



4 Lent - Year B - March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9; Ps. 107:1-3,17-22; **Ephesians 2:1-10**; John 3:14-21

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life...

(Ephesians 2:8-10)

“Americans less Christian!”

Two weeks ago, on March 9, some form of that headline appeared in just about every newspaper and on just about every national news broadcast across the nation.¹ It should have. It is newsworthy. The headline appeared because the results of a major survey had been released the day before. It is the *American Religious Identification Survey 2008 (or ARIS 2008)*,² a massive study sponsored by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

ARIS 2008 is “the third in a landmark time series of large, nationally representative surveys sponsored by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, that track changes in the religious loyalties of the U.S. adult population within the 48 contiguous states from 1990 to 2008...”³ The surveys sought “to determine whether the respondents regarded themselves as adherents of a religious community.”⁴ These responses reflect the nation’s “pattern of religious beliefs, behavior and belonging.”⁵

Some highlights of the survey: First, the one that captured the headlines: “The American Population self-identifies as predominately Christian but Americans are becoming slowly less Christian.”⁶ In 1990 86% of Americans self-identified as Christian. In 2008, the number was 76%, that is, down 10%.⁷

According to the survey, “the historic mainline churches and denominations have experienced the steepest declines, while the non-denominational Christian identity has been trending upward, particularly since 2001,”⁸ though it should be observed that even with this, Christianity is in decline overall in this country.

More from the survey: “The challenge to Christianity in the U.S. does not come from other religions but rather from a rejection of all forms of organized religion.”⁹ “The U.S. population continues to show signs of becoming less religious, with one out of every five Americans failing to indicate a religious identity in 2008.”¹⁰ The “Nones” (meaning those who stated no religious preference) continue to grow, though at a much slower pace than in the 1990s from 8.2% in 1990...to 15% today, nearly double.¹¹

Of notable interest to us, the Episcopal Church went from a membership of just over 3 million members in 1990, representing 1.7% of the population to 2.4 million members, or 1.1% of the population in 2008.¹²

Having read the entire 26 page long survey, I have to say, I'm not surprised by its results. In the period covered, we have experienced 9/11 and the rise of Islamic terrorism and fascism. We have witnessed the appalling failures of the Catholic Church in the priest child abuse scandal. We have seen Ted Haggard and other mega-church preachers caught in their own hypocrisy. In our own Episcopal Church we have seen churches and dioceses engage in an ugly fight over human sexuality, power and property.

You could conclude from all of this, and from the survey results, that Americans have been watching religious turmoil in this country and around the world and that they haven't liked what they have seen. You could further conclude that Americans have responded by rejecting formal religion and its practices and chances are there would be some validity to your drawing this conclusion.

On the other hand, we might want to ask if there is more to this trend away from organized religion than Americans merely seeing things they don't like. Is it possible, that Americans need to be challenged to look more closely and critically in the mirror at themselves?

In his landmark book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*,¹³ which was a national bestseller for quite some time, Robert D. Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University reveals the results of his survey and study of American life which involved more than 500,000 interviews. His book was published in 1995 and so falls within the period of the first and second American Religious Identification Surveys.

From his research, Putnam indicates that "over the last 25 years, we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often."¹⁴ And, in reference to his title, we're even bowling alone! According to Putnam's research, "more Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues."¹⁵ Putnam warns that "our stock of social capital - the very fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities."¹⁶

A couple of facts from his research: In the last 25 years, attending club meetings such as the civic organizations of Kiwanis and Rotary, who historically have done great community work in America, has declined by 58%. Family dinners have dropped 43%. Having friends over to visit has dropped 35%.¹⁷ Putnam's book explores all aspects of community and civic life in America, including religion, and his conclusions about declining participation in religious life parallel the American Religious Attitudes Survey.¹⁸

But when one takes into account, Putnam's research, it is not safe to conclude that Americans have rejected participation in American religious and community life simply because of the scandals and abuses they have seen. These have merely provided a convenient and welcome excuse Americans can point to for doing that which they had already doing. The patterns of American behavior precede all these things.

When one takes into account the broader picture of American disengagement from civic and social involvement, a more accurate conclusion can be drawn. Putnam states it well. He writes, "For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deepening engagement in the life of their communities – but a few decades ago – silently, without warning, that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip-current. Without

at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.”¹⁹

It doesn't take much to see that this is so: Americans have become increasingly self-isolating, with social interaction occurring primarily on the internet through vehicles like Facebook, which is fun and has its own advantages, but hardly represents real engagement in community. Americans don't participate in PTA and other vitally important service organizations.²⁰ We live in gated communities. Many aren't marrying because that represents a commitment and contemporary Americans clearly have a problem with commitment.²¹ Today, those who marry have a 50% chance of divorcing.²²

We have a record number of children being born out of wedlock and raised in single parent households.²³ We have the highest incarceration rate in western world.²⁴ Moreover, today more than 40 million of us don't have health insurance.²⁵ An astronomical number of children live in poverty in this country.²⁶ We are polarized along ideological lines.

While participation in churches and synagogues has declined, Americans instead were captured by the Gospel of the dominant religion of this country: materialistic consumerism. We have been spending like crazy, and now we are paying the price. Today we are experiencing an 8% unemployment rate which looks like it will get worse before it gets better.²⁷ 1 in 10 Americans is in mortgage trouble.²⁸ We are in the midst of an economic crisis that is currently challenging not only this country, but the world and there can be no question that American behaviors and attitudes precipitated the crisis.

So I have to ask, as Americans have been rejecting religious, civic and community life and engagement in the last several decades, are we spiritually, emotionally and morally healthier and better off? The data makes it pretty clear we're not.

Last week, Susan, Kathleen, Bill, Debbie Wagner and I participated with about 150 others in the Bishop's Annual Spring Conference which was held at the Duncan Conference Center here in Delray Beach. The conference is open to both clergy and laity and is always excellent. This year's presenter at the Spring Conference was Diana Butler Bass author of seven books including: *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*; *Strength for the Journey*; *The Practicing Congregation* and her newest book which came out just last week, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*. Dr. Butler Bass is a lay person and an Episcopalian. She earned her Ph.D. in Church History from Duke University and is currently Senior Fellow at the Cathedral College of the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. She regularly comments on religion, politics, and culture in the media including *USA TODAY*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, FOX, PBS, and NPR. From 1995-2000, she wrote a weekly column on American religion for the *New York Times* Syndicate.²⁹

From 2002 to 2006, Dr. Butler Bass was the Project Director of a national Lilly Endowment funded study of mainline Protestant vitality - a project featured in *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In the area of religion and religious life in America, Diana Butler Bass is tops in the field. She has studied congregations and she knows what she's talking about.

In her first presentation at the Bishop's conference, Dr. Butler Bass made reference to the ARIS 2008 survey and she was certainly not surprised by it or its implications.³⁰ Dr. Butler Bass is aware that Christianity faces its challenges in this country and especially the mainline churches which have been her particular area of concern and study.³¹ But she also has great hope, and her

reasons for hope are not unfounded. They are the result of what she has seen and witnessed in mainline congregations.

As Butler Bass has written, "Unlike those who persist in believing that mainline Protestantism is a religion with eyes shut, I know different. For the past three years, my job has been going to church....I did not visit just any churches, however. No suburban mega-churches or revivalist congregations with famous television preachers for me. Rather, I journeyed with a surprising group of contemporary pilgrims – those folk who gather in mainline Protestant congregations, communities that describe themselves as theologically centrist to liberal-progressive and are a part of denominations that trace their lineage back to colonial America."³²

What kind of church is she describing? Well, frankly, she's speaking of churches like us, like St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Delray Beach. As she writes, "The fifty congregations involved in my study were not usually the largest congregations in their towns. Rather, they were solid, healthy churches that exhibited Christian authenticity, expressed a coherent faith, and offered members ways of living with passion and purpose...The congregations embraced no evangelistic strategy, no programmatic style of church growth. Rather, they were their own best selves – creative, traditional, risk-taking and grounded, humble and confident, open and orthodox."³³ "Their paths of renewal varied, but I discerned a similar pattern across these very different communities," Butler Bass writes. "Mainline renewal is, as one Lutheran pastor told me, 'not rocket science... You preach the Gospel, offer hospitality, pay attention to worship and people's spiritual lives. Frankly, you take Christianity seriously as a way of life.'"³⁴

As Diana Butler Bass addressed the Bishop's Spring Conference last week, and as she described the practices that marked the healthy and vibrant congregations she studied, practices like vibrant worship, hospitality, theological reflection, friendship, practicing the presence of God, doing justice, intercessory prayer;³⁵ as she went down the list, those of us attending from St. Paul's found we could check off nearly every item because we practice these things in this church community. We are a healthy, vibrant expression of Christianity. In case you have some questions about this, a few examples:

Yoline Jolicoeur started coming to St. Paul's for help with schoolwork before there was a Paul's Place. She was ten years old, Haitian-American, and lived in the immediate community surrounding the church. She is one of the reasons we started Paul's Place. Yoline has been a member of the church and a Junior Daughter of the King since the Junior Daughter's chapter was founded. St. Paul's is not only Yoline's community, we are her family. Most particularly, Kathleen Gannon and Mary Whittemore have been her virtual parents, because Yoline's parents have not been on the scene.

This past week, Yoline, received an acceptance letter for admission to the University of Alabama. What a cause for rejoicing! Kudos to her and to Kathleen and Mary for incredibly hard work and to this church community which has done its job as a village in raising this child. If you ever think what we do isn't important, think of Yoline and the other Paul's Place kids.

Another example: On Friday of the Bishop's Spring Conference, my cell phone rang. It was Margo Vuicich, letting me know that sheriff's deputies were at her home, that they had just told her that her mother, Jean Farrar, a member of St. Paul's, had been killed in a horrendous traffic wreck on the corner of Military Trail and Atlantic. Susan and I rushed over and stayed with Margo until her husband Tommy drove three hours back from Ocala where he had been coaching his girl's Golf team in a tournament.

As Susan and I waited with Margo, a lifelong friend of Margo's came over. Then Sherry Fleming of St. Paul's came over. Then Nancy and Mike Armstrong, also of St. Paul's came

over. And then Laura Boyer, also of St. Paul's, began organizing and meals were made by parishioners and brought to Margo and Tommy's home on Saturday and during the week.

St. Paul's parishioners prepared items and created a reception for the nearly 200 people that attended Jean's memorial service yesterday. More than this, Margo's cousin, who lived in Delray Beach but was not a member of the church, died suddenly, just a few days after Margo's mother died. We turned that service into a double memorial and St. Paul's parishioners welcomed her cousin's family as family. *We don't "bowl alone" at St. Paul's!*

We are a caring community and we take care of one another whether it is through Stephen Ministries, or Home and Hospital Communion to the sick and shut-in, or Sacred Circles or Labyrinth Walk or St. Paul's Day School or helping in The Turnover Shop which raises funds for outreach to the community and the wider mission of the church; whether it is playing games with children who are our guests through Family Promise or cooking through the Caring Kitchen; whether it is singing in the choir and enjoying the fellowship of this, or of House Church, or Second Sunday Family Pot-Luck.

We are followers of Jesus Christ, a church community, with a clear understanding of who we are and what we are about. We are people who stand strongly and solidly in the tradition of which we are a part, the Episcopal Church, who understand Jesus Christ through this particular lens and who allow our wonderful traditions and understandings to lead us into mission and ministry in our time and place.

To those who have a yearning; who long to experience the love of God in Christ Jesus through a vibrant community of faith we are a shining light. Resisting the "rip currents" that pull people away from family, community, civic life and religious enrichment, we offer the living waters that join them as one. St. Paul's Episcopal Church is what God has made us: "*created in Christ Jesus for love and good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*"³⁶ By the grace and love of God, and the resolve of our own commitment to Christ and his Church, may it always be so.

3. ARIS 2008 Report - "Research" p. 2

4. ARIS 2008 Report - "Research" p. 2

5. ARIS 2008 Report - "Research" p. 2

6. See "Highlights" ARIS 2008 Report

7. See "Highlights" ARIS 2008

8. See "Highlights" ARIS 2008

9. See "Highlights" ARIS 2008

10. See "Highlights" ARIS 2008

11. See "Highlights" ARIS 2008

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12. Table 3 - ARIS 2008 - p. 5
 13. Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, London etc: Simon and Schuster 2000)
 14. See the frontpage of the Bowling Alone website at <http://www.bowlingalone.com>
 15. See the frontpage of the Bowling Alone website at <http://www.bowlingalone.com> as well as Putnam - pp. 111-113.
 16. See the frontpage of the Bowling Alone website at <http://www.bowlingalone.com>
 17. See the frontpage of the Bowling Alone website at <http://www.bowlingalone.com/>
 18. Putnam - Chapter Four “Religious Participation”
 19. Putnam, p. 27.
 20. Putnam, p. 57
 21. See “Divorce declining, but so is marriage” - *U.S.A. Today*, July 18, 2005 at http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-18-cohabit-divorce_x.htm
 22. See “Marriage in the United States” - Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_in_the_United_States
 23. “‘07 U.S. Births Break Baby Boom Record” - *N.Y. Times*, March 19, 2009 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/19/health/19birth.html?ref=us>
 24. *The Pew Center on the States 1 in 100: Behind Bars in America* “A Snapshot of Prison Growth, p. 5 [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100\(3\).pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100(3).pdf)
 25. DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, *U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports: Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: 2008), p. 19.
 26. DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, *U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports: Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007* (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: 2008), p. 12 ff.
 27. See *Economic News Release - Employment Situation Summary* published on March 6, 2009 by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>
 28. See “11% of mortgages are troubled” CNN Money, March 5, 2009 at http://money.cnn.com/2009/03/05/real_estate/record_delinquency_rates/
 29. See her “Bio” at www.dianabutlerbass.com

30. Butler-Bass, Diana - Address to the 2009 Bishop's Spring Conference of the Diocese of Southeast Florida held at the James L. Conference Center in Delray Beach, Florida, March 13-14, 2009.

31. See Butler-Bass - *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne - A Division of HarperCollins, 2006), 6.

32. Butler Bass - *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, p. 2.

33. Butler Bass - *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, p. 7.

34. Butler Bass - *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, p. 7.

35. This list was included in a handout given to participants at the 2009 Bishop's Spring Conference of the Diocese of Southeast Florida held at the James L. Conference Center in Delray Beach, Florida, March 13-14, 2009.

36. See Ephesians 2:10