

## Christianity for “Nones”

The Reverend Peter Cook

Sunday, November 11, 2012

The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ

Burlington, Vermont

### Mark 12:28-34

*<sup>28</sup>One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup>The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup>and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” <sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

When we were young, I think so many of us had an idea in our minds that love is the most important religious principle to which we must attend. We may have heard our parents say that God loves everybody and we in turn should love God. God is love, we are told. And the other thing so many of us were taught very early on was that we should love our neighbors as our selves. If we had some favorite bible stories it might be ones like the Good Samaritan who stopped by to help a man who was beaten down on the roadside while others pass by. Or there is the story about how Jesus welcomed the children in spite of the disciple’s grumpiness towards kids. Or maybe we most remember Jesus’ opening words for his ministry where he said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”

From the moment we could feel love being held in our mother’s arms or from the time we had some grandfatherly figure dote on us in church, there is the possibility that we felt in our bones that the most important thing for us to remember is that we shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. Surely we would believe what Jesus said that: “there is no other commandment greater than these.” Whether you experienced that love or not, the idea of loving God and loving all people for so many is central to what it means to be a spiritual and a religious person. And it is also true to say that we expect on basic primordial level that the church will live out this

truth in its words and in its actions. But things happen in churches where the ideal of the commandments just does not match with the reality.

This leads many people to be indifferent to the church or not want to have much to do with it. They become a growing population in America of what is popularly known as “nones” or people with no religious affiliation. None of the above thank you very much! Many of the religiously unaffiliated had limited exposure to a church or no exposure at all. Others might have been in the church at one time. But their life journey led them to become disillusioned when the church failed to live up to the commandments.

In a recent research study on Religion by the Pew it says that the unaffiliated are not uniformly hostile toward religious institutions. But they are much more likely than the public overall to say that churches and other religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules, and too involved in politics. Nones or the religiously unaffiliated, might wonder why if Jesus calls us to love our neighbor that so many churches refuse to ordain women? If Jesus invites us to welcome all people and to love them then why do they see of all places systematic discrimination against people who are gay and lesbian? Others feel the church seems more interested in what is in their wallets than what is in their souls. We live with these byzantine committee systems where we get in our own way and are left with no time to have a cup of coffee with a friend, serve a hungry person or make a visit. My reading of the report says to me that the religiously unaffiliated necessarily mind churches being involved in politics but they might ask what sort of politics we are talking about? Is it a self centered and brittle politics devoted to asserting control over others and preserving privilege and a narrow minded morality and uncompromising political correctness on the left or right, or is it a politics oriented to loving God and our neighbor?

Indeed, a majority of the religiously unaffiliated clearly think that religion can be a force for good in society, with three-quarters saying religious organizations bring people together and help strengthen community bonds (78%) and a similar number saying religious organizations play an important role in helping the poor and needy (77%).<sup>i</sup> As a pastor, I truly spend every day trying to think about how the church can be a better spiritual place that clears away the pietistic encrustations and devotes itself to loving God and neighbor. For me the ugliest word in the English language is pretension. But I also know how so often the church falls short. We are just so messed up sometimes. We can really lose perspective and forget the gift in front of us. You might have heard the old joke about how a Father woke her daughter up on Sunday morning and told her she needed to get ready to go to church. The daughter replied to her father that she didn't want to go to church this morning. He told her nonsense she should get up and go to church. "But dad" she replied, "Everybody hates me, the sermons are boring and none of my friends ever come." Her father replied, "Now, my daughter...! First, everybody doesn't hate you, only a couple of bullies and you just have to stand up to them. Second, the sermons mean a lot to many people. If you listened to them, you'd be surprised at how good they are in helping people. Third, you have lots of friends at church. They are always having you over to their house. And finally, you have to go, you're the pastor!!"

Yes even pastors who some might regard as the most religious committed can lose heart and join the ranks of the “Nones” and religiously unaffiliated and not want to go to church themselves. But whenever there are points in my life where I think about joining the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated, I try to get some perspective. I look at what is offered as the alternative to the church.

If you think about it, the church is the not the only place that can lose its way and become spiritually empty. Wherever two or three are gathered there can be Jesus or there can be hypocrisy and power plays. There is such beauty to be found outside the confines of organized religion. The mountains and the trees might provide spiritual nurture. But once we grow tired of hugging trees for companionship we decide to join an organization devoted to preserve the environment we hold dear. And yet we discover that high minded environmental organizations we may discover it has its own very human struggles where the reality does not match the ideal. Here is another example. I remember going once to a meeting devoted to disarmament and nuclear weapon reduction—a worthy cause but after hearing two hours of despairing talk from bullheaded people who left little room for nuance or disagreement, I left the meeting feeling so overwhelmed, hopeless and spiritually dry. There are only so many soccer games we can attend with quarreling parents jockeying to be sure their kid gets field time, before we wonder if there is more to life. I love reading the New York Times over coffee but I wonder how many lattes and plates of eggs and home fries we can stand while receiving the ministrations of a waiter who paid to be nice to us on Sunday morning, before we may start to wonder if there is more to life than this. Saving money on a solid cup of church coffee (it is quite good here at First Congregational Church I must say) is a whole lot cheaper. But as we drink our cup of church coffee we get the added bonus of being in the presence of someone who might tell us a story that will broaden our perspective and nurture our soul.

Churches are broken places like every other human institution. But when we get discouraged, I remember that there is often spiritual energy in the cracks. And when I get down, I look to a loving and a prophetic Christ to whom I can return time after time. It is a Christ from whom I can ask guidance. It is a Christ who through his acts of kindness, through his suffering and through his resurrection which allows me to refocus on that which gives life. It is Jesus who breathes life into scripture, tradition, and the organized church.

As we work through the Gospel of Mark, I have a growing affection for the disciples. My affection for them has much less to do with their perfection and more to do with their severe shortcomings. They just don't get it sometimes. Actually they don't get it most of the time. I see some of those shortcomings in myself. And yet there is so much grace to be found in Jesus who chooses those disciples anyway to be his followers. Jesus did not pick the perfect or the religiously well scrubbed or the politically correct or the prophets with the best credentials as his closet companions. Instead, he chose these somewhat dense, bumbling and imperfect people to do the work.

I find a lot of grace and forgiveness in that Jesus chose them. So if I ever I lose my way or see the church lose its way as it has and always will, I come here to find the grace and forgiveness which challenges my cynicism. I come back to a congregation that brings me to the Jesus of my childhood who I love so much. Such a Jesus challenges me everyday to love God with my whole heart mind and soul and to love my neighbor. Ironically, it is in the church's very brokenness and confession that we find a forgiving space where we are free to fall on our face and yet ask others to pick us up and appeal to our better angels.

No matter what is swirling around us, by God's grace, let's help each other always remember to love God with our whole heart mind and soul and our neighbors as ourselves. Whatever complications can be found in church, please be assured that old stories from our childhood will always be our guide. We are good Samaritans who will strive to help the man beaten up by the roadside when others pass by. We will always strive to welcome children and all people when we face pressure to do otherwise. We will always listen to Jesus inaugural speech to offer good news to the poor and the broken hearted. Let us love God and neighbor for always. Amen

---

<sup>i</sup> "Nones" on the Rise, Pew Forum on Religious Life at [WWW.PewForum.org](http://WWW.PewForum.org).