

“The Faith of Another”
Luke 7:1-10
17th Sunday after Pentecost

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This past week, I heard yet another story in the news about the decline of religious faith in our country.

It was actually an interview.

Two people who grew up going to church, who no longer go to church.

One of them remarked:

“The religion my parents brought me up with doesn’t fit anymore but I still long for a spiritual community...there’s a name for someone like me—a none. As in, when it comes to a religious identity—I have none.”

The other individual in the interview also spoke about the church in which he grew up not aligning with his beliefs anymore. He has a daughter, Charlotte, and Charlotte is one of the reasons that he stepped away from organized religion—he didn’t want to belong to a church in which he had to explain to his daughter certain tenets that he found problematic.

And yet, he still has a craving for a community of shared values. A place where he and his daughter can make connections.

So what does he do, in the absence of finding a church that fits? He goes with his daughter every Saturday to the local farmer’s market:

“I really do not go there to shop at all,” he remarked.

“I go there because we see the same people almost every week. And...we talk to them and I know their kids and they know Charlotte and it ends up serving the same kind of...community functions that I’m looking for...”¹

It’s almost like the farmer’s market has become his church.
What’s going on with religious faith in the 21st century?

Our topic this morning is religion.

Do you know where the word “religion” comes from?

It has its roots in the Latin word *ligare*, which means “to bind”.

It’s the same root where we get the word for ligament.

In other words, religion is that which binds us to something.

Or to someone.

It’s what that father who goes to the farmer’s market was talking about...

And yet, when it comes to church, the statistics tell us that Americans are becoming more and more unbound:

- In 1991, 6% of Americans said that they had no religious affiliation.
- By 2022, that number had risen to 30%.²

As I mentioned in a sermon a couple of months ago, the political scientist and sociologist Dr. Ryan Burge did a deep dive into our own denomination, and he determined that if we continue our current rate of decline, the PC(USA) will cease to exist within the next 20-30 years.

Besides all that, seminary enrollment is down.

¹ “The search for a church that isn’t a church,” by Rachel Martin, on NPR, September 10, 2023, found at [The search for a church that isn't a church : NPR](#).

² As reported at [End of Presbyterianism: Farewell PC\(USA\)? \(#2048\) \(sowhatfaith.com\)](#).

And the number of seminarians who then actually decide that they want to go into parish ministry, to serve as a pastor—that's down too.

What's the deal with all this?

Are there cultural forces at work in our society that are just too powerful for God's Church to overcome?

Our topic this morning is religion.
And our text for today is about religion.

It's about a Roman centurion who is desperate for his slave to be healed. And this centurion hears about Jesus, and he appeals to Jewish elders, asking them to go to Jesus on his behalf.

Which they do.
They tell Jesus that the centurion has been good to them.
And Jesus sets off to help him.

Then friends of the centurion meet Jesus on the way.
They tell Jesus—no need to come.
The centurion believes that all Jesus needs to do is say the word,
and the slave will be healed.

To which Jesus responds:
“I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

A couple points to keep in mind about this text:
Do the Roman centurion and Jesus share the same religion?
No.
The centurion is a Gentile, and Jesus is a Jew.

Did the Roman centurion promise to follow Jesus if Jesus healed his slave?

No.

And yet not only does Jesus heal the slave, he praises the centurion's faith.

It's a story that tells us that God's grace and God's love are SO MUCH BIGGER than any particular religion.

That's why the STARTING POINT for Presbyterians, when it comes to the topic of religion, is not doing everything decently and in order, even though that's what Presbyterians are supposed to do.

The starting point...is WONDER.

Wonder...at the size and scope of God's love.

Wonder...at how God's majesty and mystery always go BEYOND anything we can fathom.

Remember what happened with Moses?

Before the 10 commandments ever came along, there was the escape from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea...the wonder that God had saved God's people.

Do you remember what happened with Paul?

Before he became the great apostle of the faith, he was Saul, blinded on the road to Damascus, hearing the voice of Jesus—
and Saul was filled with wonder.

And I think you know something about this.

Do you remember ever being filled with wonder—
when you were sitting in this room?

Maybe it was during the Christmas Eve candlelight service.

Maybe it was at the baptism or confirmation your child.

Maybe it was at your daughter's wedding.

Or maybe it was just an ordinary Sunday, but the music that day moved you deeply, and you knew that God's grace was beyond anything you could do or understand or comprehend...

Do you know anything about the WONDER that is at the heart of religious faith?

I've mentioned before that one of my favorite professors in seminary was Dr. Cleo LaRue.

Dr. LaRue got his PhD with the Presbyterian pastor, Scott Black Johnston, at Princeton Seminary many years ago. They took the same classes, they became fast friends.

So one day during that time, Cleo LaRue invited Scott to Cleo's home church in Austin, Texas.

It was Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and Scott was excited.

You see, Scott had never heard his friend preach outside the academic setting, never heard him preach in the Black Church that helped shape his ministry.

When they arrived that Sunday morning, a couple of deacons met them at the door, and they were immediately escorted to the office of the pastor, the Rev. G.V. Clark.

Cleo introduced the two of them, and then the Rev. Clark left, saying that he had to take care of a couple things before worship.

Cleo and Scott sat in the Rev. Clark's office, telling stories, catching up—but after a while, Scott got a little nervous. The service was supposed to start at 11am. And he could hear the choir singing in the sanctuary. And he looked at his watch—it was 5 MINUTES AFTER 11:00!!

Why were they still in the pastor's office if worship was already beginning??

Cleo saw his friend look at his watch, and he said, "Scott, you know what G.V.'s up to, right?"

"NO, I've got no idea."

"The service has already begun," Cleo explained, "but he's waiting until there's a good size congregation out there, until the CROWD is big enough—then he'll bring us in."

Then Cleo said, "**RELAX, SCOTT. We're on Holy Spirit time now.**"

In Scott's words, he relaxed...he relaxed as much as a "Type A, we're on a schedule, Presbyterian like himself" could relax.

About 30 minutes into the service, they went into the sanctuary.

Scott was about to sit in one of the front pews to get a good view of his friend preaching, but the Rev. Clark proceeded to SEMI-ESCORT, SEMI-PULL Scott up to the pulpit area with Cleo.

After they sat down, Cleo leaned over to Scott and whispered, “Don’t be surprised if G.V. asks you to bring a word.”

“What?!!” Scott gasped, not really in a whisper.

“**Holy Spirit time,**” mouthed Cleo, back to his friend.

Sure enough, G.V. Clark invited Scott into the pulpit. With nothing prepared, Scott says he rambled on for a couple minutes, with no idea whatsoever what he was saying, and then he sat down, relieved that FINALLY, he’d get to hear his friend preach.

But that’s not what happened next.

What happened next was that the Rev. Clark invited anyone else present there to bring a word.

- A woman in the choir stood up and gave thanks for the birth of a healthy granddaughter.
- A young man approached the microphone to give thanks to the Lord for helping him get a job that week.
- Then one of the deacons came to the microphone.

“I believe I’ll testify,” he said. And he went on to tell the story of his son’s struggle with drug addiction, and how grateful he was that God gave his son the resolve, the determination to get clean.”

By the time the deacon was done, everyone—including Scott—was dabbing their eyes. Cleo looked over at his friend and raised an eyebrow at him—and he didn’t need to say it, because Scott already knew:

“Holy Spirit time...”

Leaving the sanctuary later that afternoon, Scott says he was **AMAZED** at how quickly the **THREE-HOUR WORSHIP SERVICE** flew by! And how unusual it was compared to our Presbyterian tradition.

In Professor LaRue's tradition, **EVERYONE** was invited to testify to the majesty and the mystery of God's grace in their lives. And something about all that felt very **LIBERATING** to Scott that day.

He says that when he left the sanctuary, he felt free to attribute **EVERYTHING**—this breath, those blooming flowers, that bit of goodness—
to the wonder of a good and loving God.³

Now...I know.
Religious communities do not **ALWAYS** make us feel that way. It doesn't always feel like Holy Spirit time when you come to church.

- Sometimes, your brother or sister in Christ says something that offends you.
- Or you spend countless hours serving your church, and no one bothers to thank you.
- Or even more serious, sometimes the church leaves a person with wounds that cause that person to leave the church.

³ As told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, in his sermon "Can I Get a Witness?", preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, February 26, 2012.

A religious community is always a flawed and imperfect place, because we are all imperfect and flawed children of God.

But at its best, Presbyterians believe that religion does not hinder us.

We believe it sets us free.

Free to bear witness to the mystery and majesty and sovereign grace of God that we have experienced in our own lives. And there are so many ways to be a witness...

Heidi Neumark recently retired from full-time ministry. She served a church in New York City for many years.

A few years ago, she wrote about a family that had recently joined her congregation after suffering the loss of their 15-month-old son. They were grateful for the church's ministry to them during this devastating time in their lives, so they decided to join.

Now the family also had an older boy, a 5-year-old named Charlie.

Neumark writes:

“Many Sundays Charlie hid behind his parents’ legs. He rarely spoke. He didn’t want to go to Sunday school but sat with his dad and drew pictures of cars and rockets...

[One of those rockets had a prayer attached to it]:

‘Dear God, please send us a rocket ship
so Jakey and me can go to the stars.
I love Jakey. Amen.’

Eventually, Charlie decided to go to Sunday school with his father sitting nearby.

“One Sunday the Sunday school teacher prepared a lesson on Tabitha...[and] told the story of Peter raising Tabitha [from the dead....]”

And then?

“The teacher suddenly panicked. Wouldn’t Charlie wonder why Jesus did not bring his brother back to life? Why hadn’t God answered his prayers and those of his parents?”

But the panic was unnecessary.

Because this quiet little boy, Charlie, for the first time ever in class, began to speak.

After hearing the story of Tabitha, he told the class...that his brother had died and that Jesus had raised his brother too
and that his brother was with Jesus in heaven
and that his brother was also still with him.

He showed the class a woven bracelet that reminded him of his brother.

And the class—

full of 4 and 5 and 6-year-old squirming children
they sat perfectly still.

Neumark goes on:

“There [was] a little girl in the class born with drugs in her veins, raised by her grandmother while her mother was in and out of treatment. Her name [unbelievably!] was Heaven.

[Upon hearing Charlie’s story] Heaven spontaneously got up and went over and gave her classmate a hug. Following her example, every child in the class got up and, one by one, hugged their little brother in Christ—and his father.”⁴

From WONDER...to WITNESS...

Which brings me back to Ryan Burge.
I sure hope Ryan Burge is wrong about his prediction.

But if he is right, and the PC(USA) dissolves sometime shortly after I retire...that doesn’t mean God is going to retire.

The liberating grace of God will always be at work in this world.
And it will always be at work in your life.

Which means we are not called to worry about the future.
The future is in God’s hands.

We are called to be witnesses with our hands and our hearts to the grace that God has given us.

In fact, I was tempted to ask some of you to stand up and bear witness right here right now in worship to that grace...just do it spontaneously.

But then I thought better of it.
Decently and in order—for better or worse, that’s how Presbyterians worship.

⁴ Heidi Neumark, “Companion to Strangers: Building Bonds in Sorrow and Love,” in *The Christian Century*, February 26, 2014.

So let me make a different suggestion.
You don't have to bear witness by being spontaneous right now in here.

Just do it...out there.

Share the grace that you've experienced—in how you welcome other people, in how you serve other people, in how you forgive other people...

It doesn't even have to happen decently and in order.
You could share God's grace spontaneously if you felt so called.

Did you know that Presbyterians believe in that too?
Spontaneous Presbyterians...it sounds like an oxymoron.

We believe God asks us to share God's grace and welcome not just in planned and orderly ways, according to our calendar, but even in spontaneous ways, according to God's calendar.

And do know what we call that?
The same thing my former seminary professor called it.

Holy Spirit time...

Amen.