



## A Note from the Pastor's Corner

Perhaps you took time to read the results that had been posted in our hallway of a recent survey conducted by the very reliable Pew Forum on Religious and Public life (which takes no positions on the issues it covers) on religious knowledge in the United States. If not, you can still access it on-line at <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>. You may find the results a bit shocking. I know I did – until I gave it further thought.

The results? As individual groups, atheists, agnostics, Jews, and Mormons outscored every Christian group on religious knowledge. It seems that those who attended a youth group or a Sunday school as a child performed slightly better than those who did not, those who read books or visited web sites about religion performed a lot better, and those who read Scripture once a week did slightly better than those who do not. But those who do not believe God exists performed significantly better than those who are absolutely certain about God's existence. And those who believe the Bible is literally true were among the lowest scoring categories of respondents.

Pew also helps us to make sense of this data. First, those who claim our nation's dominant religion, Christianity, may feel they have little more to do than to make that claim. After all, doing so means they fit right in with most of society. But those who choose to identify with something other than Christianity are doing so for a reason. Often, that reason is, in part, a rejection of the Church and of Christianity as it has been presented to them. But before a person gets to the point of making that rejection, they do so after becoming familiar with their options, including Christianity.

Another reason cited is that those who make such decisions are more committed to their beliefs and more knowledgeable about not just their own faith tradition but also other religions. Level of education is a contributing factor as well as other demographics, but comes as no surprise. The better educated a person is, the more knowledgeable they are about religions.

I'm not going to second-guess the people at The Pew Research Center. They're competent, thorough, and present the data as it is without putting a spin on it, making excuses for it, or burying it. But I will say that I think this reveals a factor contributing to how the Church has lost its way.

People of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are suspicious of tradition of any kind. So when they consider a tradition-bound institution such as the Church, if what they meet are people who know less about their own Scripture, their own traditions, and their own ideals than the 'insiders' do, that's one big strike against the Church.

But when the practices of people in the Church are out of sync with who Jesus is as a person, that's a condition which is hard to recover from. At that point, the Church has what could be called a pathological condition – a disease caused by unhealthy habits, but not necessarily obvious on the surface. If unchecked though, that abnormality will eventually make itself known in a way that is very obvious. And by then, it may be difficult to recover from.

The last two Sundays in October, the topic of the message was love, and how what Jesus directs us towards is an unnatural love. As human beings, our love is centered on ourselves. Maybe not entirely, but the stages of love all have self as a primary focus. Jesus wants us to be different. He calls us to be countercultural in every way. The love he asks of us is unnatural because it has others as the focus. And sometimes God sends the most unlikely people into our lives to demonstrate to us what he wants.

This is not where the Church is because it's not where most Christians are. Now, if this were simply a symptom of our humanity as many say, then all we could do is shrug our shoulders and continue as we are, helpless to do anything about it.

But I disagree with such thinking. I don't think Jesus came to Earth, did all his works of ministry, was crucified and resurrected only to give us a task that's truly impossible. What he expects is difficult – but not impossible.

This pathology, the condition of *not* loving others without pre-condition and without demand, is an abnormality when measured by the standards Jesus has set for us. It's like any other disease, like obesity or diabetes, or heart disease. It's unhealthy and our bad habits of self-righteously maintaining a list of people we don't have to love will continue to worsen the condition if left unchecked.

And, like a disease, there is a way to deal with the symptoms and improve the condition – maybe even rid the Church of this disease altogether. It's up to each individual Christian. Nobody else can do it for us. Not even God. God can and will be our partner in this endeavor. But each person has to soften their own heart, change their own attitude, and *genuinely want* to be as different from the rest of the world as Jesus was.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud