

January 01, 2017

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Matthew 2:13-23

This is the image we have of Jesus in the Gospel reading today – one of Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing from the political rulers of the day, becoming refugees in a foreign land. These were not people of power or political clout. I suppose one could say that this was a family living in the margins, outside of the political and societal mainstream. When I think of the question of where do we find Jesus today, the first place that comes to mind is the Church. And when I think of what the role of the Church is today, I think of the Church as operating in the margins.

This idea of the Church operating in the margins comes to me from a 2013 article I read in *The Mennonite* by Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray, “A Case for post-Christendom.” In it, they defend the arguments they have made in their writings, including Murray’s book *The Naked Anabaptist* that we are living in an era of post-Christendom, a time of moving away from what they refer to as “imperial Christianity” to a more pluralistic worldview. They give examples of the way our society is transitioning from Christendom to post-Christendom and state, “We are grateful for some of the contributions of Christendom – in the arts, spirituality and theology. But we do not bewail its passing. Christendom was a brilliant and brutal civilization that made life tough for minorities and misfits, including Jews and Anabaptists. But post-Christendom makes Christians more marginal than they were in the Christendom centuries. Is marginalization necessarily a bad thing? ... We insist that marginalization does not entail victimization and that the two can be and must be decoupled.” They go on to say, “In this post-Christendom world, nonconformist Christians who follow Jesus radically and make upside-down decisions about lifestyle will feel at home....marginality may be a gift to the Christian community. It frees us from the pretensions of imperial Christianity and gives us space to rediscover faithful discipleship and creative witness.”

How does the church witness to Jesus? Jesus himself answers this question later on in the book of Matthew:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:34-40 NRSV)

As a New Year begins, we have the opportunity to reflect on the challenges of the past year, and anticipate the role of the church in the year ahead. By the end of this month, our country will have a new President, and with that change in leadership may come a change in perspective which will demand that the Church reconsider the way it fulfills God’s mission in the world.

I will close with one more Christmas story. One that my mom told me years ago. A group of children was putting on a Christmas play, and the role of Innkeeper was given to a little 6-year-old boy. He rehearsed his part and perfected the ability to gruffly and impatiently answer with “no room at the Inn,” every time Mary and Joseph begged for shelter. The night of the performance he started out strong repeating his line of “no room at the Inn,” when Joseph made his initial request for shelter. But maybe the costumes and the staging transported him back to that emotional and heart wrenching scenario from years past. For as Joseph asked again for shelter, explaining that his wife, Mary, was just about to have a baby, and they desperately needed a place to stay, all of the gruffness faded from the youthful innkeeper. “OK,” he suddenly burst out, “you can have my room.” May God give us this same grace and generosity as we seek to fulfill God’s mission in the margins.