

R. Grant Mansfield

Church of the Holy Comforter

June 14, 2015

What about our Mustard Seed? What about the Change?

May the reflections of my heart and mind be pleasing to you oh God and may the hearts and minds of this community be open to hearing them.

Amen.

A few weeks ago, the results of a particular Pew Research survey, entitled “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, were published. As the title implies, the survey focused on the religious communities found within the United States and measured their “healthiness”. Among the survey’s results, it was shown that between 2007 and 2014, Christianity as a whole declined in membership, from 78.4% of the population to 70.6% of the population. In numbers, this means that Christianity had a net loss of 5 million people in 7 years, from roughly 178 million adherents to about 173 million adherents. This decline most heavily hit mainline Protestant and Catholic communities. The survey also reports

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What about the difference

What about the grace

What about forgiveness

What about a life that's showing

I'm undergoing the change, yeah

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picked a poor, uneducated shepherd boy to lead our nation? God did. For us, we seem content enough to have uber-wealthy, educated individuals create and run our government, like it ever did us any good. Yet, we still pick them because they seem to be the most qualified candidate for the job. I bet you though, if we were to elect more individuals from the periphery of our society into our government, our nation would have a lot more compassion for its citizenry and we would be a lot better off. If a poor shepherd boy is good enough for God to work with, why isn't that individual good enough for us?

The thing about God is that She works within our lives and within our communities in mysterious ways, always surprising us when we think we have it all figured out. I think the Gospel reading for today makes this point perfectly. Today, we find Jesus talking in parables, as we often do, this time, describing the Holy Nation of God. Now, Jesus could have described the Nation with a variety of things: a great mansion, a vast vineyard, a global empire, a roaring lion, an austere temple. Yet, he doesn't. Instead, he compares the Nation of God to a mustard seed, one of the smallest seeds known to humanity. Why do you

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So, let's return to my earlier question: is the church dying? Though we may have declined in numbers, wealth, and power, we have grown in ways that are surprising and not expected. We see more of society's outcasts joining the Christian Movement. We are beginning to lose our likeness to the face of power, but gaining the face of the outcast. The LGBT community, people of color, women, the discarded youth of our nation, the poor, the sick, the elderly: all of these communities are joining us in the Christian Movement. Now, broader society might deem that as a dying church, but I don't. I have seen where God has taken the

lowest of the low and raised them up, leading them, transforming them, and through them, bringing about amazing change in our faith communities and in the world. This is not our death we are witnessing, but God transforming us through resurrection! If we open our eyes and become aware to what God is doing within our midst, we will see that She is placing within us our poor shepherd boy, our mustard seed. How is God calling the Church to change for the 21st century? Are we ready and willing to make the drastic, counter cultural changes that we are being called to make? Are we committed enough in our faith to walk away from what the Church has been and to walk towards the new life of the Church? Are we willing to let go what needs letting go of, in order that the Christian Way can continue for another generation? Who and what is God raising up among us to be our future leaders, our poor shepherd boys, our mustard seeds?

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Wisdom. Amen.

R. Grant Mansfield

Church of the Holy Comforter

June 14, 2015

What about our Mustard Seed? What about the Change?

May the reflections of my heart and mind be pleasing to you oh God and may the hearts and minds of this community be open to hearing them.

Amen.

A few weeks ago, the results of a particular Pew Research survey, entitled “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, were published. As the title implies, the survey focused on the religious communities found within the United States and measured their “healthiness”. Among the survey’s results, it was shown that between 2007 and 2014, Christianity as a whole declined in membership, from 78.4% of the population to 70.6% of the population. In numbers, this means that Christianity had a net loss of 5 million people in 7 years, from roughly 178 million adherents to about 173 million adherents. This decline most heavily hit mainline Protestant and Catholic communities. The survey also reports

that between 2007 and 2014, there was dramatic growth, from 16.1% to 22.8%, among those who are religiously unaffiliated, meaning that they identify as either atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”. The demographics of this growth occurred in all age, ethnic, and educational groups, but were particularly noticeable in young adults. During these past seven years, the nation’s population as a whole has seen an increase from 227 million adults to 245 million adults, a net gain of about 18 million people.

Now, the results of this study have prompted many responses, both from within and outside of the faith communities studied. Many of these responses focus on the “decline” within Christianity, calling it the death toll of the largest religious group in our country. Many have celebrated the decline, stating that faith in the Divine is obsolete and is no longer needed for humanity; many have been saddened and disheartened by the survey’s results, lamenting over the decline of a faith community that has been so instrumental in their lives. Yet, what I find peculiar is that in all of the conversations I have seen around this survey, very few of them have focused on the changes that have occurred specifically within our

Christian communities, changes that are good! Though the numbers of the group termed “religious nones” has been bolstered by young adults, so has the membership of mainline Protestant churches, albeit more slowly. In the past 7 years, the number of young adults committing themselves to Christian communities has grown from 14% to 16% of the total membership. Likewise, ethnic diversity is on the rise within our communities, with 14% of members now coming from a non-white, non-European background, as compared to only 9% 7 years ago. So, let me ask you: now that you have heard some of the results of this survey, is the church dying? I believe that our readings appointed for today can help us answer that question.

Let us begin with our reading from 2 Corinthians. In this short, but very potent reading, we find Paul writing to the Church in Corinth, advising them about what it means to be in Christian community and how living our lives through Christ changes us and how we see and relate to the world. “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in

Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” This passage reminds me of a wonderful song that was written and released by Steven Curtis Chapman in 1999 on his album *Speechless*. The title of the song is “The Change”. If you have never heard of Steven Curtis Chapman or any of his music, here is my shameless plug for him. The song begins with him describing all of the things that he has in his life that connect to Christianity in some way: t-shirts, WWJD bracelets, key chains, necklaces, bumper stickers, etc. Sounds like most of our homes, doesn’t it? Yet, when we get to the chorus, he sings:

I cannot help but ask myself--

What about the change

What about the difference

What about the grace

What about forgiveness

What about a life that's showing

I'm undergoing the change, yeah

I'm undergoing the change

As the song nears the end, there is a montage of children reading scripture. Want to take a guess as to which verse they are reading? I'll give you a hint, I just read to you. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" This sums up perfectly what the life of a Christian and a Christian community will be, one of change, one of something new. Notice, it does not say that the life of a Christian or a Christian community is one of power or wealth, one of vast memberships or adherents, but one of change, one that brings something new into our lives and into our world, one that is filled with grace, love, forgiveness, and justice.

This way of life is very contradictory when compared to the life we are taught to live by broader society. Society outside of the church teaches us consciously and subconsciously that a good citizen is one who actively engages with our economic system, making tons of money, taking out whoever we need to in order to achieve it. We are taught that those who do not have wealth and material things are lazy, that those who cannot provide for themselves or their families brought it upon

themselves, because they refuse to put in hard work. Our society attempts to teach us that we do not need community in our lives in order to achieve our goals, only ourselves. In every aspect of broader society, we are hoodwinked and fooled into believing that people bring the atrocities of the world onto themselves, earning them by the things they have done wrong. In broader society, we are taught that the world is a “dog-eat-dog” one and that we must fight one another in order to succeed in life. There is no such thing as mercy, forgiveness, justice, compassion, grace, or love in those messages. Even worse, these messages force millions of people into the periphery of society, labeling them as outcasts and not worthy of being a part of the larger community.

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