

Invitation to the Word

(A dialogue for two readers)

Hey, wake up! It's time for the sermon.

What do you mean, wake up?

This is prime nap time!

How can you sleep at a time like this?

You might miss something important!

Nah, I've been hearing this same old stuff all my life.

But this is God's word!

Don't you know this could change your life?

Change my life?!

Uh ... I must have missed that part.

Exactly! We've promised to serve God,
to be witnesses with our lives.

How can you witness when you're asleep?

**Well, I guess it might not hurt to pay attention
just this once.**

Pay attention today and every day!

This is the word of God!

And you never know what might happen.

PENTECOST 23 2009

Luke 13:18-21

BEGINNING TO RE-THINK CHURCH

(Choir men do skit about staying awake to hear something new in the message.)

For all the commentary on the differences between those who are church members and those who don't go to church -- that little skit the guys just did reveals there probably isn't all that much of a difference.

For those who have gone to church all their lives -- or most of it -- **they've heard it all before.**

If you're United Methodist, you've probably even heard the same stories and illustrations used by different preachers through the years -- if not the same sermons. For those who are not Christians -- or those who have left the church -- the claim is the same: **"We've heard it all before..."**

And what they've heard has either been words that judge but offer no grace --
-- Or they've heard "Wonderful Words" that have been left hanging in the air because of the lack real action to follow them up.

RETHINK CHURCH is the current promotional campaign of the United Methodist Church. *(Perhaps, you've seen some of the commercials on CNN or other cable channels.)*

The one I like the most goes like this:

What if church were less about Sundays and more about all the other days of the week.

The idea that time spent gathering on Sunday as a community of faith would be used to celebrate how much we have accomplished during the week spreading God's mercy, justice, hope and peace.

Then, maybe Sunday could truly be a day of rest.

That would be awesome!

I mean -- wouldn't you be excited about gathering here at Divine Street on Sunday morning because you knew you'd be hearing from others what they had done in the name and power of Jesus Christ? I know I would.

The **RETHINK CHURCH** campaign comes at a time when mainline denominations like the United Methodist Church are declining, and have been declining for some time. And one of the **smallest populations** in our UM congregations *(and it too is declining)* are **young people under the age of 34.**

There are a number of reasons for this.

Most, however, are centered in the way the younger generations view and relate to the world around them.

In this "Post-Modern" time -

- young people actually learn and understand information...
- they comprehend and experience the world...

differently than those of us who grew up in the "Modern Age."

Post-moderns are much more likely to consider themselves "spiritual" instead of "religious."

And they are suspicious of large institutions
like denominational churches.

For the most part, they don't want to spend their time,
or their money, supporting a lot of infrastructure and overhead.

In order for the Church to receive their attention, **we must be much more than just a place.** We must be a ***lifestyle authenticated by actions.***

Yet, here's the thing...

- despite the differences between the generations...
 - things like differences in modes of learning and comprehending.....
 - differences in music tastes....
 - differences in what is moving and inspiring....

... there is something that we must choose to agree on in order to maintain our relevance into the 21st century.

And that "thing" is as old as our faith:

The Church must cease existing for itself and serving its members, and **instead exist for its members to serve like Jesus out in the world.**

For many of us -- life-long church members -- it is a **strange new reality.** And yes - **a little threatening** to our sense of identity of what it means to be a "good Christian" -- and **to our comfort and personal preferences.**

But, **we have only two options, here.**

1. We can **choose to deny the obvious** and continue to "do church" like we always have...

2. ...Or, we can **RETHINK CHURCH** to become relevant and effective in the new reality of the 21st century.

If, like ostriches, we bury our heads in the dust of "what used-to-be", we will fail our Lord Jesus Christ in making the Gospel real for the world in our time.

On the other hand, if we are bold enough and selfless enough to do new things in new ways, we might just be able to be more effective for Christ and his Kingdom than we have ever been since the first century.

Now -- the time and place where I grew up -- even as a young Christian -- was different than many who are sitting here today. And yet, **I still share some common experiences of growing up in what many describe as the age of Christendom.**

For many of you -- you grew up in a Christian world:

-- **Everyone you knew went to church on Sunday.** Cars would be lined up along either side of the street and to get into parking lots.

-- I can remember police -- with their cars flashing lights -- directing traffic on A-1-A as St. Mark's United Methodist Church, and Holy Name Roman Catholic Church let out their parishioners at noon.

-- A good number of you can recall when **no stores were open on Sunday.** So, everyone had to do their shopping during the week.

-- **In public schools** -- along with the "Pledge of Allegiance" to the flag -- the principal would lead the students and teachers in reciting the **Lord's Prayer.**

-- When I was in High School, we had a "moment of silent reflection" during the opening moments of first period.

-- **Wednesdays were "church night"** -- and civic groups and sports leagues honored the time for families to attend fellowship meals, or worship services, or young people to participate in youth groups.

-- **Everyone you knew believed in God** -- and for some of you who never had a Jew, Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist in school with you as a kid -- You **assumed everybody** either **believed in Jesus**, or at least knew about him.

...Even those Roman Catholic kids who were the reason we always had baked fish or tuna salad sandwiches in the cafeteria on Friday.

That's what the Christian world looked like.

And it extended well into the latter part of the 20th century -- especially in areas like Dunn, NC.

And church growth ministry was often called "Open Door Evangelism" = You would plan an event, open the door....and there they were.

Well, in case you haven't noticed, things have changed.

People no longer attend church every Sunday.

One of the more recent surveys of people who consider themselves to be "good Christians" attend church on the average about once every 6 weeks.

And depending on the specific area and region of the United States -- anywhere between 50% and 66% of your neighbors, friends, and relatives have no active faith affiliation.

What does a post-Christian world look like today in America?

-- even in Dunn, NC?:

-- More people are walking outside to get their Sunday paper in their pajamas, than are walking out to get into their car to go to worship on a Sunday.

-- Just about every store, restaurant, and mall is open on Sunday.

-- No one would dare think of leading a prayer at school over the loudspeaker.

-- There is a rapidly increasing number of people who have never seen the inside of a church -- except on TV or in the movies. Weddings take place in hotels and parks, and more and more people are opting for direct cremation and burial so their family members can scatter their remains in the ocean, a lake, or a favorite golf course.

When people are asked about God, faith and the church -- especially younger people -- the responses are often surprising to the folks whose lives are lived within the "bubble" of the church.

This past week, I asked a number of young people in their 20's to respond to some questions I raised in preparation for a sermon series in January. Here are just a couple of their responses:

- A young man in his mid-20's wrote:

Well, I think that so many churches -- especially mainline churches -- get caught

up in a paradigm of legalism and traditions... Young people want the church to be real. They want people to stop talking about "being the church" -- and actually do it! To be relevant, outreach and mission have to be a priority. Young people are constantly being told what it means to be a Christian...when what they really need is real, tangible evidence of what it means to live as a Christian.

... if churches, at least as a community, could get to a point where they are doing local outreaches every week -- and even 4 mission trips a year...that would be awesome.

And from a young woman in her 20's:

To become attractive to outsiders, the church must become a place where you seek guidance and a place that brings peace to the person. But, the church must focus on branching out to those who need help -- making missions and serving others the priority.

Now -- I'll let you in on a little secret...

The two young people whose responses I just shared, grew up in their respective churches -- and they are still active church members...

...So, these are just the thoughts and responses of young people "inside" the church. I'll share what those outside the church had to say, later on.

But, here's the question for us:

"Do you believe the Gospel of God's love, healing and hope in Jesus can still make a difference in the lives of people in our "post-modern", "post-Christian" world?"

I do.

I believe it with all my heart.

And all the responses I've received so far are like so many I have heard and observed -- thought about and lost sleep over as a believer in Jesus Christ -- and a pastor within the NC Annual Conference of the UMC.

One of the best responses to the question, "What could the church do differently?", came from a young adult who wrote:

"They could get out of the church, and walk down the street and be Jesus for people."

A good many Christian writers and evangelists I have read and heard in the last

few years have all communicated the same thing...

...that our "post-Christian" world is a whole lot like the pre-Christian world
-- and as such,...

...the strategies for being the church in the first century are the same strategies needed to be the church in the 21st century.

Church is not something we attend...

-- it is **something we do...**

- it is **not a noun....it is a verb.**

It is like the guy said;

It is getting out of the seats and into the streets "*being Jesus for people.*"

THE BIBLE LESSON:

Today's two mini-parables remind us that the Kingdom of God is amazingly powerful and productive. And I want to take them in reverse order.

First, the parable of the yeast:

Typical of Jesus, he uses the most mundane examples to illustrate eternal truth. Everyone knows you need yeast in order to make bread.

In fact... the lack of yeast, brought on by the hurried, middle-of-the-night escape of the Jews from the Egyptians at Passover, made unleavened bread symbolic of that deliverance.

Now, whenever most individuals make bread, they use those little packets of Fleischmann's Yeast, sprinkled carefully on 110 degree water. But, the Jewish homemaker would have needed a bit of active yeast dough, taken from the last baking batch to make the next loaf rise.

Some of you may **remember back in the 80's** when many folks got into sharing "**Friendship Bread.**" It took ten days in the refrigerator before you could bake with it, and you had to "feed" it and stir with a wooden spoon every couple of days. If you didn't use the starter after 10 days, you had to divide it and keep it alive. Once everybody started making it there was no one to send the starter to, and the stuff began to take over the refrigerator, and threaten to explode on you.

In the parable, Jesus says that the woman **mixed** the yeast into the flour....
-- but the **better Greek translation** is that she tried to "**hide**" it there.

The parable would have been met with laughter,..especially among the women...
...because "three measures" of flour would have equated to 50 pounds!
Enough bread to feed 150 people!

So imagine the scene:

A woman puts yeast into 50 pounds of dough--hoping to keep it a secret.

Give that yeast a little time, and there is a huge dough blob bubbling through the house!

(Kind of like that scene from "I Love Lucy" where the bread comes crashing out of the oven.)

The point of the parable is not the blob, though.

It is the incredible power in just a little bit of leaven.

A little can produce an amazing change.

And then with the story of the mustard seed...

750 seeds are needed to weigh just one gram.

The point obviously is that the tiniest seed, when cultivated, can produce a large plant -

- in this case, something that could grow 8 or 9 feet.

We miss the real point of the parable, however, if we ignore the part about the birds of the air finding shade and a place to make their nests.

The point is that the fully grown plant exists not for itself...

...but for the birds

-- for others

-- for those who had nothing to do with its planting.

A similar point could be made for the yeast.

The overwhelming yield of bread, when baked...could not have been consumed by the family of the woman baking. It would have had to have been shared with people who had had no part in the kneading or the baking.

So, what is Jesus saying?:

The Kingdom of God has its beginning in very small ways, but the power of it is such that its ultimate gifts and blessings are unbelievably huge.

And those gifts and blessings are given for the world...

You see... ***RETHINKING CHURCH is re-thinking the Kingdom.***

The Kingdom of God is God's will (God's purposes)...

...claimed and lived out on earth by the children of God.

God's will is that his grace, his love, his hope, his healing, his justice and righteousness be shared person to person, heart to heart.

And the embodiment of God's will is the Bread of Life = Jesus,...

...who was raised up on the cross,...

...with arms outstretched for the world -- even our world.

In a post-modern, post-Christian world, **the church finds its relevance** not by opening its doors for the world to come in -- but **by walking through its doors to go out to the world.**

People today don't want to hear about church,
they **want to see church.**

People today don't want to hear about Jesus,
they **want to see Jesus.**

People today don't want to hear about love and service;
they **want to see love and service.**

Although far from perfect...

...I believe we, here at Divine Street, are striving to be the Church by doing purpose-driven, Kingdom inspired, ministry so that people will see that within this community of faith there is a place for them to belong, believe and become...Jesus for other people.

But, I am not going to sugar-coat it:

It is going to be hard for a good number of us -- myself, included -- who have lived and experienced "church" as a noun.

And I am going to need your help -- your help in reminding me that as pastor, I cannot do it alone.

-- Your help in reminding each other that changing the way we understand "church" means allowing for the pruning away of many of the now ineffective ways of doing church.

--- We are going to need each other's help to care for one another in ways that allow church leaders to work to move us forward in ministry and mission for which the priority focus is on leading church members to serve those beyond the congregation.

I have faith we can do it.

Not on our own....

...but with the power of God's Spirit who is ready to take us -- remold us -- shape us -- and send us out to be Jesus for others.

We have big plans for the coming months.

We are going to get serious about re-doing church - not just re-thinking it.

We've already begun with little steps.

But, **the time has come to truly step out in faith.**

You are going to hear about, be prepared for, invited and encouraged to participate in ministries and missions through which we will literally be leaving our facilities to unmistakably **BE** the church of Jesus Christ, serving in the world.

As pastor --

-- I need you to be thinking and praying about whether God is calling you to this new kind of post-Christian world mission.

We need individuals -- believers in Jesus Christ to commit to living into the new reality.

You will be hearing about different ways you will be able to do that.

And...

--- not everything involves swinging a hammer and going door-to-door.

There are behind-the-scenes, -logistical work that will need to be done...

- like making phone calls,

- writing personal notes of encouragement and prayer

- making sandwiches for work teams

-- and most importantly, *(as I remind our home-bound members)*

-- PRAYER!

You can be the seed.

You can be the yeast.

What you give of yourself in the name of Jesus Christ will be empowered, and enlarged by the Holy Spirit.