

Advent 2 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

If you were to ask someone why fewer and fewer people in the United States identify themselves as Christian, let alone go to church, even though this phenomenon is happening across all age groups, most people would probably blame millennials. Those darn millennials. Those millennials, whom older generations call lazy, even though they tend to work harder and work longer hours than their older counterparts. Those millennials, whom older generations call entitled, even though most have record high debts due to the skyrocketing cost of college tuition, and many of whom could only dream about being able to buy a house as easily as their parents' generation could. It's those millennials who just don't want to bother waking up early on a Sunday morning to go to church.

If you've noticed the theme here, it may not be surprising to you that older generations are, once again, wrong about millennials. Many claim that millennials don't come to church because it's not flashy enough. They'd rather go to something that looks like a rock concert than a church service. They want the newest and coolest thing, and they don't value the ancient traditions that the church holds so dear. They want the church to cater to them, and don't appreciate the fact that the church caters to all people. However, if you actually ASK millennials why they don't go to church, the answer you get is much different, and probably very similar to the answers other age groups would give as to why they no longer attend church or identify as Christians.

The reason millennials, and likely other age groups, give for not going to church is that they don't want to be a part of an organization that is so hypocritical. Christians claim that God made us stewards to watch over creation, yet it seems few Christian churches are advocating for safer environmental practices. Christians claim to follow a messiah who taught us that we are to care for the poor, the sick, and the hungry, yet they know far too many churches that don't seem to give much thought or care to those in need. Christians claim to have a deep and true faith, yet far too many Christian churches seem to twist and change what their services look like in order to cater to their members. Yes, millennials DON'T want to be catered to. They want to feel like they are a part of something that is greater than themselves, something that upholds truth as more important than what the cool thing of the day is.

When John the Baptist was ministering in the wilderness, living out his calling to prepare the way of the Lord, he did so earnestly and without shame. It was clear that John the Baptist was preaching the truth and not trying to pander to anyone. In fact, anyone that was NOT seeking the truth probably would have avoided John. He was living out in the wilderness, wearing clothing of camels' hair (which is not comfortable), and surviving off of eating locusts and wild honey. This is not "normal" behavior, not now, not then, but those who were seeking the truth did not care about how John dressed or what he ate—they cared about his message—they cared about the truth. And so many came to him to be baptized.

And the one for whom John prepared the way, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, ministered in much the same way. Though Christ rarely isolated himself, he too, was much more concerned with preaching truth than to pandering to any group. Jesus traveled around the region with nothing more than the clothes on his back, and insisted his followers do the same. He refused to look down upon groups that were viewed as almost subhuman during that time, such as Samaritans and lepers. Jesus was not concerned about what was popular, but was concerned with what was right. And he urged those who followed him to be concerned with the same—to love God and to love neighbor, even if that neighbor is poor, or sick, or hungry, or a sinner.

Millenials, and I think many people of any age who no longer attend church, do not see much of John the Baptist or even Christ himself in Christian churches. Many prominent churches and church

leaders seem much more concerned with their popularity than with speaking the truth. Many prominent churches and church leaders are NOT accepting of others, and commonly pander to certain groups of people while denouncing others. Many prominent churches and church leaders seem much more concerned with their bank accounts than trying to preach and demonstrate truth in the world, let alone help the least of those, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, those very people Christ told us we should be ministering to as if we were ministering to Christ himself.

Hopefully at this point you are thinking that not all churches are like that. That many churches, that this church, cares about people, cares about helping people, cares about spreading the truth of the Gospel. But you also may notice that it is not churches like ours that often end up on the news. Because you don't usually see good news on tv. You see news of churches picketing the funerals of gay soldiers, or you see commercials of church pastors claiming God will bless you if you send them \$200, or you see people claiming to be Christians complaining about not being able to discriminate against others. The church that most people see is a church whose ways are very different than the ways of John the Baptist and of Christ himself. So even though it is true that many churches are different, many people have no idea that that is the case.

So how do we let others know that there are churches out there whose services are rooted in millennia-old tradition, that are not transforming themselves to pander to young people—that there are churches out there that are not exclusive, but welcome all people—that there are churches out there who genuinely care about others and try to follow Christ's teachings in life? Because we know churches like ours are not getting a whole lot of national airtime. And we know we no longer live in a world where we can passively wait for people to come visit our church because the social expectation that EVERYONE has to go to church is gone.

Well we have to change our ways, not to pander to others, but to make our voices, to make the truth, heard. We have to go out to the wilderness, those places in the world that are not "church" spaces, and be willing to talk to others. We have to be willing to share our stories, and articulate why we feel our church is important in our lives, and why it might be important to others as well. We have to be willing to tell others about our own faith journeys and experiences in order to make a path for Christ to enter into the hearts and lives of others. Like John the Baptist, we have to be willing to look a bit silly or even a bit insane in order to teach people about Christ, to prepare the way of the Lord. Because rock bands and exclusivity may grow a church, and may be popular amongst some people, but there are millions of people who are longing for something different, for something deeper, for something more authentic, more true. Let us work to help those people find a place and a path to Christ. Amen.