with our nation as we lament this culture of violence and work for peace. Give us courage, O God, to do what is necessary, so that no more communities must endure such tragedies.

God of Love — Our world is full of people who long for light, for peace, for food, for shelter. We remember those still struggling to rebuild in the wake of devastating hurricanes, and those in the path of hurricanes still to come. We remember those closer to home, who live without ... without sustenance, without security, without opportunity, without hope. We remember those whose sorrow and pain we carry in our own hearts, whom we name before you now in silence.

[Silence]

God of Grace — Who called the church into being and commissioned us for service — You have empowered us by your Spirit, and given us gifts to use for your glory ... Gifts of love and faithfulness, kindness and peace, generosity and joy. Help us, O God, to use these gifts here and now, in this world shadowed by despair, so that we might help build your kingdom on earth. Christ, be our light! Shine in your church, that we might bear your light to the world.

We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, and join our voices as one to offer the words he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen