

Following Jesus in a Post-Christian World

Matthew 9: 9-13

We are followers of Jesus. That is our identity, but what is this about us “following Jesus in a post-Christian” world?

Jesus lived in a pre-Christian world – before there was a Christian Church. He called Matthew and the other disciples in the context of a pre-Christian world. He spoke about and worked for recovering the ideals of Judaism, saying he had not “come to destroy the Law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.” He taught that the original intent of the Sabbath and of the Jubilee was to remind people of God’s love and God’s justice. He taught that the point of the Law was to assure inclusion and opportunity for the poor and the outcast. Jesus’ priorities centered in a desire to change this world into the image of God’s Kingdom.

All this was in the context of a pre-Christian world. Jesus left his followers without an institutional structure *per se* and without rules or governance other than “love one another.” Those disciples had their experiences of Jesus -- his life, death, and resurrection -- and their continuing experience of him.

Early Christian interpreters like Paul brought a radical message of inclusion centered in Jesus. Paul advocated that all Gentiles be included as God’s people without first having to become Jewish. He argued for the equality of all people including Gentiles, slaves, and women. He emphasized the importance of grace through faith for salvation instead of adherence to the Law. Gradually, the followers of the Way of Jesus gave way to the religion of Christianity.

More than twenty centuries now separate you and me from the world in which Jesus lived. 2000 years of church history has affected how we interpret Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence. For fifteen of those centuries, the Christian Church was a dominant force in the world, from the rise of Constantine through the flowering of the Enlightenment. The Church’s interpretation of Christianity through most of those years has formed a filter, a lens, through which we have looked at the life of Jesus. Until recently, most Christians have tended to filter out the pre-Christian context of Jesus’ life. We often forget that those who followed him were Jewish. They were committed to that faith and were attracted by Jesus’ efforts to reform that faith and change its political implications for his world.

The account of Jesus calling the disciple Matthew, as told in the Gospel of Matthew, took place in a pre-Christian context. Jesus was walking along while Matthew was working as a tax collector and said, “Follow me.” He just got up and followed. Then, the next thing we know, there is a dinner taking place. It’s probably in Matthew’s home because there were lots of tax collectors. Matthew threw a dinner for his new friends, the followers of Jesus, and some of his old friends came by. And Matthew must have welcomed them and invited them in to meet Jesus.

I'm not sure who invited the Pharisees, but they were around looking for trouble. "Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors? Why is he 'acting cozy with crooks and riff raff'?" (*The Message* translation) Jesus said three things in response. First, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." He took on the wisdom tradition of his day that saw good health and prosperity as proof of God's blessings. It also saw illness or being a "sinner" as a sign of the withholding of God's blessings. Second, he said "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." This is apparently a quotation but the source is not known. It certainly is a reference to the ancient prophet Micah who wrote, "What does the Lord require of you but to ... love mercy – [also] to do justice and walk humbly with God." Third, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." The justification for discipleship, for inclusion at the table, is not righteousness but the need and desire to be there.

We don't know how accurately this depicts what might have been the actual call of the disciple Matthew. What the Bible tells us for sure is that Jesus called people to join him in learning, helping his ministry, and undergoing a transformational experience in their lives.

This story reminds us that Jesus still calls followers today, in a post Christian world." Though it is a provocative title for this sermon, "Post-Christian World" is just a way to describe a world that is quite different, in terms of Christianity, from the world of the last 1500 years. We live in a "society that is no longer rooted in the language and assumptions of Christianity, though it had previously been in an environment of ubiquitous Christianity (Christendom). A post-Christian world then is one where Christianity is no longer the dominant civil religion, but one that has changed to embrace values, culture, and worldviews that are not necessarily Christian.

Christian author and mystic Thomas Merton's wrote a book in the early 1960's that was not published until fairly recently. It is titled *Peace in a Post-Christian World*. He is not describing a world that has forgotten Jesus, but is describing a time when the role of the Christian Church has changed significantly. Many Christian doctrines and perspectives that had been assumed for centuries are being questioned not only from without, but from within the Church. This is a time when many intellectually-oriented people, who have in the past filled the ranks of mainline churches – moderate to liberal in their theology – have decided that the Church may have very little to offer them.

We live in a time of crisis for the Christian Church, but also a time of opportunity for the Church to rediscover its essential calling - find its roots. One criticism of the Church in recent years has been its lack of a clear and compelling message. What is the core of the Church's message today? How do Christians relate with integrity to the world today? These are questions that confront and challenge us. There are new concerns and age-old concerns. There may be no more real differences within the Church than in centuries past, but they are being expressed more openly than before.

Scholarship has changed things. There is a vast amount of new biblical and theological knowledge available. It is now possible to touch the world of Jesus in a way that has not

been possible since a generation after his death! The implications of this knowledge challenge many people's understanding of how the Bible developed. At the same time, archaeological discoveries of places referred to in the Bible seem to give at least a measure of credibility to the historical accuracy of these stories.

Scientific knowledge continues to expand almost as fast as the universe itself. Much of it challenges the "scientific" assumptions of the Bible, its theistic images of God, and the miracle stories. Cosmic and quantum physics actually suggest a spiritual aspect inherent in the world of matter – a mystery that can seem akin to religious mystery. Many things are possible, but very little seems certain anymore.

Questions confront Christians today. What are the opportunities for us in following Christ today? Where might the journey be going? Is Church useful to our society? Is it valuable for most people in the living of their lives now? Despite what we may think about these questions, they need to be asked. They also need to be answered honestly by those of us who follow Jesus.

Each of us begins the journey of following Jesus differently. That journey also continues in ways that are individual for each of us. My sense of call at this time is to walk with this congregation as it seeks to translate a deeply rooted biblical faith into the language of a post-Einstein, quantum physics, post-Enlightenment, fundamentalist-filled 21st century universe.

I see Crossroads as having an opportunity to help the Christian Church make the shift into the 21st century and also to bring the 21st century Church back to its roots of following Jesus. The Christian journey is all about change, about transformation into the image of God seen in Jesus, and about a change in attitude from scarcity and fear to abundance and hope. Our mission is nothing less than being partners with the Spirit to change the world.

How will we accomplish this mission? First, we must decide that we will be full partners with the Spirit, doing our best and giving our utmost while trusting that God is always seeking peace and justice in partnership with us. This is *stewardship*. Then, we must decide how we will be church – how we will minister and reach out in love, sharing the life of God with each other and with others. This is *Sabbath!*

A really effective way to practice stewardship and Sabbath, as well as to practice the freedom in which Christ has made us free, is by asking questions. Questions reveal truth about our selves, our world, and our faith. Our questions propel us forward on the journey. They connect us to each other as well. More often than not, we hold our questions more in common than our answers. Never stop asking questions of yourself and of our faith. Never stop letting your answers change you and help us grow.

Jesus' disciples follow him in a pre-Christian world. They were seeking something to make their lives better and it changed their lives forever. They found something worth giving their lives to. Eventually they died for something worth giving their lives for. The

same is true today, following Jesus in a post-Christian world that is often just as uncertain as that first-century world. It gives us something worthy of our life's investment. When we die, we will have something worthy of having given ourselves to completely. I invite you to give of yourself that fully. We are blessed to follow Jesus – blessed to be in community together and with all people and all nations. We are blessed to be here at this time and in this place, and to share our journeys together in Jesus' name.