

*Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.*

*1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## **“Counter-Cultural Christianity”**

### **Introduction: The Golden Age**

Ah the 1950's.... Those Golden Years.... That was America. That was when life was good.

I'm not old enough to remember the 1950's. I would guess that roughly half the people here don't remember the 50's. Yet that decade has a strong hold on America's imagination. Celebrities (and non-celebrities) still imitate Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Fifties-style diners and fifties music continue to be popular.

I suppose Americans will always remember the 50's as a time when America was on top of the world. We didn't have much competition from Europe or Japan because their manufacturing had been so damaged during the war. Developing countries like India and China were not developed enough to compete with us. Our economy was by default the strongest in the world.

From what I am told, the quality of life in the 50's was pretty good. Labor Unions were strong and workers were well paid. Immigrants that had come over in the late 1800's and early 1900's were coming into their own as middle class Americans. The new wave of immigration had not hit the United States yet. Everyone knew what it was to be a good citizen and most people shared a common world view.

## **The Golden Age for Churches**

For many pastors, the 50's were a golden era too. If you wanted to start a new congregation, all you had to do was build a building, open the doors and watch the new members file in.

I am not sure it was ever that simple even back then but there was a kind of cultural Christianity in the 1950's that we don't have today. Back then you could assume your neighbor was Christian, maybe not a great Christian but at least he went to church on Easter and Christmas.

## **Religious Diversity**

Today we live in a different world. Go to the Chinese buffet in Shawano and you can eat your meal by a Buddha statue. Stop at a gas station in Oshkosh and you can see a Vishnu poster on the wall. New immigrants are bringing religions that seem strange to most people in rural Wisconsin.

## **Growing Secularism**

In addition to new religions, we live in a time of growing secularism. People don't feel they need to be in church at all. There is no social pressure on them to do it. Many of them have bought into the idea that the world was formed by blind chance and an infinite amount of time. They don't believe there is any God watching them or judging their behavior, so why bother going to church?

## **Cafeteria Christians**

In addition to growing religious diversity and growing secularism, Christians seem to be changing from previous generations. Many Christians don't commit to one doctrine or denomination like they

did years ago. They go from denomination to denomination, only staying as long as it is stimulating. When the thrill wears off, they switch again.

These people are often called cafeteria Christians because they go down the line of denominations picking a little of this and a little of that like you might do in a cafeteria line.

Our culture loves the cafeteria Christian. Our culture says they are spiritual without being religious. Our culture says they are spiritual without being preachy or intolerant. But this lightweight spirituality comes at a high cost. The cost is truth itself.

All Christian groups (whether they call themselves denominations or not) make certain claims that are either true or false. Either we are saved by works or by grace. It can't be both. Either Christ is physically present in the Lord's Supper or he is not. It can't be both. By not answering these questions, the cafeteria Christian can flit from church to church without ever committing with any depth.

Cafeteria Christians are like the seed that landed in shallow soil. At first, it sprung up. It looked like it was really growing but when the sun came out, it died quickly because it had no root. When persecution comes, they run and hide because they have no depth.

### **Persecution Is Coming**

Jesus warns his disciples in today's Gospel lesson that there will be a time coming when they will be persecuted. Jesus says, "*a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.*" People who call themselves religious will persecute the disciples thinking that they are doing God a favor. Jesus makes a point that being his disciple is never easy and it may even lead to a cross.

I don't know the future. I don't know what will happen in America in another fifty years. Will the secularists win? I don't know. Will Islam win? I don't know. But there is one thing I do know and it is based on Jesus' words: Persecution will come.

Persecution came to the early church. Most of us are familiar with old movies, many from the fifties, about the Christians being thrown to the lions.

Martin Luther faced persecution too. A similar reformer, Jan Hus, was burned at the stake by the Roman church. Luther knew that without God's protection, he would have faced the same painful death.

It has been said many times before that we are blessed in this country because we can practice our religion openly without overt persecution. We should never forget to thank God for this great freedom.

### **Confirmation and Persecution**

Today our confirmation students will make a promise to be faithful to the Christian faith as professed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Part of that promise is that they will be faithful to death.

Throughout the last weeks of confirmation, I told them that they should not take this lightly. This is an oath before God's altar that they will not waffle under persecution. It takes a lot of courage to make that promise if you think about what it means. I tried to get the confirmands to think about what it means in this weeks leading up to confirmation. Of course, some will and some won't.

Jesus is trying to get his disciples to think too. He warns them that persecution is coming. It may come in spurts. At any given time, it might be weak or strong but it will come because the world hates

the Gospel. Jesus is warning us too so that we will not be caught by surprise.

## **Conclusion**

Real Christianity, authentic Christianity will always be opposed by our culture. Real Christianity is not afraid to quote Jesus when he says, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)* Real Christianity is not afraid to say, *"You shall have no other gods before me."* The truth is that there is only one God and that Jesus is the only way to that one God. That truth will become increasingly offensive as our nation becomes increasingly multicultural.

We may find ourselves living in a multicultural society where Christians are the minority. If we do, we need to remember that this is nothing new for Christians. The early Church lived in just such a culture. Christians have always been in danger of following Jesus to the cross.

But we do have one promise that gives us hope. We know that Jesus has promised the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Wisdom and Power. We received him in our baptisms and we know he will keep us until the Day of our Lord.

*May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*