

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – January 31, 2010  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

In the United States, census data suggests that 70% of the US population are nominal Christians. Of this 70%, 40% claim to attend church at least once per year outside of Christmas, Easter, a wedding or a funeral. Statistics show that less than 25% of that 40% attend worship on a weekly basis. Now, this is neither a financial update sermon nor a stewardship sermon, but those same statistics show that of those who attend church regularly, only 3% tithe.

These statistics are born out in our own congregation. On our statistical report we claim a little over a thousand members. Our average weekly attendance is about 25% of that. Of our 200 giving units, less than 5 are tithers.

Last week, we were talking in our after church meeting about the viability of this congregation and the need for new members and where are they going to come from and all that. After church, I had a chance to talk with President Bauchle and I shared with him two interesting statistics. First, we average about ten visitors per Sunday. Now some of them are true visitors, friends of members, people in town for a weekend or a wedding or accompanying someone to Roswell or one of our other fine hospitals. But some are looking for a church to call home. I suspect there may even be a few folks here today, because they hope to find a new church home. I said to Paul, if we averaged 10 visitors per week and half of them were “church shopping” to use a crass word, and we could show them that this was a loving, caring, exciting church family to be a part of, our membership would double every four years.

The other interesting statistic I shared with Paul, was that if everyone who claims to be a member of this church came on the same Sunday, they wouldn't fit, unless we held three services of worship here in our main sanctuary.

So, I concluded that what we need to do to insure our viability was twofold:

- Be better at welcoming and showing hospitality to our new friends and genuinely welcome them to and include them in our ministry and....
- Do a better job of being a church family and invite those who are already members to become more active in the life of the congregation.

And beyond that, once they're here, they need to have something to do. Mission both precedes and follows evangelism, because there's no sense joining a church that doesn't do anything and so we need look no further, once again, than to the first words Jesus speaks aloud in the Gospel of Matthew, words I eluded to last week. The first words he speaks are taken from the book of Isaiah and lays out the mission, not only for his life but for the life of the church as a whole:

18" The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
To proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free.

How you do that and what actions these words motivate, are up to you and are of infinite possibility, but if you're looking for a mission statement, you won't find a better one than this.

Jumping for a moment from church mission to church statistics, I read an interesting article in the Wall Street Journal this past week about the growth of home churches. Of the 30% who claim to believe in God but who don't go to a traditional church each week, the article stated that the home church movement was approaching 6%. Now, we don't really know what that number means....it could mean that that 6% are actually holding worship, with prayer and song and teaching components, but it could include those who claim to hold church at home when in reality, they're just saying "grace" before meals. But the movement is interesting nonetheless. Critics of the institutional church say that increasing numbers of people are reverting back to the smaller models that characterized the early church, citing a growing dissatisfaction with the larger Church and the issues that typically face larger institutions, among them the cost of maintaining the institution, its facilities, its administration, its bureaucracy, training costs for leaders, health and pension plans and so on. I not here this morning to debate the pros and cons of the institutional church as much as I want to focus on why people are turning to different alternatives, some of which may be good, like home churches and an emphasis on keeping a Christian home and focusing on morality and ethics. But parts of the movement away from the traditional church and traditional forms of spirituality are not so good, perhaps even dangerous.

I've noted an alarming increase in the general population's attraction to the para-normal, to psychic fairs, tarot, vampires, were wolves. Television programming and large screen cinema seem to focus a lot lately on the interaction being the living and the dead. And you have to ask yourself, "Why?"

I think part of the answer lies in the first statistic I gave you, as people wander away from the historical and traditional sources of wisdom that attempted to answer some of these questions in a way that respected both intelligence, reality and science, the vacuum left by this trend gave room for all sorts of a-traditional and a-historical venues, not to mention a proliferation of attention on celebrity lifestyles and preferences, Dr. Phil, Oprah, and the like.

You know what they say, if parents won't talk to their children about drugs and sex, somebody else will and the information they get from those sources may not be exactly the information you want your child to have. So also, with issues of spirituality, morality, ethics, life, death and God.

Human beings are hard wired to be questioning creatures. Even a quick reading of Genesis and how our first ancestors dealt with ambiguity will attest to that fact. And more than questions of which tree should we eat from or not, are the larger questions of "who we are," and "what is our purpose in life?"

And these questions are only answered if we look at the larger picture, at the whole of creation and at our relationships with one another, and with God. I cannot answer the question, "Who am I?" apart from the question, "Who am I in relationship to you?" And I will not be satisfied with any answer I receive if it doesn't also address the question, "Who am I in relationship to the one who created me?" I cannot accept the proposal that I am an accident of chemical combination, Descartes solved that equation for me, and I cannot believe that creation and therefore, I, have no purpose or goal. I am more than the DNA that makes me up and I can affect change and therefore history.

How do I know then, if what I do with the freedom that my life affords me, is for good and for God?

Well, believe it or not, the answer to that question is the simplest of all, and St. Paul can be credited with giving it to us. In his most famous passage from his first letter to the people of Corinth, who, by the way, were having all kinds of trouble sorting out for themselves how to treat one another and which philosophy and lifestyle to accept, says this,”

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*4Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*8Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

If you're looking for a mission statement, remember this:

18"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
To proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free.

And if you want to be certain that your motivation comes from God, let whatever you do, be borne first, and last, of love.

Amen.