

David's WHINE

Kick Off Sunday Sermon

Alida and I were up in Williamstown, Massachusetts a few weeks ago, home of The Williamstown Summer Theatre, one of America's greatest summer stock theatres, for sure. We've seen magnificent plays there throughout the years. After one performance of "Our Town" we were so moved, so emotionally drained that we sat in our seat for so long, eventually the ushers had to ask us to leave. They had to close up, they told us. Well, this summer they closed up for the whole summer. A summer theatre, with no theatre, all summer.

Meanwhile...Did you play this child's game? You fold your hands, fingers intertwining (upside down): "Here's the church." Then you take both pointer fingers and point them upwards: "Here's the steeple." Next, spread wide your two thumbs: "open the doors." And turning your fingers inside out, wriggling them: "see all the people" (Do it 2nd time.)

Well, not so much anymore. Not in Williamstown. Not in Church.

Nowadays, all the talk is about the decline of religion, dwindling attendance, the closing of churches, the loss of faith. Which is why my part of today's David/Alida double-header mini-sermons, my part is called "David's Whine: W-h-i-n-e." Because the world of religion, at least in America, especially in Christianity is full of lament and whines. And of course, a lot of "Why?" and "Who's to blame??" Church is "Out of date," people say. Irrelevant. A vestigial organ. "Americans Are Losing their Religious Faith" blared a major news headline. (NY Times, Nicholas Kristoff, 08/24/28, p.A17.). "The Church is Dying" trumpets another. "Who killed the Church?" asks many others, offering a steady list of culprits. Just yesterday I read this article, upset that we are in 2023, yet something many of us hold dear, and count on, something we treasured in the past is now in decline, diminished, "fallen out of the groove," it said. "Slow to

rebound,” “nearly disappeared,” “not particularly inspiring,” it said, “thanks to a deficit of imagination and ambition” (NY Times, 08/27/23, p.AR7). Oh, by the way, that article is about the death and dying of good family films.

For anyone in church today over 60, and if not, ask your grandparents, we remember a time when religion was prominent. Where I grew up, everybody went to church or synagogue. Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen was a TV superstar in the early days of TV. Billy Graham’s evangelistic crusades filled Yankee Stadium and Madison Square Garden. There was some sort of faith-based activity at every public school across America. And all the atheists were behind the Iron Curtain, or so we thought. But when religion began to crumble, we began to point fingers. There was Madeline Murray O’Hare, who single-handedly kicked prayer out of public schools. There was Rock-N-Roll, Hollywood liberal elites. Oh, the list was endless. Eventually, we began to look in the mirror.

Turns out, much of the damage to Christianity we did to ourselves. The Catholic Church’s Clergy Sex Abuse scandal. The Protestant Church’s slimy TV preachers led by Jim and Tammy Baker. Corruption and immorality in religion’s high places. But then came the greatest sin of all, the one that’s really killing churches: Boredom. Did you catch our scripture lesson for today? It’s from the Book of Revelation; granted, a really mysterious, even scary book. But there’s this one section that’s pretty straightforward in which God delivers a letter to seven different churches, seven prototypes, actually, churches that represent certain weaknesses. Today’s scripture is addressed to the “church in Laodicea,” “the lukewarm church,” it is called. God actually says, “I wish you were hot, or cold, but you’re just lukewarm. So, I’ll spit you out of my mouth.” Lukewarm. Wishy-Washy. Boringly mediocre. Recently there have been two fascinating polls, surveys, media hype, of interest today. The first claimed there’s a huge diminishment in patriotism and religion among Americans. Less commitment to nation. Less interest in God. The second looked at why folks aren’t going to church. It cited all my examples, but the real reason, simply stated, “it’s not worth the effort.” Which is another version of, it’s boring, “lukewarm,” don’t bother.

Which is actually more damning. I can fight “godless communism,” they’ve actually failed on their own. Madelyn Murray O’Hare ended up murdered for her money. The aberrations among religious leaders most everybody knows they’re aberrations. No one gets up on Sunday morning and says, “I didn’t like Catholic Cardinal Law in Boston, or TV’s Jimmy Swaggart, so I’m not going to Greenfield Hill Church.” But boredom? Irrelevancy? Not worth the effort? That’s on us. On me. To state the obvious, if we fail to produce, we, the royal “we” – you and me, if we fail to produce, then it’s the “we” that failed.

To be frank, I don’t fully believe that there’s a decline in patriotism and faith. Nowadays, you can find a survey or article to make any point you want. There’s certainly more questioning of both, but you happen to be sitting in a church that loves questioning!! Bring it on! Jesus asked questions. Jesus invited questions. Jesus answered questions.

I do think there’s a lot less blind faith and blind patriotism. And that can be a good thing. We, the church, we need to earn our place in your life, in society, in your Sunday. I’ll close my bit with this. When America was being founded (by the way, 50 years after this church was founded), when America was being founded, we declared to the world that we are, quote “endowed by our creator with inalienable rights.” In other words, there are things we stand for, virtues and values that are beyond fad, trends, politics. Things which are lasting, timeless. And let me add: wonder-full. Full of wonder.

Why do people pack this church Christmas Eve – twelve to thirteen hundred people, from 10am to midnight – why? The story doesn’t change. Same old music. But there’s magic in the air, isn’t there, and not just for little kids. There’s magic, and wonder, and values beyond fad. And why do we fill our church on Easter? Easter is the most incredible, unbelievable, impossible story in religion. Heck, Jesus walking on water is easier to believe, or turning water into wine. But resurrection? God’s love defeating even death itself? That’s the world of wonder.

Maybe religion is in decline. Maybe family films are dwindling. Maybe summer theatre is closed for the summer. Maybe the trusted values of yesteryear are out of style. Maybe a lot of what used to matter just isn't worth the effort anymore. And maybe we can't fix much of that. But right here we can make sure we are not passé. We are not half-dead. We're not ancient history, pretty to look at, but no value to it. We are Church with energy, with passion, with a single-minded purpose to be Christlike every day of the week. No whining.