

Easter 6A 2017, May 21, 2017, Acts 17:22-31, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Several years ago someone gave me a copy of an old Life magazine from the 1950's. This particular issue was devoted to the various expressions of religious life in America. There were articles on Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, Lutherans and Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists. As a kind of side-bar there was one small article on Judaism. But as you can tell from the list I gave you, the religious scene covered was limited to strictly mainline, mostly Protestant Christian religious life. What really caught my eye, however, was a headline introducing this special issue devoted to religion in America. Across the top of the page read these words, "Religion is at the center of this Christian nation." It was that phrase "Christian nation" which leapt right out at me. Even though I was born in the 1950's I grew up in the whirlwind of rapid social change that was the 1960's and 1970's. The Vietnam War, political assassinations, Watergate, were all causes and symptoms of breakdowns in trust of established religious and political institutions. Today America is a much different place envisioned by Life magazine in the 1950's. Some say for the better. Some say for the worse.

We are a much more diverse society and religion is playing a much different role within our culture. A generation ago most people simply assumed and assigned a pre-eminent place to Christianity in society. That Christianity was largely of a mainline Protestant variety. Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans were the main actors in the religious scene of the early to middle part of the 20th century. And let's face it, our place as a denomination and as a congregation was, in part, to play a role in supporting that influence and dominance in our culture. It was only fifty years ago there was a lively debate in this country whether it was acceptable to elect a Roman Catholic as president of the United States. Today that's all changed. The mainline Protestant denominations have lost much of their influence and Christianity as a whole has retreated into a more individualistic place in society. A whole host of religions and spiritualities are taking its place. Articles in our local newspaper have reported on religious communities as diverse as Bahais and nature religions. Our own building has hosted Hindu Nepali weddings. But the fastest growing religious group in America are called the "nones," meaning those who chose "nothing in particular" or "none" when they are surveyed about their religious affiliation.

Some may wring their hands and wonder if there's anything that can be done to return us to the former days when we believed we were a Christian nation. Others will resist any attempt to acknowledge and celebrate our religious diversity. But most will simply feel paralyzed by the loss of support for religion in what some will call the public square. Religious faith becomes increasingly a private and personal matter, another lifestyle choice like taking up yoga or kayaking or gardening. The Sunday morning hours once dedicated to worship are now prime time for coffee and newspaper or heading to the garden store to start the day on projects around the house. I must admit I live in a sheltered Sunday morning world. 99% of the time I'm here in church. But there have been occasions when I've been out in the world on a Sunday morning and I have to say how amazed I am at the hustle and bustle of commerce and activity that takes place. We are clearly not a country in which Sunday morning is devoted to church and rest anymore.

I have now come to the conclusion that America is experiencing the collapse of Christendom. Not the collapse of Christianity, but of Christendom. The word Christendom signifies the pre-eminent and dominant role of Christianity in shaping our culture and influencing our lives. Christendom encompasses all the ways Christianity used to exercise

influence in culture: Christian prayers in the public schools and opening sessions of Congress and city councils. Christendom means a quiet Sunday in which lawn mowers and leaf blowers are silent, stores closed and only hospitals and fire departments are open. Christendom means an informal religious test for all holders of public office in which the electorate will only vote for someone who demonstrates a Christian piety in public, usually by publicly going to church. This Christendom is rapidly disappearing and in many places is almost entirely disappeared.

We are rapidly returning to another age, a much older age. A time when Christianity was not the majority religion but actually the minority religion. We are rapidly returning to the time of the New Testament. Our first reading from the book of Acts this morning returns us to a time when the Christian faith was young and new and not many people knew about it. It was also a time, like our own, of great religious diversity. Temples enshrined different gods on just about every street corner. Paul, the speaker in Acts, was well-versed in taking the Christian message into the religiously pluralistic world. Raised as a zealous Jew, he was also educated in the schools of Greek religious philosophy. Late in life he encountered the living Jesus and became a follower of the risen Christ. He believed his commission directed him to the Gentiles, to those religiously plural Greeks who worshipped a variety of gods.

In our reading today Paul is giving a sermon to these Greeks. He takes a survey of the religious landscape and notes the wide variety of religious shrines that exist in the city. He comes across one such shrine inscribed to "An Unknown God." This shrine was apparently to a god without a name, a kind of cover-all-your bases kind of god. So if all the other gods couldn't or wouldn't answer the prayer requests of the people then prayers might be directed to this unknown god. Paul uses this catch-all shrine as an opportunity to proclaim how a god previously unknown to the Athenians is now made known to all. This unknown god is, according to Paul's proclamation, the one God who created all things and is, in fact, the source of all spiritual and religious longing and searching. And now, Paul is saying, your search is over and your longing is fulfilled. This God, this God of creation of all things and all people, now invites you to turn to him and live. And to show that his promise is real and can be trusted this God has raised Jesus from the dead.

We may no longer be as uniform in our religious life as we once were as a nation. Organized religion, especially the mainline Protestant variety, is having some rough times. But that doesn't mean people aren't hurting spiritually and seeking a word of hope. People are still broken, still longing for peace and fulfillment. At our heart, our core as a church, is still that message of hope found in the resurrection of Jesus. For it means that his life of love for those in the world who are most hurting, most feeling unloved still remains true, because he lives. We still have that message, but for the world to hear it and embrace it we must shed any of the pretensions we once had as culturally privileged and influential. For hurting people will find us more interested in maintaining a status quo than walking with them in their journey towards healing and hope.

The reality is we are all hurting and in need of healing is some way or another. We bring to God our secret faults and failings and fears. And here we have found that hope because we have met the one who welcomes all and invites us to sit and dine with him and experience his love and forgiveness. Our calling then is simply to be those beggars showing other beggars where they can find bread. Here at this altar Jesus invites to join in his life poured out for the whole world. The only real privilege we have as a community in Christ is the privilege to share Jesus with others. Amen.