

Losing Our Bearings

During the past two years, I have been invited to speak in a wide variety of church settings in many different parts of our country. Recently, a number of these engagements have taken place in what is commonly called the "Bible Belt," where church attendance is still high -- but so are emotions of anger and fear in regard to Muslims or people radically different from the majority culture. In one such setting this summer, when I was teaching on the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity, a middle aged man stood up and said, "Pastor, I know what you are trying to do, but I am sorry, I moved to this town purposely with my wife and children a few years ago to be in a place where we could be surrounded by people like ourselves. I do not want a Muslim anywhere near me. What I say probably does not sound so good, but that's where I am at." As I stood there at the podium, I applauded this man for his honesty and I continued with my teachings from the Gospels. By the end of the weekend seminar, this man had made a 180 degree change. He joined a chorus of other people from his church who came up with the idea of inviting Muslim students to Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners in their homes this fall and winter. He said that being reminded of the teachings of Jesus had softened his heart.

This honest man represents so much of America today, not just in the Bible Belt, but in every state in our union. American Christians are sadly spending an increasing amount of time on social media, religiously listening to their televisions and forming spiritual and emotional opinions from the secular news sources of their choice. Secularism is growing at a rapid rate in our country, surrounding churches and practicing Christians as never before. Technology now offers us opportunities to be bathed in images and people talking to and making impressions on us 24 hours a day. Christians are filling their minds with words and images from the world, not from the kingdom of God, to the point where they can hardly distinguish between the two.

We are at a moment in history when we need to remind ourselves that the world has its own prince, its own kingdom, which is incredibly alluring, seductive and cunning. It is not the same as the kingdom of God. In fact, God's kingdom is slowly coming to earth to replace the kingdom of this world. These two kingdoms are in opposition to each other. Think about it, every time you say the Lord's Prayer, you are reminded of this fact: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of this world is often crass, self-serving, power hungry, cynical, in love with money, violent and divisive. And, on a daily basis, it is recruiting you to join its cause. If Christians are not careful, they will find themselves espousing values of the world, not knowing how much they are in opposition to the kingdom of God. The only thing that can keep you from falling into this trap is making time to listen carefully and often to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Recently, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook announced that his company has a new mission statement. He now envisions and wants Facebook "To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." He says, "Facebook is now about community-building and not just connecting with friends." In recent interviews, Mr. Zuckerberg says he sees the world changing with less people going to church and joining other older established community organizations. He thinks Facebook can fill that gap and create the new kind of community people need. Oh really? Can Facebook create the same kind of community the Church of Jesus Christ has for the past 2000 years? Can an organization that celebrates self-promotion, self-importance, self-aggrandizement, and image glorification, at a distance, ever replace face-to-face gatherings of humble, praying, faithful people getting together to break bread, share stories and resources, read the Word of God, look at each other in the eye, and bind up each other's wounds through the loving grace of God? It is up to faithful Christians today to answer this question.



Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook

Jesus instructed his disciples to get together often; in fact, many of them lived together. He did not say, stay in your own rooms and relate to each other through a collection of images. He did not say, walk down a street, sit on a donkey, or eat a meal at a restaurant with your head buried in some kind of communication device. He said, forgive someone who owes you money, pray for those who persecute you, love people radically different from yourself, judge not or you will be judged, give away a second shirt if you have two, love those who hate you, turn the other cheek, reconcile with your adversary on the way to court, listen before speaking, wash each other's feet, because the last shall be first and the first last.

Koreans, Chinese, Brazilian and Nigerian missionaries are sending themselves as missionaries into the Western world, as never before. They know that in the United States, Europe and Canada especially, secular society is making major inroads into Christian community, heavily influencing how people think, drawing them further and further away from the teachings of Jesus. For this reason, Nigerian missionaries have started new churches throughout the United States, now numbering in the thousands. Some African mission organizations hope to establish a church in every city in the United States in the near future. They hope to revive the American Church so that people are not tempted to leave worshipping God and satisfy their need for community in unhealthy and ungodly ways; so that the kingdom of the world does not choke out the kingdom of God in North America.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the people in Philippi, the following words; "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8-9) In other words, our minds

should be filled with grace, not rancor. Our first impulse should be to serve quietly, not call attention to ourselves. We should be ambassadors of reconciliation, not divisiveness and anger. We should not allow spirits of fear or anxiety to rule our lives. As followers of Jesus, we need to be incredibly vigilant as to how the messages of the world might be slowly creeping into our lives and into our daily thoughts. The earmarks of our lives should be faith, hope and love.

Many media sources today are providing non-stop commentary on everything that moves; and we are eating it up. We are becoming a society that fears silence and prizes chatter. If we do not make an image of ourselves and send it to someone, the moment might not have value, or so our thinking goes. Clearly, we are racing towards creating greater internet community, but at what cost? We are uncomfortable with silence because we are uncomfortable with ourselves. In our subconscious, we reason, if there is no God, then we are truly alone, and that frightens us to death.



We are now in September, the beginning of the new "school year:" it is when people are most inclined to join a Christian community, or seek a greater understanding of Jesus, his teachings, and his Church. What if this year, you would allow yourself one hour a week to sit still in a church service and just listen to what is being said about the life of Jesus; or take 15 minutes a day to read and pray through one of the Gospels on your own? We are in constant need to renew our minds in the grace of our Lord. No one ever said it better than the Apostle Paul when he wrote the following to the Romans; "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)



If you feel as if somehow you have recently lost your bearings, don't panic. There are many people in our country who feel the same way. But, there is a way home. And, this way is through the words of Jesus. If we listen to him, he will lead us safely to his calm waters -- to his peaceful kingdom in our hearts and minds.