

WGUMC February 7, 2016 "Jesus for the *Nones*"
Luke 9:28-36

Back in 1995 when Hank and I were dating, we went to Seattle to visit my sister, and he asked me if I'd like to go to compline at St. Mark's Cathedral. They were holding (and still hold) a service at 9:30 pm every Sunday night. I said, "sure." I couldn't think of anything better to do than to spend my Sunday evening listening to Gregorian chant. Apparently, I wasn't alone.

I was shocked when we got to the church and there were no empty seats. There must have been over 500 people there and the most shocking of all: their average age must have been about 25. There were scores of college kids lying in the aisles, just taking in the music. There was no scripture read, no sermon, no sacrament. Just psalms and prayers sung by an all-male choir. I looked around and was pretty sure that almost none of them had gone to church that morning. I wondered how many had never been to church at all.

As I look back on that night, I think that what I was witnessing was one of the early signs of the rise of the "Nones." That is the nickname that sociologists have given to those who, when asked, say that they have no religious preference. The Nones are the fastest growing group in the U.S. today. But until now, we haven't known much about them.

In 2014, the Pew Forum on Religious Life interviewed 35,000 Americans in all 50 states to produce the Religious Landscape Study. This study tells us that the Nones are a very diverse lot. A few are atheists. Some are agnostics. Some call themselves "spiritual but not religious." Nevertheless, most Nones grew up in a religious household, but for one reason or another, fell away from the faith. You find them in all ages, but the bulk of them are "millennials". As the children of Baby Boomer parents who didn't want to force them to go to church as their parents did, the millennials were often left to choose

for themselves what to believe. Consequently, over a third of them have chosen "none of the above."

That causes church leaders much weeping and gnashing of teeth, but some of the numbers hold out hope. Though 91% of them are not in church, 61% of Nones say they believe in God. Forty percent say that they feel a deep sense of peace and well-being at least once a week. Twenty percent say that they pray daily. [www.pewresearch.org]

Numbers tell one story, but they don't tell the whole story. Beyond the numbers, I still want to know who these Nones are, and I'm curious what they think of Jesus. For if we ever hope to be Jesus for them, then we'd better have a good idea of what he means to them.

Elizabeth Drescher is an adjunct associate professor of religion at Santa Clara University. She travels around the country, listens to lots of Nones, and has made some interesting observations about them. Drescher describes many

Nones as "'feral' Christians of a sort." She says that they are "undomesticated religiously by regular church experience but more than happy to lap from time to time from a saucer of spiritual sustenance set out in the churchyard." ["The Gospel According to the 'Nones'", in *America Magazine*, June 8-15, 2015]

I suspect that many of the young people at St. Mark's were "feral Christians of a sort." They wanted to get in touch with the transcendent, but they didn't want to be trapped inside the walls of traditional church. So they would sneak in at night and lap us some spirituality.

Another characteristic of Nones, Drescher notes, is that many aren't looking for any one religion; they prefer to dabble in multiple religious traditions. She calls them the "free-range faithful" who are "ambling all about the religious landscape to partake of its diverse offerings without seeking a single set of answers (or questions) or intending to settle in one spiritual place." They are not looking for a spiritual home but a spiritual

journey. A 33-year-old woman from Hawaii told her, "There is something about selecting one religion, one path, in the narrow way that I was brought up that seems so wrong, so unhelpful. The world is filled with wisdom. Human history is filled with wisdom. Why would I close myself off to that?" [*ibid.*]

Just because you won't find them in church very often doesn't mean that these Nones have closed themselves off to Christianity. They can't. They live in a culture that is steeped in Christian symbols and traditions, and so they are not ignorant of our faith. In fact, most of the Nones that Drescher has met have been eager to talk about Scripture. They retain a high regard for the Bible, especially for the teachings and parables of Jesus.

But their attraction to Jesus has nothing to do with church doctrine about him. They don't care much whether he is the Son of God, the Messiah or if he rose from the dead. If they love Jesus, it's because they love the stories the Bible tells

about him: how he healed the sick and embraced the outcasts, how he called out the hypocrites and spoke out against injustice and government-sponsored violence. The Jesus they want to hold onto is the Good Samaritan Jesus.

So why don't they come to our church? I can tell you that it's not because of Jesus. Too often, I'm afraid, it's because of his followers.

Meet Jeremy Myers, who grew up in a Christian home, went to a conservative Bible college, served two churches, and then decided to go to seminary to pursue his dream of leading a big church someday. But when he got to seminary, he went through a de-conversion experience, instead. The longer he was there, the more he couldn't reconcile the mean and self-righteous Christians he and his classmates were becoming with the Jesus they were supposed to be following. He remembers, "We each thought that we had the infallible truth, and anyone who disagreed with us was a heretic and a tool of the devil."

And so he began to reexamine his beliefs and started hanging out with sinners and heretics. When he read books that questioned the doctrine he had been taught, he was fired from his job, and walked away from the church. Now, he says:

I don't 'go to church.' I do read and study the Bible, but only to discover what it says; not to reinforce what I've been taught. I find that my favorite people to read the Bible with are atheists, agnostics, and Buddhists. We meet weekly to read the Gospels, learn from each other about Jesus, and drink lots of coffee. And slowly, I've been rediscovering the teaching of Jesus and the message of Scripture in a way I never knew before.

Where will all this lead? Frankly, I'm not sure I care. Back when I had plans and dreams, they all ended in disaster. Now, I just view every day as another step in a journey to somewhere. And along the way, I hope to love and serve as many people as I can.

[<http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/omeoflitlefaith/2011/02/conversions-from-senior-pastor.html>]

Unfortunately, we in the church have a lot to answer for.

We like to ask why young people are leaving, when we should be asking why we are driving them away.

Young people are leaving because their parents' churches have failed them. For one thing, they have become too political

for them. Young adults today are turned off by the assumption that Jesus belongs to a political party. And they don't agree that abortion and same-sex marriage are the most critical issues facing Christians. They care about poverty and global warming. They don't want to politicize it; they just want to do something about it.

What's more, they have grown up in a far more racially and culturally diverse environment than their parents did. They don't like the fact that Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week. Neither do they want to be part of an organization that fights to the death over whether gays can be Christian.

Meanwhile, they hear about church sex scandals being covered up, victims who are hushed up, and clergy who are not being locked up. If that weren't enough, every day the internet gives them horrific scenes of violence and people doing awful

things in God's name, and they remember that the church, too, has a bloody history.

Finally, they are growing up in a world that has literally been made possible by scientific discoveries, and they don't question that evolution is a fact, that the earth is older than 4,000 years, that the dinosaurs were not around when the first humans appeared. They are embarrassed that Christians have built museums and theme parks to try to peddle such nonsense.

When you add it all up, you have a lot of reasons to give up on religion. Every one of those things bothered me when I was young, and I could have easily ended up being a None. When I was in high school and college, I was about as science-minded as they come. But I wasn't a science fundamentalist anymore than I was a Christian fundamentalist. I knew that there were questions science couldn't answer. I knew there were things we didn't know that we didn't know. And so I made room for mystery, and for a long time that was God for me.

I was determined to keep that space open and then one day, while I was reading the Bible and praying, that space took the shape of Christ for me. Now I'm not going to tell you that "I found it!" as the old bumper sticker used to say. That would imply that I had found the universal truth and that I could define it for you. I just can't figure out why we ever thought we had all the answers when not even Jesus' closest friends could understand him.

When Jesus told his disciples that he was going to suffer and die, they couldn't hear it. One of his disciples, Peter, couldn't accept it. Then he took Peter, James and John up to a high mountain and was transfigured before them, and they couldn't understand it. How could Jesus be God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God was so well pleased, and still have to suffer at the hands of the authorities? Why did his disciples have to deny themselves, pick up their cross and follow him?

What did he mean when he said that we have to lose our lives for his sake in order to find them? [Matthew 16:24-25]

If they have struggled with it more than we have, it is quite possible that some Nones have better answers to these questions than we do. If we who have been in the church for a long time, a lifetime, could only understand these things, if we could only live these truths, if we could only be this kind of Christian, if we could only have this kind of faith, fewer of our young people would have none.

If the Church is going to be the Body of Christ today, we are the ones who need transfiguration. And I'm not talking about building new worship spaces or playing new music or using the latest technology. That's not what the Nones are looking for. The transfiguration I'm talking about is more fundamental than that. What we need is a reformation. Next year is the 500th anniversary of the first Protestant Reformation, and we are way over due for a second one.

In the twenty-first century, if we don't let people of other faiths or no faith challenge us, if we don't let science teach us, if we don't let Christian doctrines grow and change with us, the world will one day be full of Nones and in the Church there will be next to no one.

But there is good news. Whether we know it or not, this transfiguration is already taking place, a new Christianity is already emerging. The Holy Spirit is making church less of a spiritual home and more of a spiritual journey. And as the Spirit of Christ moves through Jews and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, even through people with no particular faith at all, we Christians gain a fuller understanding of who Jesus is for all of us. And the closer we come to "the fullness of him who fills all in all," the more we ourselves will be transfigured into an image of Christ for the world. [Eph 1:23] And the world can't wait!