

LAKESIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Rev. Terence A. Lucarelli & Rev. Katie Robb
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IS IT TIME TO TEAR DOWN OUR CHURCH?
Mark 13:1-8

Pastor Daniel Bohlman had a problem. The front of his new church was very small ... only enough room for a pulpit. When a prominent member died, Bohlman had to figure out where to place the coffin for viewing. The most reasonable place seemed to be in the back of the church, where there was more room. All they needed to do was move out one of the back pews for the funeral service, then replace it afterwards. *Problem solved ...* or so Pastor Bohlman *thought*. But certain members of the church were outraged that anyone would *think* of moving the back pew, *even temporarily*. How dare they tamper with tradition! The opposition was so intense that Pastor Bohlman would write, "It was easier to rally people together to fight to keep a pew from leaving the church, than getting them to fight to put people into it!"



Our scripture lesson today is from the 13th chapter of Mark. It is a stark chapter about the return of the Son of Man. But I want us to look at a *warning* in the beginning of the chapter that you and I need to heed.

One day as Jesus was going out of the Temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And they *WERE* wonderful buildings. The Temple looked like it would *last forever*. It was *GIGANTIC*, covering the entire top of Mount Moriah. Some of the stones used to build it were forty feet long and eighteen feet wide. The building project took over forty-six years. In the front of the Temple were *huge* pillars, almost forty feet high. The Temple was made of pure white marble and parts of it were covered in plates of solid gold. According to William Barclay's commentary on the Gospel of Mark, "When the sun hit the white and gold structure, it often gleamed so brilliantly that onlookers had to shield their eyes from the glare." But Jesus turned to this disciple and asked him, "Do you see these great buildings?" And then he declared, "Not one stone shall be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

What a bleak revelation. The Temple was the *CENTER* of Jewish life. More than *ANYTHING ELSE* in their land, the *TEMPLE* gave the Jewish people a *SENSE OF IDENTITY*. And Jesus was telling them that *ONE DAY* this glorious structure would *LAY IN RUINS*.

There are some people who are saying the same thing about the church today. The church is *IRRELEVANT*. The church is *DYING* and *ALMOST DEAD*. The church as a *vital institution* is *FINISHED*. But, of course, skeptics have *always* said that about the church. The *difference* is that *today* some of the people who are saying that the church will "one day lay in ruins" are people who *LOVE* the church, *just as Jesus loved the Temple*.



Church Consultant George Barna has devoted years to tracking the impact of the church on society. In his book, *The Second Coming of The Church*, Barna says, "At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I believe the Church in America has no more than five years—perhaps even less—to turn itself around and begin to *affect* the culture,

rather than *be affected by it.*” Five years Barna warns *or* this temple we love will lay in ruins. He concludes by saying, “Oh, the shell might be around for another century but the church as a live, redemptive force will be no more.”

The reality is, we have been living through a half century of mainline decline. When I was growing up our assumption was that if you built a large Presbyterian Church, they would come! But that’s just not the case anymore. By the way, did you happen to read the religion section of the paper on Friday morning? The Southern Baptists, of all people, are experiencing a sharp decline in membership. Who’d a thought that would ever happen?



Clifton Kirkpatrick, our soon to retire Stated Clerk of the denomination, in a booklet mailed out to the leadership of the church a month ago entitled, *Is There a Future for the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, writes of our decline:

At our peak numerically in 1966, we had a combined membership of 4,250,000 in the two (Presbyterian) denominations that eventually reunited to form the PC (USA). Our membership as of the end of 2006 (the last year for which statistical data is available) was 2,267,118. We know that we have lost at least another 50,000 over the last eighteen months because of congregations withdrawing to the New Wineskins movement. The net result is that we have roughly half the number of members we had forty years ago—the same period of time when there has been rapid population growth in our country.

In that same book I mentioned earlier, George Barna reports that even though we are seeing a decline in the numbers of people going to the mainline churches in the United States, the number of people who profess a belief in God, or some form thereof, has increased dramatically since 9/11.

The comedian, Lenny Bruce, recognized the problem way before George Barna, or Clifton Kirkpatrick. In the 60’s Lenny Bruce made this poignant observation about the church: “*Every day people are straying away from the CHURCH and going BACK to GOD.*”



From a different perspective that I might bring, I’ve invited Katie to be a part of the sermon, helping you recognize a problem that is prevalent in our culture and society today. I’ve asked her to speak to you as one who finds herself as a member of what has been dubbed: Generation X.

Katie ...

Let me start by saying this: I love the church. I don’t ever feel more at home than in a church setting. I love the sense of family. The unconditional love. The budding possibility it holds for transforming the world. I love the church. And I believe in it.

I imagine that many of you here in this room share that love. But as it turns out in our culture today, we are the odd ducks.

Especially in my generation. My generation doesn’t typically love the church. Most of my friends didn’t grow up in it. And they are extremely suspicious. OK, I am too.

I’m talking about what author Dan Kimball calls “emerging generations.” Those of us in our twenties and thirties. GenX and the Millenials. (I’m never sure which on I

am) Kimball is the author of a book about these emerging generations called: They Like Jesus But Not the Church.

A pastor in California, Kimball spends time talking to young people outside of the church. And his reflection of those conversations became his book title. They Like Jesus But Not the Church.

Just the title of that book should startle us here in the pews. Kimball believes “we’re living in a post-Christian culture.” And his title indicates how that culture sees the church: Somehow, something different and separate from an authentic Jesus.

A description I found of these generations is especially telling: Both are highly individualistic. We are self-reliant, the first latch-key kids. We celebrate diversity, use technology, and multitask constantly. Gen-X rejects rules. (we were the first to wear jeans and flip-flops to the office)

Millenials rewrite them. Gen-X mistrusts institutions. Millenials find institutions irrelevant.

We are the generations of “Spiritual but not religious.” And one of our pop-culture gurus, Madonna, has said, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the teachings of Jesus, but I am suspicious of organized religion.” So here we sit. In the institution. Loving it. But we’d better be asking some questions. As Kimball says, we need to: “Look at the church through the eyes of Emerging Generations.”

He did that through conversation, and here’s what he found:

Emerging generations like Jesus. The mega-rapper Kanye West said “Jesus Walks with us.” He is a pop-culture guru. A respected prophet. A revolutionary. A compassionate friend. Someone with a deep connection to God.

Emerging generations don’t like the church. Because: The church wrecks personal freedom. It is an unnatural structure for relating to God. I can relate to God on my own. The church is about hierarchy, power, and control with a political agenda. The church is judgmental and exclusive -the church brainwashes people. The church operates like a business with a CEO.

So, if emerging generations don’t want Doctrine, rules, procedures, hierarchies, meetings, and programs, what do they want? Authenticity, experience, freedom, creativity, connection, relationship.

“I think Jesus wants the church to offer an apology to people when needed, and I think Jesus wants those who like him to forgive the church if she has wounded them.”

How do we look to those on the outside of the institution? We look like the angry right-wing who blamed 9-11 and Katrina on the homosexuals and who try to influence government...etc. – OR, as priests that abuse children - that is what is seen on TV, etc.

We in the church, know, however, that the church can and does offer what emerging generations want. Despite all of our organizational foibles, It is what we are and we should strive to be. Jesus offers the expansive life we are looking for, not the narrow one that is perceived by culture. And so should the church.



Thanks Katie.

With all that’s been said, should we be concerned? Most definitely, *YES*. Is there any hope? *ABSOLUTELY*.

I believe there *IS* a future for the Presbyterian Church, and over the next three weeks it’s that *HOPE* I will attempt to build upon.



For the remainder of our time here today, let's consider a couple of important principles about the church and today's society.

The very first thing we need to understand is that the church *HAS* what most people *WANT* today ... *TO BE CONNECTED TO OTHER PEOPLE AND TO GOD*. These two concerns are at the *center* of who we *ARE* and what we are *ABOUT*.

So, the reality is that church *has* what most people *want* today. But, as Katie and I have both already mentioned... *the last place most people look for spiritual fulfillment and community is in church.*



Several years ago a major car company had their sales personnel wear a button that said, "I am not a car salesman." It seems that surveys showed that the *one thing* the average person dreaded *MOST* in buying a new car was *dealing with sales people*. They associated car buying with *HIGH PRESSURE* and *LOW ETHICS*.

But something like that has happened to the church in the eyes of many people. They want God ... at least in some form. They want to be connected with others in spiritually-healthy relationships, but the last place they want to look for these things is in a Christian church. Our image has been tainted ... they associate us with *HIGH PRESSURE* and *LOW ETHICS*. To *SOME*, we've become *uncaring, judgmental, a social club* only concerned about our own members, *out of touch* with the *REAL WORLD* and its *REAL ISSUES*. In a word: *IRRELEVANT*.

So what are we going to *DO* about it? Christ has called us to reach out to *ALL* the world. *WHERE* do we begin?



WE BEGIN WITH OURSELVES.

We need to continually ask ourselves what we can do to make ourselves more appealing to the world outside.

There are two principles that apply here:

THE 1ST IS: Are we focused on our OWN NEEDS or are we focused on the NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE OUTSIDE THESE WALLS.

Every community is different. How is Lakewood different? Who are the disenfranchised within a five mile radius of our church; what are their needs and how can we reach them? The crime rate in Jacksonville is the highest in the state ... is there something we can be doing about it right here? These are the *kinds* of questions we need to be asking, but more than just *asking* ... we need to be *ANSWERING*.

In this post-Christian culture in which we find ourselves, where the church is viewed with *mistrust* and *lethargy*, the missionary zeal of the church has got to be rediscovered. Folks ... the mission field can be found right outside these walls. The church of the 21st Century has got to be a *MISSIONARY CHURCH*. *Where did Jesus do his ministry? Out among the PEOPLE, wherever he found a NEED.*

Clifton Kirkpatrick says this in his booklet:

In a world where the powers and principalities of our time are widening the gap between rich and poor, countering violence with violence, and threatening the future of our planet, a strong and united witness by Presbyterians to God's transforming love and justice is needed now more than ever!

In this sense, we might need to *tear down our church*—as we have known it—in order to *BUILD IT UP* ... *to be a MISSIONARY CHURCH*.

This is where we *BEGIN* ... by *CHANGING* our image ... by concentrating on the *NEEDS* of people *OUTSIDE* our walls ... by taking the ministry of Christ where he ministered—*TO THE PEOPLE!*



BUT THERE IS A 2ND PRINCIPLE WE MUST RECOGNIZE:

In a society where people are floundering *ethically, morally, spiritually*, a person who is able to take to heart the example of Christ ... who *LOVES* as Christ loved, who is as *KIND* as Christ was kind, who is as *ACCEPTING* as Christ was accepting, who is as *GENEROUS* as Christ was generous ... that person will stand out in any group.

There is nothing more appealing than a person who truly lives as Christ lived or than a church living as Christ's Body on earth. The problem with our churches sometimes is that many Christians, by their *attitudes* and *actions*, resemble Jesus' *ENEMIES* more than they do *HIM*. They are so *sour*, so *judgmental*, so *unloving*, that they *do more harm* to the Christian cause than *good*.

I like the title of one of Tony Campolo's books, *How to Be a Christian Without Embarrassing God*. Some church people are an *embarrassment* to God by their *attitudes* and their *actions*. *No wonder the world views us with SUSPECT and DISINTEREST.*

I can't tell you how many times over the last 26 years I've had a child, who was walking along with mom or dad before or after church, point their finger toward me and whisper, "*Look, there's God.*" My reaction is always the same ... *NO, NO, NO! NOT ME!* But if the truth be known, what people see of *YOU* and of me ... those of us who call ourselves "Christian" ... what people *SEE* in our lives *IS* a reflection of how *WE RELATE TO GOD*. What is *YOUR* relationship like?

People outside our walls want to be CONNECTED to other people and CONNECTED to God. But as Lenny Bruce observed: They are straying away from the CHURCH to get BACK to GOD.

George Barna says we have only five years to turn the church around. We need to LOOK at ourselves more closely and REDEFINE our mission. And we need to draw closer than ever to God and to each other.

Amen and Amen.