

Joshua 24:19-24

¹⁹Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the Lord!” ²²Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.” ²⁴The people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”

1 Corinthians 1:22-31

²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, ^{*} not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one ^{*} might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in ^{*} the Lord.’

John 16:1-4a

‘I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. ³ And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴ But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

The Church Is a Dangerous Place

Pastors hear a lot of reasons – as well as excuses – for not coming to church. Some people just flat out tell me that they don’t believe in God, or that they don’t believe in the Christian message, or that they just don’t consider worship to be a priority in their life. There are lots of reasons, good and bad, why most people don’t go to church. But if anyone had a good reason for not going to church it was Jesus. Okay, so technically speaking Jesus didn’t go to church; he

was a Jew and he went to synagogue. But when you compare what went on in ancient synagogues with what goes on in churches, when you compare modern churches with modern synagogues, even when you compare the meaning of the word “church” with the meaning of “synagogue,” you find that they have a lot in common; people of a common religion come together, scripture is read, hymns are sung, sermons are given and hopefully God is worshiped. So when the Bible says that Jesus went to synagogue, think church.

And ironically enough, church and Jesus didn't seem to mix. After his first sermon in his hometown “church” the congregation nearly ran him off a cliff. For most of us, that would be enough reason to stay home the following, and perhaps every week. But it didn't seem to stop Jesus; he went right on preaching and healing. One day he healed a man with a withered hand in the “church”, and the pastors and committee chairs told him that *that* was not the way things were supposed to be done there. They started plotting on how to kill him. You'd think maybe that would be enough to make Jesus change his ways, but NO; Jesus kept going to church, kept rocking the boat, AND he put it on his Google calendar to go to the mother of all churches, the Temple in Jerusalem, and share his message and healing there. Jesus, what are you thinking? You know a few fishermen, right? Why don't you spend your day on the lake instead of in the church where you keep getting yourself in trouble? And as we all know he actually *was* arrested, tried, mocked, tortured, and killed after tipping over a few tables in church. And it seems that quite a few of his disciples did likewise, and were likewise killed and/or kicked out of the church. Yes, Jesus and his disciples might have been better off going to the mall or the beach or anywhere but the church.

Why didn't Jesus or his disciples take a hint and stop going to church? Strangely enough, they went to church in order to bring God into the church. That's right. When he had that little outburst in the Temple, Jesus said to the folks engaged in commerce in the fellowship hall, “You have turned my Father's house into a den of thieves.” Jesus just wanted to bring God back into the Temple that should have been his from the start. And he warns the disciples that like him they too will face some serious problems if they insist on going to church; they'll get kicked out and killed, or perhaps killed and then kicked out. And Jesus doesn't tell this to the disciples to help them avoid these struggles; he says it to them to keep them from stumbling. “Don't get confused,” Jesus says, “when you go into Church and people tell you that what you're doing is not pleasing to God. It's the ones who kick you out who are not pleasing God.” He doesn't tell them to avoid church; just be ready when they start throwing punches at you. He's like the trainer telling the boxer that he's going to get bloodied up as he faces his opponent in the ring, but he says, “Don't stumble, and certainly don't fall. Take the punches, because as tough as your opponent may seem *his hour is coming*. You may die in the ring, but he'll get what's coming to him *eventually*.”

All of today's scripture verses should serve as encouragement to those who love God and as warnings to those who don't. In our Old Testament passage we find Joshua reading the riot act the Israelites in the land they have just settled more or less, a land that still has a lot of people

who worship a lot of gods, and Joshua recognizes that it is the God of Jacob, the God of Abraham and Moses, who has enabled them to succeed, and it is to **THAT** God that Joshua pledges his allegiance. And I'm glad that Joshua challenges the people, saying in essence, "You can't remain faithful to God." He says God "will not forgive your transgressions or your sins." How frightening is that? And how prophetic! Understand that Joshua is not thinking in terms of individual salvation like so many people do today but rather communal salvation, saving the entire nation of Israel which, in a very real sense, is like one big church – everyone believes in the God of Jacob. And if the nation as a whole stops obeying God, the nation as a whole will not be saved from her enemies. In that sense the nation is punished for her sins rather than forgiven and shown mercy. And I don't look at this as some overt act of God leading to the nation's destruction – God is not throwing lightning bolts at the people; he is allowing bad things to happen. I believe it's the natural consequence of a nation losing her way and failing to follow the ordinances of God which include tending to the needy and welcoming the stranger. A nation that regresses into a mere population of individuals each bent on pursuing self interest and the interests of those closest to them rather than tending to the needs of EVERYONE is no nation at all. A nation that compromises the eternal Law of God by failing to love God and neighbor is destined to fall; its hour of demise will come. Our job is the same as Joshua's; to worship the one true God and to obey that one true God to encourage others to do the same, and I dare say that we're not doing so well on this task. We Americans are, as a nation and a culture, worshiping an assortment of idols that tend to offer self-gratification or intoxication. We have placed so many things in front of God and pushed him to the back of our list saying "we'll get to him when we have time," and we know when that is – NEVER! And meanwhile we keep filling our schedules with all those things that get in the way of worship and Christian fellowship and our relationship with God. And when the day comes that we actually need God we aren't even sure how to pray, how to fast, how to get back on the right path. And just as Joshua warns the Israelites, "Today you are witnesses against yourselves," many of us are witnesses against ourselves as we have made so many promises to God that we have failed to keep.

Our Epistle lesson talks about another kind of distraction that keeps people from truly worshiping and glorifying God. I'll call it the distraction of intellect. There's nothing wrong with being smart, but when you combine intelligence with pride you get snobs. And intelligence becomes your idol to the tune that you would rather spend your hours and days splitting theological hairs with others than caring for the least of these your brothers or sisters. You'd rather talk about God than obey him, and your snobbery can completely obscure the beauty of the good news of Jesus Christ, because you fail to see the foolishness of the cross, that God takes on weakness and pain and suffering and death, all the things we try so hard to run away from, to demonstrate his amazing love for us. And so rather than build a church that is founded on love and compassion for God and neighbor we build a church that claims to embrace the right theology and **THAT'S** the reason you should attend. I tell you, if God made entrance into his kingdom contingent upon our intelligence, none of us would qualify.

And our Gospel lesson reminds us that even churches run the risk of running Jesus Christ and true disciples out of their “sanctuaries.” Churches face the temptation of attracting people to come by telling people what they want to hear, because there are so many people who have left the church to follow their idols, whatever they may be, so the church allows them to worship their idols in their own sanctuary. People are attracted to churches where the preacher says, “God wants you to prosper, so don’t feel guilty about ignoring the poor and the needy – and all those sinners – the adulterers and the blasphemers – you don’t need to care for them because God’s going to destroy them anyway. BUT NOT US – WE’RE THE ONES GOD LOVES AND IS HAPPY WITH.”

I dare say that if Jesus were here today, and went into a church and started preaching what he preached and doing what he did, he would be run out and crushed just as quickly as he was 2000 years ago. Have we learned nothing?

Okay, the picture I paint is too bleak – there are good people and there are good churches. While I don’t have much to compare it with, I think Bethel is a good church. BUT IT’S ONLY AS GOOD AS THE PEOPLE WHO COME. Which means it’s up to us to keep coming and to keep being transformed by the Holy Spirit. And when we face those in the church who are intent on making it THEIR church rather than CHRIST’S church, we need to challenge them, even if our nose gets bloodied.