

Proclaim Jubilee

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Deuteronomy 15:1-15 Luke 24:44-53

I.

Good news or bad news? More people in America than ever before are being honest about the fact that they don't go to church! The headline reads: "**New Pew Research Center Study Examines America's Changing Religious Landscape** *Survey of 35,000 Americans Finds Christians Have Declined Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Have Continued to Grow*".ⁱ Some people, it turns out, are going to Hindu temples, mosques and a myriad of other houses of worship. And many aren't going. And a growing minority are being honest about not being affiliated religiously. An interesting little statistic is that more people are switching than ever before, leaving the faith of their childhood for something else—and the only ones gaining more than they are losing are some evangelical churches—but don't get too excited—10 % more have joined, but 8% have left.

More than a decade ago, in a work entitled *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, Harvard researcher and comparative religion scholar Diana Eck more closely documented the growing interfaith character of the nation, something I for one celebrate.ⁱⁱ The loss of members? Pastors have been pulling their hair out over it for the past thirty years. And it has all hit the press once again. What you and I have been noticing about church attendance in one congregation over the past generation is part of a national trend—or to be more accurate a whole bunch of national trends.

In the world of a pastor, now a world full of blogs and online commentary, all this has occasioned numerous opportunities for instructive articles on what Christianity has been doing wrong in America. Problem is that a quick survey of the literature (meaning my own reading up to this point) reveals a hodge-podge of speculations about why many "Millennials" don't like to go to church. For one writer it is the hypocrisy of the churches. For others it is the boring preaching. For another it is worship that is more of a media show than real worship; for another still it is worship that is traditional and therefore not captivating. For another it is the failure to grasp the importance of social media. Go figure. There's truth in all of the above, right. But one plus one plus one still doesn't equal 10. Especially when the reasoning of one commentator contradicts another's.

II.

The subject of the Recent Survey came up at a Thursday gathering of Emmanuel Friedens folk this week. And earlier in the day it had come up in conversation about how a

church like ours might make itself better known. To help me think about all this I recently asked some questions to one of my favorite twenty-something people, someone who grew up with a very positive experience of church, and who has finally quit looking after diligently working for some years to find a community of faith where he might feel like he belonged. My survey subject of one may be back some day, he says, but he isn't sure when.

I asked the question: What should we be putting out as a message that might catch the attention of someone like you? My friend's response was simple. "So what if you catch my attention? When I get there, is there any reason I would want to be part of your community? Do you have anything?"

My friend's experience in visiting churches has been a bit painful: moving to a new city and new churches it was very difficult to get in. These were faith communities that purported to be welcoming. Their theology was open, and affirming. But it was hard to become part of the communities, and it was not immediately apparent why someone would bother. My friend no longer misses the Sunday morning routine. But he did say there was one thing he did miss. And that was a place for having deep conversations, in the setting of intergenerational relationships: conversations that allow for open questions—and that are based on trust and respect. In short, he misses being part of a community in which to wrestle, learn, grow, and find support. He also misses being part of a community with a real sense of social witness and mission.

Now that is just one friend, someone I love and respect, and take seriously, who doesn't go to church. I figured it would be good to talk about it, not to try to recruit, but rather to understand. He was grateful to have the questions without any sense of guilt or attempt to pressure him into "going to church" just for the sake of it, and with the knowledge that I really wanted to know! I figure the next conversation with another friend will have different perspectives. And I will try to listen just as carefully. I suggest you do the same—call someone you love and trust who doesn't go to church any more. And without trying to recruit, ask what sort of message from your congregation might get someone like them interested. I bet you will be surprised by the response—by how thoughtful it is, and how caring, and perhaps by how much pain is hidden in it.

III.

When everything was in danger of coming apart in the still fledgling movement that ultimately came to be called Christianity, their leader dead and the followers scattered, our faith story has it that Jesus himself stood among his friends, wounded hands and all, ate with them, and finally led them out to the place where he would be leaving them again, the town of Bethany where his friends Mary and Martha lived. In his final words to them, just before he offered a final blessing, he told them that in the days to come they would be offering a revolutionary message not just to the people of one country, but to all the peoples of the world—a message calling the nations to a new way of love and justice, a way of forgiveness and liberation. And then he told them to go back: go back to the city, and be together in

community, because there was a spirit coming, a new kind of force that was going to transform them, give them light and strength.

Jesus had a big message for all of humanity—big enough to turn the world upside down. And he asked his friends to go start living it out together in community with each other and with the people around them. For starters!

Now the question that has really got me going from my friend’s conversation is this question: ***Do we have anything?*** I can imagine the friends of Jesus, asking the same question as they trudged back to town having lost their messiah yet again. And speaking confessionally, Christianity, nine times out of ten, you and me included, has fallen far short of the revolutionary, loving, risk-taking, forgiving, healing, justice-seeking character of our founder.

I’m not saying that we would grow numerically if we offered the Jesus kind of message full strength! We might shrink! But that would be a cause worth growing for earnestly or shrinking for joyfully.

What the heck. Let’s do it. We are going to offer this message of liberation and forgiveness, a vision big enough for the nations. And what is that message? Just look at Luke’s gospel! Jesus calls for a redistribution of wealth, for the release of the captive and the prisoner! He calls for the radical forgiveness of debts, and a return of homes and land to those from whom they have been taken-- not just his own people, but all the nations! He calls for peace with justice in the place of hostility and war.

What are we to do with big message? For starters we are going to try to live the big message in a small community. Not just a message of words, but life together: deep questions, sharing together and with strangers. We will talk and live not just a message and a small community, but also practice Love in action, when and where we are called. Openly, humbly and insistently

I am convinced that this little congregation, housed in this big building, has a share in that Spirit—the one Jesus was saying would come and did. We have something special going here, something that is in need of sharing. This ***is*** a community that you can become part of. We ***have*** the capacity and the desire to talk about deep questions openly and lovingly, and the willingness to take risks individually and together for the sake of Love. I know it because last week in Sunday School we had a great conversation about changing conceptions and images of who God is. And people listened and discussed well! And David Chancey, David who was leading the discussion, said, “We could talk about this subject for the next five or six years!” And we all agreed, yes, and we are ***going*** to! We do have something here—something bigger than us. It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor here, black or white, gay, straight, or bi, Jew or Greek, male, female or transgender. We have got that part of the message of Jesus, there is a Spirit in the midst of us and we are living it out, one step at a time.

When the church becomes a social club or institution primarily worried about its own survival, it is no longer actually the church. Then it doesn't matter if it grows or shrinks. It may as well be dead already, so far as being Christ's presence in the world. It may be the national religion. But that isn't the same thing as being the upside down turning spiritual movement of Jesus. But *this* congregation, and many others including some within a block, is in no danger of that kind of death.

This Emmanuel Friedens congregation is a faith community where people care for each other when we are sick. We listen to each other when we are struggling, and offer insight and support. We are open to different understandings of scripture, and we are doing our level best to walk with Jesus, in some ways many folk don't know that any churches are even interested in.

May the living Spirit be our guide and stay together in this community and to the ends of the world—today and in the days to come. And may the friends we haven't met yet, those who long for the conversation, need the care, and have the gifts to offer—may these others find their way to us, that we may offer hospitality and love, and be strengthened for the joyful pilgrimage ahead. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/new-pew-research-center-study-examines-americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

ⁱⁱ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, HarperCollins, 2001