

attention to the lives of the saints, choosing to look at Brendan, Godric, and Jacob. Each one followed God in relationship and mission. He was surprised to find in his research of these people many skeletons in their closets.” What made this unsavory trio saintly?” he asked. He decided that in spite of everything that they were “life-givers”. They were passionate. They were risk-taking. They were courageous. And most important, they brought life to the people around them (Yancey, ‘Grace Notes’, p.27). The proclamation of the Kingdom of God brings life.

I was impressed by a recent Time Magazine article entitled “The God Squad”. This refers to the many millennials embracing Jesus’ call to mission through the Priesthood. Their lives and character represent a culture change in the Catholic Church, bringing life to dry bones. That is happening throughout the wider church today as God raises up a new generation of followers who are doing church differently than my generation and most of us. It is a reminder that Jesus is in charge of his church. We may give up on church, but we don’t give up on Jesus. He is alive in the Holy Spirit waiting to get our attention and give us life by following him into the towns and villages around us.

The best description of discipleship that I know comes from J. Heinrich Arnold. He reminds us that Christian discipleship “is not a question of our own doing; it is a matter of making room for God so that God’s Spirit can live in us” (Yancey, p.244).

Let’s go back to our conversation with Jesus. Our universal need for love is met by his unconditional love for us. He then fills our aspirations to live better lives by inviting us into his mission in the world. He opens our eyes to the harassed and helpless around us. He gives us a message of life and the authority to proclaim it. He tells us to depend on him for the resources that we need. He tells us to keep moving. God goes where God is wanted and doesn’t hang around where there is no response. It will be difficult and might cost our lives, Jesus tells us. But by following him we will gain our lives. Maybe Catherine of Siena is right; “If you are who God calls you to be, you will set the world on fire”.

That is what it means to live under the rule of God.



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CHAMPAIGN

June 18, 2017

Living Under the Rule of God

Chuck Carlson

Genesis 18:9-15; Matthew 9:35-10:6

I have always appreciated being challenged. I don’t have to like it, but I appreciate it. I like to be made to think. I have often heard some of you express to me the importance of being challenged in a message and worship service. We would all acknowledge that we are far too comfortable with things as they are but often don’t know how to move forward. Comfort zones can be too comfortable sometimes. We enjoy our comforts yet don’t enjoy them at the same time. I find that something within me always seems unsettled. In a film entitled ‘After Life’, director Hirokazu Koreeda places us in a context where people have died. There follows a week of decision. The deceased are invited to choose the one memory that he or she would like to live in forever. The setting is a nondescript office building. Here bureaucrats talk over desks and filing cabinets. It is day to day stuff. However, thoughts are transformed as each person begins to recognize the universal need for love and the aspiration to live a better life.

In a conversation with Jesus, what would emerge as our greatest need? What would be his aspiration for us to lead better lives? Let’s take a look.

As Jesus goes about the villages and cities, stopping in synagogues to teach and converse, the people he mixes with are the marginal and common folks. They aren’t the elite or the powerful. These would be the Roman and religious elite who maintain a fixed, well-organized hierarchical society. It is they who daily exploit these very people and oppose Jesus’ teaching and ministry. Jesus is moved to compassion for these people. He views them as “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”. That means that they are like a lot of people today. They feel exploited and maltreated,

annoyed, troubled by life. Many experience a sense of helplessness, thrown or cast about like sheep wandering around without a shepherd who could lead them to water, food, and safety.

Isn't this where we will find Jesus? A book, "Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town", written by Lancaster native, Brian Alexander, describes the condition of many in the populace today. A once proud town sporting a Fortune 500 company, Anchor Hocking, was built by industrialists in the 20th Century with a commitment to the common good of the community. The company provided a living wage to the families who worked there and provided various public amenities for the town. Executives and managers might live on the same block with machine operators and share beers at the local tavern.

Death came to the community when a succession of Wall Street raiders, over a 30 year period, systemically stripped the town of its sustenance, its sense of community, and pride. Eric Brown, head of the local police major crimes unit, tells Alexander about arresting the drug-addicted children of his high school classmates. The author asks Brown what happened to so radically change the town they both love. "Corporate America is what happened", the policeman answers glumly (Sojourners, 'Picked Clean to the Bone', June 2017, pp. 34-6).

When Trump declared in 2015, "The American Dream is dead", the people of Lancaster heard him loud and clear. They gave him 60% of their votes. These are the people in our cities and country who are "harassed and helpless, people without a shepherd". Non-workers, those who have given up finding a job, the disabled, immigrants, many denied the disciplines and rewards of productive labor by our nation's wholesale deindustrialization, simply adrift, fall into this category. Across the economic and social spectrum, many people in our communities feel disenfranchised.

Jesus' ministry is linked with the arrival of God's kingdom. He proclaims and embodies the in-breaking kingdom of God. The world we live in is not how God wants it. The proclamation of the good news and the preaching of the kingdom with its signs of healing and hope challenge the status quo of things as they are in our world.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few". That harvest is right in front of us; bringing good news to people, proclaiming the kingdom of God, offering the opportunity to follow Christ. Bible school is planned for July, but Mindy is restricted in meeting the needs of the children God is placing in our midst. Why? Because the "laborers are few". Jesus tells us to "ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers into his harvest". Without laborers this ministry cannot happen.

So Jesus sends this motley group of people into the cities

of Israel foreshadowing the mission of the church. They are simple fishermen, a tax collector, a revolutionary, a loudmouth, and even "a shifty betrayer" (Homiletics, May-June, 2017, p. 64). He gives them and us his authority. He desires that the church be a transforming community and not a deforming experience. We are still a motley group whom Jesus is sending. But mission is where we will find our life, Jesus tells us.

Mission is not optional for the church. It is the very reason that these disciples and we, the church today, exist. The mission Jesus gives us extends his mission. The tasks of our mission are the same as Jesus. Our focus is upon the people around us. Who are the people to whom Jesus is sending us and calling us to care for? Who are the harassed and helpless in our neighborhood Jesus would direct our attention toward? We support DREAM, an outreach to at risk African American boys. We minister to our international and immigrant neighbors through ESL. Jesus is bringing the people to us. What might be the risks that we have to take to minister to the immigrant population? What are the implications of committing to identify as a multi-cultural church?

Secondly, Jesus gives us the content of our proclamation. We are his person and voice of healing and hope as we proclaim and live out his message. Is Jesus calling us to address the imbalance of the social system? Recently Courageous Conversation challenged us to listen to God's heart for migrants in the bible and seek a biblical response in order to guide us in responding to the immigrant issue in our nation at this time. How is Jesus calling us to treat and assist the immigrants among us? As participants and citizens in the Kingdom of heaven, what is our version and application of curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers and casting out demons? What does that ministry look like for us? These are things that we must work out and discern through his guidance.

Following Jesus into his mission both engages and transforms us. And make no mistake, the church exists only because he sends us while at the same time he makes very clear what the content and context of that mission consists. I hear people wringing their hands at the decline and state of the church today. There are times when the church appears moribund and its members demoralized, overwhelmed by bureaucratic and personal inertia. What do you say to the person who asked, "I have given up on church. Completely. What do you say to someone like me?" (From eReflections article, "What Kind of Church Are You?").

We turn our ear to Jesus and listen. I always think of that second century theologian, Irenaeus, who tells us that, "The glory of God is a person fully alive".

Author Frederick Buechner once decided to give his