
A FAITH THAT MATTERS

What does it cost you to go to church—to be a religious believer?

- (I say religious believer in contrast to believers who are spiritual but not religious—don't go to church—and of course those who are neither religious nor spiritual—non-believers.)
- What does it cost you to go to church?
 - A free Sunday morning? A chance to sleep in?
 - Five or ten or twenty dollars in the offering plate?
- Odds are, though, if you stop to think about it, being a Christian today costs us very little.
 - Even in this post-Christian world, where more people do not go to church than do.
 - Though going to church is actually no longer the norm today, your worship attendance still results in little or no comment or judgment from others.
 - Not so in JESUS' day, of course.

Today, families know that the two things you don't talk about at family gatherings are religion and politics.

My brother-in-law is an atheist.

- So much so, that when visiting my in-laws, if Rob is going to be there, I'm always warned not to talk about religion or Rob will leave.
 - Actually, I'd just like to ask him two things:
 1. What is it that you do believe?
 2. Why don't you want to listen to what others believe?

Most of us know that at family gatherings, no religion and no politics.

- These subjects can lead to pointed arguments with those with whom we are supposed to be the closest.

I have friends in Wisconsin called Jon and Juliette.

- Jon and Juliette are very active Christians and passionate about their faith,
 - but at the same time very respectful of where others are in their walks with the LORD.
- Juliette's step-father is a non-believer and strongly disapproves of religion and anyone who has "bought into that stuff."
 - When Jon and Juliette are with him for a meal, they will quietly bow their heads and say to themselves a prayer of thanks for the blessing of food.
 - But the whole time they are doing that, her step-father will throw food or other things at them.

For some families, it's no religion or politics...period.

- I guess it's really the same in the church, too...except that here you can talk about religion.
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Again, in JESUS' day, that was not the case.

- If you think that religion and politics are rather recent issues that can cause conflict between family and friends, you only need to read the gospel passage for today.
 - Religion and politics have always been instigators of debate and even division.
 - Just one more example of how the Bible continues to be relevant, and witnesses to the many truths of our human condition.

To believe in JESUS as the MESSIAH, CHIRST, SAVIOR, (those three words all mean the same thing), and to follow HIM as a disciple, meant for many to leave behind family and friends--literally;

- family and friends who thought you were either crazy or criminal.
 - Crazy to give up security and safety for a wandering life.
 - Crazy to abandon belonging and community for an existence with strangers.
 - Criminal to follow a so-called MESSIAH.
 - Criminal to believe that there was another GOD.

To follow JESUS, you see, if you were Jewish, meant accepting as the MESSIAH this traveling rabbi who hung out with disreputable, known sinners, and preached a message of love and forgiveness.

- It meant, that is, that you were accepting as the MESSIAH one who looked and acted almost nothing like the warrior king they expected.
- To follow JESUS, if you were Gentile, meant accepting as the MESSIAH this traveling rabbi who hung out with disreputable, known sinners, and preached a message of love and forgiveness.
 - It meant, that is, that you were accepting as the MESSIAH one who looked almost nothing like what the culture lifted up as powerful or important.
- More than that, following JESUS meant not merely accepting new beliefs, but a new way of living.
 - To be a follower of the ONE who accepted and even honored the disreputable meant that you needed to do the same, rejecting the temptation to judge others and instead, to invite them into your life.
 - To be a follower of the ONE who preached love and forgiveness meant you needed to practice the same behaviors, particularly when it came to those who differed from you even, and more especially, in terms of who they were or what they believed.

I began by noting a major difference between JESUS' day and ours.

- Naming yourself as a follower of JESUS had much greater societal cost and even personal risk associated with it than it does now.
 - But I wonder...I wonder if we might also find ourselves thrust into conflict and division with those we care about, if we welcomed into our homes and congregations and social circles those whom society shuns?
 - What would be the reaction of our family and friends and co-workers if we really acted as JESUS did?

The purifying fire JESUS talks about here has been most often associated with the fire that burns away impure religious practices, both then and now.

- Not impure as being liturgically incorrect, but rather impure in that they tend to make religion a source of false comfort.
 - Throughout history, there have been those who thought that right religious practice and beliefs should exempt you from suffering, or disaster, or poverty, or even death all around you.
 - Even today, the phrase "accepting JESUS into your heart" seems to mean escaping eternal punishment and securing an eternal reward because of that one act.

But what if faith isn't so much about guaranteeing future bliss, as it is an invitation to live differently *now*,

- to see those around you neither as souls to be saved, or threats to be deterred,
 - but rather to see them—every one of them—as GOD'S children to be loved, honored, and cared for?

It struck me the other day that it has become routine for political candidates at every level to close each speech with "GOD bless America."

- Yet throughout the Bible, blessing always comes with an expectation, even an obligation, to extend that blessing to others.
- America has been blessed, and richly so, and from those who have been given much, much is also expected.
 - So, what would it cost a candidate to close a speech with these words: "GOD bless America so that America can be a blessing to the world?"

Now I'm not trying to sound critical of people who are comfortable in their faith and how they are living it.

- Rather I have found myself wondering, and wanting to invite you to wonder, "How could we use our time together on Sunday in worship, education, and fellowship to encourage each other to make our faith more meaningful,
 - to make love of GOD and love of neighbor a greater possibility and reality in each person's life?
- How might worship, preaching, Sunday school, and even coffee hour equip us to enter more deeply into our faith so that it might shape our discipleship by a creating a clearer picture of GOD with us.
 - Because I truly believe that people—that all of you—want your faith to matter, to be useful to you, and to shape the way that you think about work and family and neighbors, and money, and free time, and more.

And I realize that doing this might make life a bit more uncomfortable and even risky,

- because it might...no...because it will impact relationships with people that are important to us and about whom deeply care.

JESUS' naming of our human tendency toward disagreement is not to suggest that we identify division as a value of Christian interaction and conversation.

- Instead, we need to understand that an outcome of living as CHRIST did, that reaching out to those that CHRIST loved, and speaking out against those injustices that CHRIST challenged will put us at odds with others.
- But it will also create joy, because the ONE who sends us out—who also experienced division and discord—is both with us and for us as we come to church to be reminded of our identity as GOD'S beloved,
 - and as we are sent out again in mission to tell others through word and deed that GOD loves all.

What does it cost you to go to church?

- Ultimately, I think that's really for each person to decide.
 - But whatever the cost to you, I pray that you find it worth it as you come to be equipped with a faith that matters, that sends you out,
 - a followers of JESUS in the world, in love and service in HIS name, a blessing because you have been blessed.