

Sermon for Oct. 13, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Luke 18:1-8
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

The Questions Jesus Asks

May these words be rightly preached and rightly heard to the glory of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What an odd little reading we find in Luke this morning. It begins with instruction on prayer and ends with a very direct, almost desperate, question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (18:8). There seems to be a disconnect between the parable and the question until we read the chapter before this one in which the disciples beg Jesus to increase their faith (17:5) in response to his difficult teachings. Consistent and trusting prayer, then, is one tool Jesus advises the disciples, and us, to use if we want to remain strong in our faith.

But what I feel drawn to talk about is Jesus’ poignant question at the end of this short passage: Will Jesus find faith on this earth when he returns? Let’s make this question more relevant: Would Jesus find faith on the earth if he returned right now?

It should come as no surprise that church attendance has been declining since the 1970’s. In fact, according to the last Barna statistics from 2017, 31% of Americans define themselves as practicing Christians, which means, according to Barna criteria, that they attend worship at least one a month. 41% define themselves as non-practicing Christians, which means that they were once affiliated with a denomination but now no longer make worship attendance a part of their lives. 48% of those surveyed define themselves as “post-Christian,” a term explained by Barna this way: “If an individual meets 60 percent or more of a set of factors, which includes things like disbelief in God or identifying as atheist or agnostic, and they do not participate in practices such as Bible reading, prayer and church attendance, they are considered post-Christian. Based on this metric, almost half of all American adults (48%) are post-Christian.” Practicing Christians, then, are the smallest group at 31%. *“When the son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”*

Unfortunately, the situation is no better in Europe. That reality wasn’t that difficult to spot on our trip to England and Spain the past eleven days as we visited several different cathedrals. As I thought about the different churches we saw and about Jesus’ question

about whether he will find faith on the earth, each church became a type of metaphor for the practice of Christianity and how those practices affect our ability to spread the faith.

Let's start with Westminster Abbey in London, built in 929 AD. We noticed the following:

No picture-taking is allowed

The cathedral is the home of multiple marble carved tombs, gold gilt tombs, cherub covered tombs

Monarchs have been and still are crowned here.

The coronation chair sits behind glass walls.

Over 3300 people have been buried or commemorated at this abbey.

The cathedral was made for the glory of kings, queens, and dignitaries.

Westminster Abbey left us cold. Not so much a church as a mausoleum, packed with tourists. It is tempting sometimes for our own churches to become mausoleums, places where we hold onto the past, past traditions, past ways of doing things, past people, past language, to the point where nothing is relevant to those who are seeking Christ. Such churches speak their own language—the one they have grown up with and understand—and have no interest in learning to speak a different language that may draw others to Christ. So Jesus asks, *Will he find faith on the earth when he returns?*

We next saw the Cathedral of Barcelona, constructed in the 1400's. We could not get near it because of the crowds. But note that all these people are not going to worship. They are taking pictures of the cathedral because of its architectural beauty. They are drawn to the structure but not to its meaning. According to cathedral's website, "the cathedral has been updated in response to an increasing number of tourists. The cloister now contains a gift shop, and the traditional candles normally lit at the shrines of saints have been replaced with electronic candles," all for convenience, but not for spiritual growth. Some churches are like that: beautiful to look at, but with no substance, because all effort is on maintaining the building, not reaching out and spreading the word. So, Jesus asks, *will he find faith on the earth when he returns?*

Thankfully, things do get better. We visited a most remarkable church in Barcelona, Spain. Called the "Sagrada Familia," the Holy Family, this basilica was designed by an acclaimed architect named Antoni Gaudi who accomplished cutting edge work during the

art deco movement. Gaudi was a very devout Roman Catholic, and his theology about God is demonstrated in his work.

Gaudi held that everything in a church should point toward the Creator, and that if an architect examined what the Creator had made, he or she needed no other models. So Gaudi took his designs from nature—from the way trees spread their branches, from the outer layers of a pine cone, from the spiny insides of a sea urchin—and he used God's designs in his own works as his homage to God.

Construction began on this project in 1882, and the building is not yet finished. The completion date is 2026. Funds for the continuing work come from the entrance fees. The final tower will be just one meter shorter than the height of Montjuic, the highest hill in Barcelona, at 173 meters because Gaudi believed nothing should surpass what God has built.

Everything in the basilica draws attention upward to the heavens. There are no statues of saints, no commemorative plaques, nothing that points to man. No names of any person adorn anything in the church. Everything about it is to the glory of God. The most moving feature is the ecumenical Lord's Prayer on the Glory Door, where the prayer is translated in fifty languages, the door that says, "Welcome, all!"

What if our churches modeled the Sagrada Familia in a way that always pointed to God? What if we were able to get our own pride and agendas out of the way so that everything we did, we did for God? What if we learned to speak the languages of others—millennials and seekers and the formerly churchd-- so that we could swing open our own Glory doors? Then maybe Christ would find faith when he returns.

We also visited the Bath Cathedral in Bath, England. Again, another beautiful structure filled with tourists, but also filled with what draws a person to God:

Solitary places to pray with real candles

Stained glass that tells the scripture stories

Old architecture and new designs

Bath Cathedral is an active place of worship, and it offers the visitor a prayer guide to use in different locations of the sanctuary. It also hosts civic ceremonies, concerts and lectures. There is a heritage museum, but it is in the cellars.

Here is a church that exemplifies our purpose: an active place of worship, a congregation that reaches out to the community, and a congregation that honors its past but does not

worship or cling to it. We very much felt the Spirit of God in this place, but then, we are Christians. What about all those others?

Will Jesus find faith when he returns? Jesus asked a lot of questions throughout the gospels. In fact, someone once quipped that if Jesus knew all the answers, why did he ask so many questions? Most likely, to get us to examine our own actions, our own hearts, and our own faith so that Jesus will find faith *in each of us* when he returns.

St. Andrew, you are at a point in your own mission and relevance where you have important questions to ask yourselves as you prepare for a new minister and ministry. What kind of church do you believe you are? What kind of church do you feel called to be? Who are you willing to serve? Who are you willing to seek? How are you helping to ensure that Jesus finds faith here? With God's help, all of us can become Glory doors.