

What Makes You So Important? by Holly C. W. Aastuen
John 18:33-37 November 22, 2009

Back in early October I was stuck in the Denver Airport for an entire afternoon. I was coming back from a conference in Aspen and the Humphrey Airport in Minneapolis was virtually closed down for repairs. I was stuck in the Denver Airport for almost 8 hours.

After about 5 hours of reading books and working on my sermon, I went off to a different part of the airport for a change of scenery and a gate that was a little less crowded. A group of 6 people—two moms, four daughters—were sitting near me and eventually we struck up a conversation. The moms and I talked about the flight delay and what had brought us to this part of the world and when I told them that I was at a 4 day conference for pastors, one of the girls who was about 15 asked, “What's a pastor?”

Her mother looked embarrassed, but I explained what a pastor was and after my brief explanation, her mother apologized, “We’re raising our children to make their own choices about spirituality,” she said. “They’re very spiritual kids. But they haven’t shown any interest in going to church.”

I bit my tongue so I wouldn't say something like “you can't choose what you don't know.”

For the past 26 years that I have been a pastor the conversations I have had with strangers have changed.

Back in the 80s when a stranger asked what I did, their reaction was often , “Oh, I didn't know they had girl pastors.”

Sometimes, especially when I was a captive audience on an airplane or on a bus, someone would say something like, “I'm struggling with something I haven't even told my own pastor, but maybe you can help me.” And then they would talk about some interpersonal problem they were struggling with. I felt a little like Ann Landers.

More recently, I've found that people feel guilty when they hear what I do for a living, and say things like, “Oh, I'm not much of a church-goer myself. I suppose I really should get back to it, but I never seem to find the time,”

But as my experience in Denver illustrates, we are now living in a day when it's not uncommon for people to not know the meaning of the word pastor or what a pastor does. It's a different world.

Another example of what a different world we live in today comes from something I learned at a conference a couple of weeks ago. What I learned was that according to The American Church Research Project only 17 percent of the American population attended a Christian church on any given weekend in 2007. (TheAmericanChurch.org) Seventeen percent! Even though some 80 percent of

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people in the United States call themselves Christians, only 17 percent of the American population is actually in a church worshipping sometime during the weekend.

Today is commonly called Christ the King Sunday and it is a Sunday I've struggled with for years. This last Sunday before the Advent season celebrates Jesus Christ as our ruler and the King over all creation. But since I've never lived in a country that had a king, the concept of Christ the King has always felt a little foreign and, frankly, hierarchical.

But then this week I learned about the origins of Christ the King Sunday.

Christ the King Sunday was instituted in 1925 when respect for the Church was waning. Stalin and Mussolini were gaining power. Hitler had just published *Mein Kampf*. People were dealing with the aftereffects of World War I and were pessimistic about the future. Pope Pius XI declared the new celebration of Christ the King as a reminder to people both inside and outside the church that our allegiance is to Christ. Celebrating something about power and the power of Christ which surpasses all others in strength and compassion—celebrating that sort of power—was something that was sorely needed at the time.

Which brings me to the question, 'So what is needed in today's culture? What has gotten us to the point where only 17 percent of the population is going to a Christian Church on any given weekend? And what is the Church's response?

I was doing some Christmas shopping in Northfield yesterday and I saw a book that was called "What if...Questions for the Soul." I flipped through the book and one of the questions that caught my eye was this, "Other than money, what would you like to leave your religion when you die?"

It was an intriguing question and it got me to thinking about what it is that we as a church can leave as our legacy for this and future generations of church-goers. What makes Christianity and us as Christians important and relevant to today's world? In a world that no longer is fully engaged in worshipping Christ, what difference can we make?

Back in 1925 the movement of the church led by the pope was to declare Christ the King and ruler over all in a tumultuous time when many were claiming that role.

In a world where Christianity is no longer the culturally established norm of society what can we answer to those who would ask what difference does our faith make? What does it mean to be a Christian?

In my own thinking about this question I thought 'Maybe what we need a little more of is the Prince of Peace in this world torn with wars,' then came to mind

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the eternity of God who is the same yesterday, today and always, which is a comfort to us in this time of economic instability. Then I thought of the King of Kings who gives us hope in a time of confused leadership.

Perhaps the message is we need to share these hopeful words of the nature of God with a people who are not flocking into churches to hear.

I'd like you to take some time this week to contemplate your own answer to the questions—what does it mean to be a Christian? And what difference does it make in my life and could it make for those I love?

Our answers could make a difference for the future of the church.

When we recognize Jesus as the King of our lives, as the leader we dare to follow, everything changes. We become a counter-cultural people who pray with boldness, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters* again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' 36 Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' 37 Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' 38 Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'