

It should never be easy to be the Church! Being the Church means to stand against the standards of the world that go counter to the Church. It means to stand against the norms of society that counter the claims of the living Christ. I read recently a critique of our society and the author noted that businesses are now starting Bible study and prayer groups, offering retreats on spiritual practices and recognizing the importance spirituality plays in the life of their employees. On the other hand, congregations are now hiring pastors as CEOs and business managers. Numbers are being crunched weekly in congregations and there is little if any emphasis on spirituality or spiritual practices. The conclusion was that there is something wrong with this picture—businesses are looking at quality and congregations are looking at quantity!

Pergamum was a difficult place to be Christian. It was one of the major cities in Asia and one of the major places of emperor and pagan worship. The city had an Acropolis which towered about 1000' high and this was the home of multiple temples and places of pagan worship. There was even a place of worship to the god of healing with a college for medical priests. The city was a stronghold of emperor and pagan worship. This Acropolis with its temples and shrines could be seen throughout the city.

I was at a meeting on Monday with a professor from one of the theological colleges in Burma (Myanmar). He was a guest of Paul Aita of JBC and he shared with us some of what life is like there today. One of the issues the church there is struggling with is that the government and Buddhists are paying people to become Buddhist. This is especially true in the major cities where there are Buddhist temples on almost every corner and where hunger and poverty are the norm rather than the exception. How does one respond when they are offered money or food for their family if they will only become Buddhist?

The church in Pergamum is honored for its faithfulness to the Gospel. This congregation has been faithful to its calling in the midst of pagan influences. They have been faithful--they have not denied their faith. It is interesting to note that the congregation was probably all from Greek or Roman backgrounds. There was little, if any, Jewish influence in the city. Thus they would not know the history of the Old Testament; they would not know the stories of faith. The list of the faithful in Hebrews 11 would be an unknown list to them.

The same can be said for much of our world/nation today. We are living in an age when the stories of faith are not known. There is no foundation or background on which to build. Loren B. Mead in his book, The Once and Future Church, writes: "We can no longer assume that the community (church) has engaged the people in any serious contact with tradition. Near total ignorance of the biblical story and of the faith is more and more the norm."

The congregation in Pergamum has remained faithful – they even have had a martyr in their young history. They may not know the rich history of their faith but in the midst of it all they have been found faithful.

But... they are not perfect. There are still some problems. Sexual immorality is still a struggle. This would be a part of worship in some of the temples and the congregation was accepting of things they should not accept. Ephesus was too harsh and intolerant and Pergamum is too lax and tolerant. Tolerance may have made their lives a little easier. They may have looked the other way rather than enter into confrontation with those who are still participating in temple practices. There is a danger – there is a need for congregational repentance.

I wonder – have we lost our ability to be faithful? Who or what are we faithful to today? We are told that we no longer have “brand” loyalty. We no longer have a loyalty to business or businesses to us. Employers seem not to care about what happens to employees and no longer do people enter the job market expecting to work for one organization their entire working lives. We even change occupations. The time is long past when being a loyal employee/employer is the norm.

Commitment, loyalty and faithfulness are almost “dirty” words in our present day society. Even in personal relationship these traits are seldom found. We get a better offer and off we go. We owe nothing to anyone. If the grass looks greener off we go.

Even within the church these traits have been lost. There is no longer any denominational loyalty or congregational loyalty. I remember back in Maine in the late 1970’s we traced the growth of churches in a certain region by the type of hype and programming that was going on within a certain “worship experience.” The congregation that was offering the most exciting programming—worship was the one that was growing. If the program was better across town then all the people would head across town – leaving the congregation they were in. You could almost watch churches being built and then left abandoned in the space of months.

George Hunter III has called our evangelism as “stealing guppies from another’s pond.” He concluded that we were not making disciples, we were just taking them from other congregations. His call is for the church to begin making new disciples as we are charged with in the New Testament. His call is for faithfulness to the Gospel mandate.

God looks for our faithfulness not our perfection. How often do we fail to accomplish anything because we do not try and we do not try because we feel we are not perfect? I am not ready yet. Maybe in ten or fifteen years we will be but not right now. Then in ten or fifteen years we still feel we need more training, etc. God does not want our perfection; God wants our faithfulness.

Wonderful story in the book we have been using for our Wednesday studies, Noah Built his Ark in the Sunshine. James Moore tells this story from his seminary days when he was a chaplain intern in a local hospital on the neurosurgery ward.

He writes (and I condense and paraphrase) that every Thursday at 1 p.m. he would arrive and check the patients that needed to be seen. Then he would make his rounds and prepare a verbatim for his professor to evaluate. One Thursday he was met by the head nurse who said that today they needed a minister more than any other day. One of the patients, Mrs. Davis, was scheduled for a surgery she would probably not survive; she had refused to see anyone and would not take phone calls, receive cards or flowers.

Using all of his reserve James headed off to visit. He had an idea he would just introduce himself and let her talk. Repeating back what she said and nod appropriately now and then. However, just as he was going into the room the nurse caught up with him and told him that Mrs. Davis was to remain absolutely still and was not allowed to talk!

*Now, are you familiar with the word discombobulated? I was discombobulated. I promptly went into the room and did everything wrong. I pushed open the door too hard and it slammed against the wall. I went over and kicked the bed. (You are not supposed to do that!) I tried to talk to Mrs. Davis, and everything came out wrong. In desperation, I tried to pray and botched up the prayer. I left that room totally humiliated. I went straight to my car and felt so defeated. As if it were yesterday, I vividly remember taking my fists and hitting them on the steering wheel and screaming at God, "Why did you get me into this? I can't do this. I don't have what it takes to be a minister."*

He goes on that the following week he arrived earlier than usual when the lunch trays were being distributed so that he could check the charts. To his surprise Mrs. Davis had survived the surgery and was listed in good condition. He went down to her room and found just the opposite of what he had encountered the week before. There were flowers, soft music and sunlight was streaming in the windows. Mrs. Davis was alert, sitting up and writing thank you notes.

*I went over to her and said, "Mrs. Davis, you probably don't remember me." And she said, "Don't remember you? How could I ever forget you? You saved my life." I turned around. I thought maybe someone else had come into the room! I said, "I don't understand. I felt so terrible—I did everything wrong." She said, "That's just it. I felt so sorry for you!" She said, "You were so pitiful that I just wanted to hug you." She said, "I felt compassion for you, and it was the first time in months that I felt anything but self-pity; and that little spark of compassion made me want to live again." She said, "And now the doctors tell me it made all the difference."*

*I walked out of that room inspired. Here's why: I learned a lesson that day that changed my life, a lesson that turned my life around...I learned that I don't have to be perfect. I don't even have to be good. All I have to be is faithful. Just do my best, and trust God for the rest.*

The congregation in Pergamum is praised for their faithfulness. No, they are not perfect, there is still room for growth but what was said of them was that God's knows their faithfulness. Does God know ours?

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Mead, Loren B. The Once and Future Church, Alban Institute, 1991(p. 50-51)

Moore, James W. Noah Built His Ark in the Sunshine, Dimension for Living, Nashville, 2003 (p. 81-85)