

## Take a Hike! *Mark 1:14-20* | 1/22/2011

Every religion has its holy places. So where are the holy places for the Christian? Not where we think: Not primarily inside the church. Rather, out-of-doors. It is high time for the church to discover what lies outside its doors -- out in the world of natural creation and the world of human culture.

It is time to raise the roof, bang down the door, open the windows, or whatever it takes to get the church out-of-doors -- to get the church into the world. Wisdom does not shout from the structure and hierarchy. When the church itself, rather than the mission of God in the world, becomes the object of our passion, it is time to hear the words: "Open the door."

These words "Open the door" come from T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, where the priests bar the doors of the great Church of Canterbury against some would-be assailants. But Thomas a Becket, though knowing they have done it for his safety, will not permit it. "Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!/I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ,/The sanctuary, turned into a fortress .... /The church shall be open, even to our enemies. Open the door!"

How many of us grew up with the picture of Warner Sallman's "Christ at the Door"? Remember Jesus standing outside in an unkept garden knocking on a rusty- hinged door without handles, waiting for someone inside to hear and heed the call to open up? Remember the secret shape of the human heart Sallman placed in the picture?

Sorry, but Sallman had it wrong. The words "Behold I stand at the door and knock" were spoken not to the individual believer, but to the church -- to the smug, self-satisfied, Little-Jack-Horner sitting on a corner church of Laodicea. In other words, "the door" Jesus stands at and knocks on is not the door of the human heart, but the door of the church, and in the case of the commercial city of Laodicea, a busy, well-to-do church filled with ecclesiastically-proper, spiritually-lukewarm, money-making Christians.

The church has too often locked Jesus outside his own church. He stands there, not so much trying to get his followers to let him come inside to stay, but to get them to get up and follow him into an unkept garden and "out into the road and lanes" (Luke 14:23).

The story goes that a church member was branded a sinner, excommunicated and forbidden to enter church. He took his problem to the Lord in prayer: "They won't let me in, Lord, because I am a sinner." "What are you complaining about?" said Jesus. "They won't let me in either."

It seems the church of Jesus Christ has too often become another secret- society. It has its own special symbols, its obscure signals, its esoteric beliefs, its separate language one has to learn if one is to be comfortable as a member. And what is the best kept secret of this secret society? Jesus the Christ.

In a sense, of course, Jesus Christ is our secret. But Christ is not to be kept our secret. He is to be our shared secret, shared with everyone, at all times, and in all places. And that means following him out into the world.

Today, we in the church speak and act on little but that which relates to ourselves. We refuse to learn the language of the culture. We are reluctant to trust the Spirit already at work in the world. What is born out of this is a kind of ingrown spirit that does for the body of Christ what an ingrown toenail can do to the human body: It becomes diseased and infected and is a danger to the whole organism. An ingrown spirit can ground a body just as much as an ingrown toenail.

God's kingdom is larger than the church. The church is not the kingdom. Christ does not belong to the church. Indeed, Christ is even larger than Christendom. God's "sanctuary" is larger than the little roofed boxes we spend an hour in on Sunday mornings.

The church has remained indoors for too long, proclaiming: "Here I stand. I can do no other." It is time for the church to go outdoors, proclaiming, "There we walk. We cannot go back." If God loved the world so much that Christ "came down to earth" to show the enormity of that love, isn't it about time the church came down from its

own clouds and got "down-to- earth" and back into the world in love and concern?

The Bible instructs us to "lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and ... run with endurance the race that is set before us. " (Hebrews 12:1-3, NAS). Jesus did not say "Follow the Way." Jesus said "I am the Way" and "Follow me."

It is time to end the smug sense of superiority that draws the church apart from the world and weaves around us a silky, complacent cocoon. It is time to get "down-to-earth," to seek God in the world. The Western church today is not suffering because it's not religious -- it's hurting because it is too religious, too self-absorbed. Western spirituality is introspective, individualist and preoccupied with itself. It is too concerned with "Jesus in my heart" and unconcerned with Jesus in the world. Too often, it puts preserving the "church" ahead of serving God and "serving" Jesus to the world.

The sea squirt affords one of the most striking examples of evolution that has gone backward instead of progressing. The juvenile sea squirt wanders through the sea searching for a suitable rock or hunk of coral to cling to and make its home for life. When it finds its spot and takes root, it somehow figures it doesn't need a brain anymore. So it eats it.

The analogy between the sea squirt and some tenured professors has been pointed out on numerous occasions -- but the church ought not laugh too loudly. It does the same thing. It finds a home and then settles in. When this happens, it enters what is known as a PVS -- persistent vegetative state. A PVS spells the termination of a human being as a thinking, responding, awake entity.

The biblical tradition itself challenges us to step beyond those "futile ways inherited from your ancestors" (1 Peter 1:18). Christians often sin against the present and the future by clinging to the experiences of the past. When a community only looks back, it turns into pillars of salt.

Jesus washed dirty feet, fed hungry mouths, healed sick limbs, opened blind eyes, cleansed leprous skin, exorcised demonized bodies. And Jesus said, "Follow me." Jesus called us to do the same, and even greater things (John 14:12). What greater things are we doing?

It is no longer business as usual or politics as usual or economics as usual because it is no longer life as usual. So why is it still religion as usual? Look around. The whole world is changing -- its ways of doing business, its ways of doing politics, its ways of doing everything except church. The Spirit is breaking out all over the place. New light is breaking forth from every direction imaginable ... And Jesus, the source of all light, said, "Follow me."

But first ... we gotta move forward, following Jesus as he races into the 21st century. First, ... we gotta "take a hike!"

When Jesus called to Simon and Andrew to "follow me," it was an invitation that enticed them out of their familiar paths, out of the fishing boat, and into a world full of problems and possibilities. That is the same invitation He gives to us today.

So take a hike, church. Hit the road, Jack. Hit the road, Jennifer. Let's all take a hike.

*Pastor Keith*