

“The Problems with the Church These Days”

Hespeler, February 4, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-11, 20c, [1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#), Mark 1:29-39

Hey, do you want to hear what is wrong with the Christian church these days? I can tell you, you know. Or maybe let me rephrase that a little bit. I have people tell me all the time what they think the problem with the church is today. And they are always so sure that they are right that it must be so, right?

Sunday Mornings

For example, I have been confidently assured that the problem with the church today is Sunday shopping. Yes, the real problem that the church has is that people have the possibility of going out and buying their groceries or picking up a nice new outfit to wear at some point in time between 9 am and noon on the first day of the week.

Oh, but there is more than just the hours of business at the local shopping mall. It is also sports leagues. Yes, the other problem with the church is that sports organizations schedule their games and practices and rent out their ice and fields at any hour on Sunday mornings. Can you imagine that?

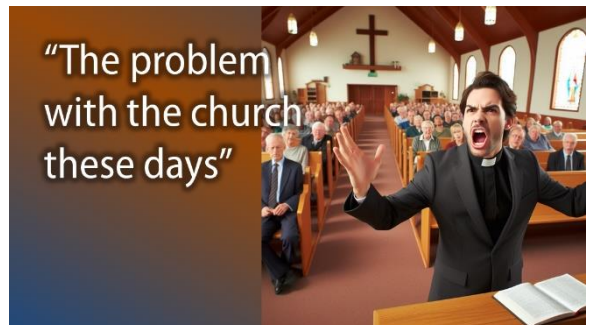
People Not Joining in

Oh, but there is more to it than that. No, I can give you a whole litany of the problems with the church. It is also that people don't want to sit on committees, and they don't want to join the various groups in the church.

And, if I can be frank here – and remember that this is all assured data that has been fed to me consistently so I guess it must be true – it is particularly the fault of the younger generation. Yes, whereas previous generations were only too happy to come out and attend these long meetings and participate in women's groups and bake pies and cookies and all kinds of other things to support the work of the church, apparently these younger folks today just say they don't have the time.

Oh, and there's more. Shall I go on? Another big problem with the church today is that people don't like the right kinds of music. And they don't like big wordy long prayers and they're not even appreciative enough of hardwood benches that might be a little hard to sit on but are beautiful to look at.

That, I have been confidently told again and again, is precisely the problem with the church today. And, no, I am not saying that those are the things that people at St. Andrews are always telling me. I get it from various places and even from people who never go to church themselves.



How We Deal with our Challenges

And, yes, I probably did exaggerate what I often take to be the subtext underneath many of the comments that people do make. But I am pretty sure that many of those kinds of sentiments sound somewhat familiar to you. They are part of our litany of lament as we think about some of the problems that are facing the church today.

But I wanted to reflect them back to you for a moment because I think those kinds of comments are emblematic of the way that we do think about the problems that face the church. And I want you to notice how I phrased them.

Absolutely nothing in what I just said to you was about what the church does or fails to do. Everything I said was just a complaint about what everyone else does or doesn't do. And I suggest you that that is how we tend to think of the problems that do face the church today. We are usually only too happy to focus on what we see as the deficiencies of the society or the changes that we don't like.

Will Things Go Back to how they Were?

Now, it is not as if there is nothing to any of these laments that we raise. There is no question that society has changed in some very dramatic ways over the last few decades and that those changes have created challenges for the centuries-old institution that is the Protestant church – an institution that has not proved itself to be very good at dealing with change.

But I'm sure you can see the problem with this mode of thinking. If the root problem facing the church is that the world has changed, then the only possible cure for the church is for world to just spontaneously decide that everything should go back to exactly how things used to be. And, even if there were some good things about how things used to be, what do you suppose is the likelihood of that happening?

Paul's Approach

That is why I find the approach of the Apostle Paul to be so refreshing. Paul dedicated his life, once he had met the risen Jesus, to building up the Christian church and to tearing down the barriers that kept people away from Jesus and his message. He pushed to include all sorts of people – people that others objected to – into the life of the church. And he seems to have been extremely successful in all of this, founding several churches all over Asia Minor and the Greek peninsula. He did this despite a great deal of opposition from fellow Christians, Jews and even many local officials.

So, I can't help but think that we might be able to learn a few things from Paul and how he approached his work. He explains his approach in our reading from First Corinthians this morning. And do you want to know what I noticed first when I read it? I noticed that Paul spent no time at all talking about what the society around him needed to change in order to help his work.

He didn't call on the emperor to shut down the local market or the chariot races on Sunday mornings. He also didn't complain about people not being available to sit on committees or about how they didn't want to listen to his sermons the way he liked to preach them.

Meeting People Where they are

Instead, Paul describes his strategy to us. **“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God’s law but am within Christ’s law) so that I might gain those outside the law.”**

The message could not be more clear. Far from blaming other people for being where they are, Paul makes a point of meeting them there. And he does this in spite of his own sense of identity. He is willing to suspend his Jewishness and his sense of what law he is responsible to in order to meet the people exactly where they are.

Other People’s Weakness

But he goes even further than that. You see, the church has often fallen into the temptation of thinking that its failures are the result of other people’s weaknesses. We like to say that it is because other people lack in commitment or faith or faithfulness or just because they don’t want to do the work that the church has failed. The church, in a classic display of projection, is unwilling to see its own weakness and so it projects that weakness onto others.

Complaining about other people’s weakness can often feel satisfying and it is certainly habit forming, but Paul offers the perfect antidote: **“To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”**

Walking in their Moccasins

Paul is telling us that whenever we are tempted to perceive someone else as weak, what we need to do is put ourselves in their position. It is like the Indigenous North American proverb that says that you must never judge another until you have walked a mile in their moccasins.

And the truth of the matter is that, once you do that, what you usually discover is that what you perceived as weakness was something very different.

When, for example, people are struggling with economic difficulties, it is often very easy just to write them off and accuse them of being lazy. “People just don’t want to work these days,” has become a common refrain. But I honestly believe that there are few who are truly lazy in that sense.

People often have some pretty good reasons for why they are not working or not working enough to cover their bills. Sometimes, wages have been set so low that people can’t actually afford to live in a place and do the work because they cannot afford the rent and cost of living. Therefore, for them to take that job would be to choose to fall even more behind economically speaking.

I think this is certainly true when it comes to the work of the church. I really do think that people are motivated to contribute to the important and meaningful work that the church is doing. They would love to be a part of spreading good news and helping people out as they face the struggles of life. What more meaningful work is there than that?

Barriers in the Way

So, if people are not doing that, I don't really think it's because there's something wrong with them. It's because other barriers are in the way. It is because the church has conceived itself and its activities in a way that do not fit into people's lives and sense of priorities.

And so if, for example, younger women aren't interested in joining missionary groups or other similar organizations in the church, it has little to do with them not agreeing with the goals of those organizations.

It certainly has a lot to do with an economic situation that forces almost all adults to take on full-time careers in addition to taking care of substantial family needs just in order to break even. And it probably also has a great deal to do with how they order and organize their social world. But it certainly doesn't have anything to do with a deficiency or weakness.

Becoming Partners

That is why what Paul writes to the Corinthian church ought to be emblazoned on the door of every one of our churches. **"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it."** The job of the church is not to simply continue to be what it is always been and expect everyone else to conform to its way of doing things. The job of the church is to become a partner with anyone who is able to share in the good news.

For that reason, the church needs to be adapting itself to the needs of its partners rather than demanding that those partners adapt to the needs of the church. The simple recognition, for example, that families these days are often stretched to the limit could go a long way. They are on the run earning what they need to survive five or six days a week. They are on the run providing for the needs and the development of their children. They are doing the right thing.

Moving in the Right Direction

That doesn't mean that they don't recognize that the church is a part of doing the right thing for their family. But it does mean that the church may not fit into their lives in the way that has worked for other generations. As the church finds ways to partner with such families where they are in their lives, we will discover new strength.

And I will confess that that is something that this church is still working on, but I do think that how we have been finding ways to allow kids to be kids in our worship service, to be a part of our worshipping life, has been a really good step in a good direction.

There are many challenges facing the church today. But whenever you are tempted to explain away all of those challenges by laying blame on the society outside of the church, you are not going to get anywhere. That is a non-committed conversation, and, as we learned last week, those will get us nowhere. It is in our commitment to meet people where they are, to love them as they are, and partner with them in a way that values them and the challenges they are dealing with, that we will find the greatest strength for the church.