

“More than Religion”
Sermon 3-25-18
By Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Luke 19:28-44

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’”³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.”³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen,³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

⁴¹As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it,⁴²saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.⁴³Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.⁴⁴They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Message:

(Play video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>) There’s a lot packed into this video. One of the phrases that caught my attention was, “Religion says do. Jesus says done.” You may have heard of phrases in recent years as, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Or “I’m not Christian, but I’m a Christ-follower.” These sorts of phrases are in negative reaction to a Christianity that people don’t want to belong to. It’s for those who follow Christ, but don’t want to be lumped in with those people over there. They don’t want to be synonymous with a political party. They don’t want to be considered threatening to another

person. They don't want to be associated with certain traditions that no longer carry any meaning. The word "Religion" is an artifact word of dying institutions and traditions from long ago. I struggle to define, "What's the difference between 'religion' and Christ-followers?" But maybe I struggle with discerning the difference because maybe I'm a partial product of 'religion' and a partial product of a Christ-follower. To one degree, it's hard to know the difference, but on the other hand, I get it. I understand what's trying to be addressed.

As we look at our passage, I invite you to look for the contrast between what may be religious and what may be following Christ. Some crazy things happen here. Many of us know this story very well. Jesus tells his disciples to go ask for a colt and tell the owner the "Lord needs it." This seems highly suspect. A colt is a valuable commodity. Who in their right mind would just freely give this colt away for Jesus to ride into town on it? Remember, that this whole scene is a mockery of conquerors or kingship. Normally, a triumphant King entering the city of his conquering, would ride in on a horse establishing his rule of the people. Here Jesus mocks this by riding in on a small colt or donkey. And then something else starts to happen that is quite miraculous. People just willingly lay down their cloaks on the road for Jesus. Would they do this for any other conqueror? I imagine not. I imagine this is a humble version of someone rolling out the red carpet for a celebrity. These people worship Jesus so much that they are willing to be embarrassed in their nakedness and literally take their shirt off their back to make way for Jesus. Pay attention to the contrast in the next few verses, "³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'" There it is again, God's "...deeds of power..." They saw it. They experienced it. And they proclaimed it. They shouted for joy. Overwhelmed by God's presence, they just had to praise His name. And then watch what happens in our next verse, "³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.'" Here we have it. The disciples and the crowd is cheering and celebrating this King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah. And then we have the Pharisees, the representation of law and institution, telling Jesus to get his disciples to stop. Why? You may ask. Because everything Jesus is doing here is going to throw everything out of balance. How often do we resist Jesus because we're afraid of things being thrown out of balance? Institutions, traditions and practices are going to be threatened because of the ruckus Jesus is causing. Even if we fast forward to verse 47b, "The chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him." They can't join in on the parade because they're too busy preserving what was rather than moving into this wonderful and

triumphant time of welcoming the Messiah. It's like they wanted a Messiah, but not if it threatened the temple, the economy of the temple, their relationship with the Roman Empire and all the traditions that have been going for many years. Luke puts it quite clearly without directly saying it, do you want Jesus, the Messiah? Or do you just want the activities, the buildings, the institutions, the traditions and the programs? All man-made. We take some security in these man-made things, maybe even idolize them, but imagine what could happen if we, the people, would take more security in the God-made things? The things we can't control? In the Kingdom of God?

Jesus is in grief in our next few verses in how the people have turned away from God. ⁴¹As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴²saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'" Ouch! This is painful to hear, but it's also painful for Jesus to say. The coming of Jesus, the Messiah, God's visitation is hidden from their eyes. How tragic. Is God's visitation hidden from our eyes? Think about it this way, when one receives prescription glasses, they're only helpful if the prescription is correct. If not, their ability to see will be limited. In that same way, if we are not viewing life through Jesus' finished work—and instead through our own "goodness", what we've made—we'll lack the ability to see "God moments" in front of us.

You know, I've never, in my lifetime, known the Church in its glory days. I'm too young for that. I can hardly even lament what the church used to be. All I've ever known is the church in decline. And like so many of you, I want to right the ship. But if that means going back, I'm not interested. If that means trying to replicate what was, I'm not interested. Because obviously what was, is no longer working. I'm not interested in keeping the same old traditions and institutions going just for the sake of keeping them going. More than anything, I want to see God glorified just as he was on this triumphant entry. The church is not the building, the programs or the traditions. The church is you, those who follow Christ. Those who have an intimate relationship with Jesus. The passage that's been speaking to me in recent weeks is Matthew 9:17, ¹⁷"Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." We can try to preserve old wineskins, but those wineskins were usually made for a place and time that no longer exists today. And so if we try to pour into these old wineskins what we have today, the wineskins will burst. For

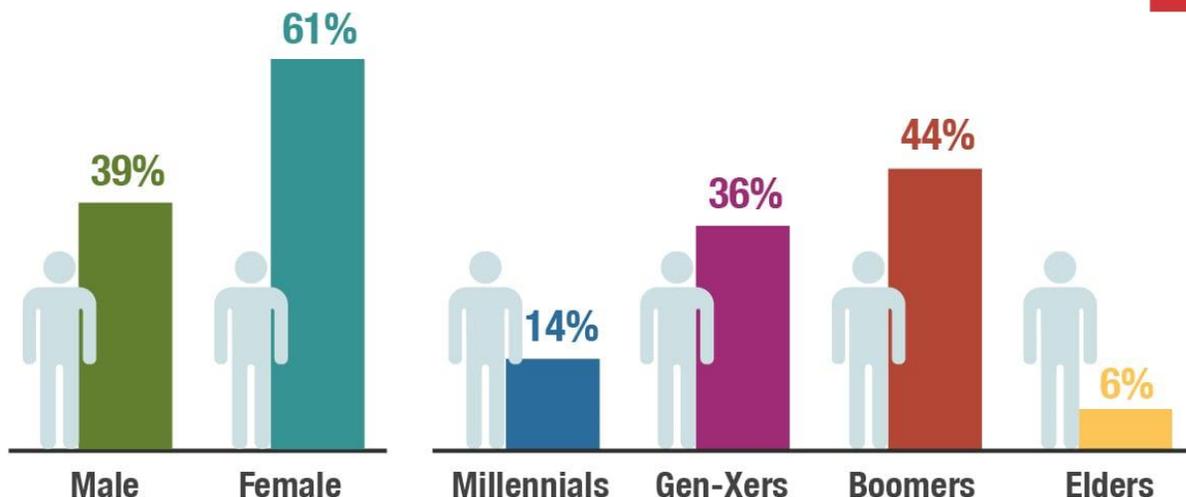
instance, we have a tradition coming up this Thursday, Lovefeast. It's actually one of my favorite Church of the Brethren traditions. But if we're trying so hard just to preserve every little practice that happens in Lovefeast and preserving it as just so because to change things would "ruin" lovefeast, then we've lost our way. We're trying to preserve a wineskin and maybe even old wine that is no longer relevant. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying, do away with all tradition. But what I am asking is, is there new wine still being poured into the tradition or event or program? Is there new life happening? Or do we need to make way for new wineskins to be formed? I'm not saying that I know what that is, but I believe Jesus does.

And this is the difference between being religious and being faithful to Christ. We keep the same things going, the same wineskins, but we lack an ongoing passion and fervor for Christ. We keep the traditions, the institutions and the programs going, but they fail, not because they weren't once good things, but because they no longer have new wine. They no longer have new life. For whatever reason. One of the big things that church decline is exposing is those who are religious and those who are followers of Christ. And can I just say, it's embarrassing. It's embarrassing to see how much we cling to the things of this world rather than celebrating and moving with where God is moving. It's embarrassing how we are more passionate about our political parties and our affiliations than we are about Jesus. It's embarrassing that we claim to follow Christ, but when Christ moves, we fail to proclaim His deeds of power. We fail to join the parade. We would rather cling to the things that we've made, the things that are safe, rather than what God is making. It's embarrassing.

To reiterate this divide between those who are religious and those who follow Jesus, Barna Research did a study on those who "Love Jesus, but not the church" in 2017. And I'll share a little bit of what they say and a graphic, "To get at a sense of enduring faithfulness among Christians despite a rejection of the institutional church, Barna created a metric to capture those who most neatly fit this description. It includes those who self-identify as Christian and who strongly agree that their religious faith is very important in their life, but are 'dechurched'—that is, they have attended church in the past, but haven't done so in the last six months (or more). These individuals have a sincere faith (89% have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important to their life today), but are notably absent from church.

Love Jesus but Not the Church #1

Barna



n=1,281 | November 4-15, 2016

According to aggregate Barna tracking data, this group makes up one-tenth of the population, and it's growing (up from 7% in 2004). The majority are women (61%), and four-fifths (80%) are between the ages of 33 and 70. That is, they are mostly Gen-Xers (36%) and Boomers (44%), not Millennials (14%) or Elders (6%). Though Millennials are the least church-ed generation, they are also the least likely to either identify as Christian or say faith is very important to their life, explaining their underrepresentation among this group. Elders are underrepresented for the opposite reason—they are the generation most likely to attend church regularly." Millennials are so fed up with the politics of church, the institution, that it's easier not to care. It's easier to have this individual faith, but not a communal faith. They are avoiding church because they don't want to get trapped by the potential religiosity. The emphasis on doing church, rather than being the church in our world. Being Christ to those around us. So what do we do with this information? First, we have a serious branding issue. Meaning, the institution of church projects religiosity even when we may have faithful believers in Christ. Secondly, we have an incredible opportunity to recreate church for a new generation. What it means to be the people that make up church, rather than the institution. It's not about the building. It's not about the tradition. It's about being God's people together and testifying to God's deeds of power in our lives.

What I want to invite you into today, is take hard look at yourself. We have some traditions here at Providence. They're not necessarily bad, but is there still new wine being poured into those traditions? Are they receiving life and are we experiencing lives being transformed because of them? Or are they just merely a remnant from something that was formed years ago, but we just keep doing? It's

an empty shell. A wineskin without wine. If they still carry life and transform lives, then let's keep it going. If it is having very little to no Kingdom impact, we need to rethink it. We need to assess if it's just merely religious rather than Christ-following. When you die and stand before God, do you want to just simply list all the things that you did? Or do you want to proclaim all the things that He has done in your life and in all the lives around you? I want us to be a church that can boast more about what God has done than what we have done. I want to be a church that can point to the greatness of God rather than a church that brags about our traditions and programs. I want to be a church that can testify of how God has transformed our lives. How God has taken those who were once lost, but have been found. I want to be a church, that when God moves, we can lay our cloaks on the ground, on bended knees and welcome God's presence. Because as I have been learning lately, it's not about what I do, but what He does. And it's awesome. It's beautiful. It's wonderful. The disciples and the people along the road on this triumphant entry, understood these things. That we have a mighty God. We have an incredible Jesus. And He deserves our praise and acclamations. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Amen.