

The Church Relevant: “What Does Society Miss When the Church Neglects the Heavy Stuff?”
 (First in the Series, March 10, 2019) Text: Matthew 23:23
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This series of sermons began with an article I read about leadership in the church and a much-needed understanding of Matthew 23:23. Jesus said it this way. “Instead of taking up the heavier matters of the laws of God, you just keeping snipping your precious little herbs.” Today we begin a series of sermons about what I think needs a healthy, serious examination. I am asking questions about what affects the church here in the United States. I’m seeking answers about why the church in the U. S. is losing or has lost its relevance in our society.

That’s when I realized you and I need to take a stand about what we really believe is important in our faith. Most of the time I am talking **to** you. Today, and over the next four weeks, I want to talk **with** you about how important this is. So, the sermon today is the beginning of a journey that will take up these five weeks ahead of us. It presents the question. Today will seem a to spew from the dark side. Yet, my hope is that the five sermons on the relevancy of the church will initiate conversation and actions that will contribute to the awakening of the church once more in the religious landscape of the United States.

Let’s begin. Mainline churches are asking why the numbers of constituents continue to weaken. By mainline, I mean Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Lutheran. Why are congregations from among them, like our congregation, represented by aging demographics, and why won’t young people just buy into their message with activities? Presbyterian theologian John Leith once wrote that the greatest danger to the church is not paganism, doubt, or heresy, but the “distortion of the church’s message.”¹ Was he on to something about what our church in the U.S. is facing today?

To cope, those same churches grasp at most anything that will “attract” newcomers. Newcomers, among the few there are, typically are not people from outside the faith. Let me illustrate with the story of the church in Germany. What has already happened in Germany is an example of what is happening in the United States now. Recall that Germany is the birthplace of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, but since the middle of the 20th century, the country has seen a dramatic shift away from Protestantism . . . Protestants represented a majority (59%) of Germany’s population in 1950, . . . Over the next 60 years, the

¹Citing James C. Goodloe IV, “Beyond Crisis to the Long Game,” citing John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 1981

share of Protestants fell 30 percentage points . . . [Protestants and Catholics] each included roughly three-in-ten Germans, based on 2010 membership data.²

But, how does that compare to the U.S. church today and inform us? The facts are revealing. Take note of what you hear in the next five minutes:

Protestants no longer make up a majority of U.S. adults. The U.S. has a long history as a majority Protestant nation, and, as recently as the 2007 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study, more than half of U.S. adults (51.3%) identified as Protestants. But that figure has fallen, 46.5% of Americans are now Protestants.

Religious switching is a common occurrence in the U.S. Depending on how “religious switching” is defined, as many as 42% of U.S. adults have switched religions. That definition counts switching between Protestant traditions, but even if Protestantism is regarded as a single group, about a third of Americans (34%) identify with a different religious group than the one in which they were raised.³

Christianity Today, a periodical that connects all kinds of people with the Christian faith has forwarded some trends that reflect the disconnect between society and the U. S. church. Again, take note as you look around our own congregation. “Mainline Protestantism is in trouble and in substantive decline. . . . mainline Protestantism will continue its slide. According to the General Social Survey (GSS), about 30 percent of Americans would self-identify as mainline Protestants in 1972. Now they are down to 15 percent. In other words, based on the GSS, they lost half their people over 40 years. . . . And, if that trend continues, the math does not look good.”

Also, the future is less mainline denominations or flat evangelical denominations, and more nondenominational evangelical networks. All of these trends have implications—some good, and some not so good.”⁴

You can spend hours on the internet looking up research on this. But St. Andrew’s is experiencing this in more obvious ways. The fact is that with all the research pointing in the same direction, can it all be ignored anymore? Though some trends show other groups increasing, the total numbers of all protestant Christians in the U.S. is on a veritable decline.

The future for mainline churches will require a fresh look at how pastors to find pastors to lead them. The seminaries are having to shut down, one by one:

“ . . . the biggest factors causing the crisis: declining interest in attending seminaries. Seminary enrollment has been falling since 2005, and since many

² Pew Research Center, (accessed March 6, 2019).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ed Stezer, “3 Important Church Trends in the Next Ten Years,”

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/april/3-important-trends-in-church-in-next-ten-years.html>, (Accessed March 6, 2019).

seminaries are small — the median head count for a member of the Association of Theological Schools is 155 students — the margin for error is small as well. . . . The loss of denominational support, a trend that began decades ago, has also passed costs onto students, and prospective seminarians are more concerned about debt than they have been in the past. Borrowing is increasing, and while students who take out federal loans are eligible for income-based repayment, those who go into ministry are ineligible for public service loan forgiveness.⁵ Are there any options, I mean for the church in the U. S.?

Abdicating to what church leaders Eugene Peterson and Dallas Willard call “the lazy danger of short-termism”, we, the aging church, think that somehow it will get better in time, or maybe worse, but we won’t be around to witness it. They advise the church, “when we feel least like directing intention toward the [future]postponable important is exactly when we most need to do so.”

It begs the question? Is the U.S. Christian church relevant anymore to anyone but other Christians and us? If not, how can the church propose to affect/correct the major societal shift away from the church? It is not likely that I can cover such a complex subject in just five weeks of twenty- minute sermons, but I can begin to ask probing questions that we at St. Andrew’s will have to solve. Each of them points to some aspect of the problem as well as some biblical understanding of what approaches to take now. “Short-termism,” Peterson and Willard say, represents a profound threat—the threat of unmade choices—too all of us.

While the Pharisees were busy snipping branches from herbs growing in their gardens, Jesus predicted their demise. With his words of woe (not destruction but an exclamation of grief) that is repeated five times in this chapter, he also gives the corrective measures. This can only be a beginning place. We need to closely consider whether we are snipping herbs or working to make the message of the gosepl relevant! Do we want to get our heads out of the “minutiae”! Do we want to throw of the blinders of mis-guided purpose! Do we want to overcome low energy and high exhaustion!⁶ Do we want to be relevant in a society that is bent on mean spirits, political sniping, and a loss of moral center! We must become transformed by the heavier stuff of the New Testament: Jesus listed three: Judgement (in the sense of making right decisions), Mercy, and faith. We would have expected love? Right? But that’s not what he said. Jesus insisted that the

⁵ Rod Dreher, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/what-will-we-do-about-seminaries/comment-page-1/> (accessed March 6, 2019). Tuition and Fees for 2018-2019 at Austin Theological Seminary is \$13,900 compared to just \$4,684 for Texas residents at public universities. Austin TS for 2017-2018 had 158 enrolled 62 men and 96 women.

⁶ Paul J. Pastor, “A Divine Conspiracy in the Same Direction: Eugene Peterson and Dallas Willard on the Quiet Urgencies of the Spiritual Life, *Outreach*, March/April, 2019, 33-40.

failure of the Pharisees (and the Jewish leaders to perform in the Roman/Judean epoch) had to do with their lack of moral center, lack of compassion, and lack of faith in the future of the kingdom of God.

So, what does society lack when the church neglects the heavier stuff? The bottom line is this. *It will succumb to its human propensity to make shallow decisions that have long-term implications for both the nation's history, and the devolvement of its culture.* Within the framework of that culture is the significance of the church in western civilization. Not only is the threat great, the eventuality is undeniable.

The church in the U.S. must not give in to procrastination any longer. There is an illustration I read this week that demonstrates what I mean.

“It is the feeling I get when I remember that an oil change is overdue . . . and think (as I floor it) ‘Oh, we can make it another thousand miles.’ This is true. We probably can. But in the big scheme of things . . . the unseen fluid that keeps the motor purring is getting darker and grittier, and ultimately, I am sacrificing the health of the engine for . . . what? I have the ability and money to change the oil. I can make the time. In the course of my busy day. I simply do not want to think about it.’ And I keep driving.”

Jesus said it this way. “Instead of taking up the weightier matters of the precepts of God, you just keep snipping your precious little herbs.” Honestly, the U. S. church has no right to wail and complain about how terrible things are in our country if we are just snipping herbs while our neighbors just across the mainline denominational fence are snipping away, too. We face tough choices. But the most important thing we can do, now, at this stage. We must recover our audience because they hear us as a relevant voice in all the voices they are hearing today. Right thinking, mercy and faith demonstrates that. We will learn how. And, that is what this series of sermons during Lent 2019 has been designed for. I want our congregation to begin to find the hope of resurrection for relevance in our congregation, as well as in U.S. Christianity.