

Message for September 11, 2022

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

I would like to begin this week's message by asking what are perhaps, some very provocative questions. Is our community a better place because our church family is a part of it? Is our community a better place because of all the Christian churches that are a part of it? Is the world itself a better place because the Christian church is a part of it?

To us the answer is, I hope, a resounding yes but not everyone sees it this way. In the eyes of many people including the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins who wrote "The God Delusion", the world would be a much better place if there was no religion at all as religion, and especially Christianity, lies at the root of much of the world's problems today. It is claimed that looking back at the past two thousand years, the world would have been a better place if Christianity had never emerged, but is this really the case?

In his book "Atheist Delusion: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies", David Bentley Hart argues the exact opposite. We can use our moral values as an example. Even as the atheists attack Christianity for all of its failures and shortcomings, virtually all of our modern moral values and ideas about what is right and wrong are firmly based on the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed if that foundation were to disappear what would our society's values be based on? The atheists say that even without Christianity, society would still affirm values such as human dignity and caring for others, but the facts don't bear this out. An appeal for such as disaster relief is launched for example but who are most likely to support it? The religious, and this has even led some of those who sneer at Christianity to bemoan the fact that atheists are not as generous as religious people are when caring for others. In fact, if one looks at history there is little that would make us think that the world would have been better off without religion; all we have to do is look at the history of the 20th century. The three most murderous and oppressive regimes were not religious at all and were in fact avowedly secular; the communists under Stalin, the Nazis under Hitler, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

Going even further back in time, some atheists claim that the ancient world was a paradise until the Christians came along and ruined everything but to say

this is to totally ignore the realities of life 2000 years ago. Back then for example there were no safety nets or food banks. If people didn't work then they didn't eat. Also, as I said in one of my messages not all that long ago, an unwanted baby was often placed on top of the garbage at the local dump where, if he or she was lucky, they might be taken by a childless couple or a slave dealer. Life was very harsh and brutal for most people, and this is the so-called 'paradise' that some atheists unthinkingly say Christianity ruined. The truth is that when Christianity emerged there was a social revolution. If a person was hungry for example, it was the Christians who fed them. If a person was sick, it was the Christians who looked after them. If a person was homeless then it was the Christians who took them in. And as for the children abandoned on the garbage dumps? The Christians looked after them too. The Christians cared about others when no one else did and they did so because they believed that everyone is a child of God and should be treated as such.

This is one of the reasons why, despite the oppression and persecution, the Christian faith grew in leaps and bounds. Of course human nature being what it is there were those, including some Christians, who took advantage of others' kind-hearted generosity. There were for example those people who could work but wouldn't. There were also some extremely religious Christians who were absolutely convinced that Jesus was coming back at any time; this being the case, they decided that there was no point in working. To Paul however both attitudes were totally wrong. Paul made it very clear that he had no sympathy for those who could provide for themselves but chose not to. As Paul said, "If a man shall not work, he shall not eat".

If a man shall not work, he shall not eat. I sometimes wonder if any other verse in the Bible has been more misunderstood or taken out of context than this one. In years gone by for example, this verse was used to argue against such as unemployment insurance, welfare, and old age pensions. It is also used by some people to justify why they do not support charities. Why it's right there in the Bible; if you don't work then you don't eat! To understand this verse in this way though is to totally take it out of its context. It is because right after saying this, Paul went on to say, "And as for you brothers, never tire of doing what is right".

What is needed said Paul, is a balance. Don't take advantage of other people's kindness and generosity and don't just sit around waiting for Jesus to

return either. To willingly be a needless burden on others is not the Christian thing to do. And yet as Paul also knew, there are people who quite legitimately need help and he insisted that it is a Christian's duty to help such people. But this of course leaves us vulnerable, doesn't it? How do we really know who legitimately needs our help? Why some people might take advantage of our kindness and generosity! Yes they might, but that is a risk that we must be prepared to take.

Before coming to Milton, we lived in the village of Colborne. Without fail every spring and fall there would be people passing through who said that they needed help. What the village council decided to do then was give the reeve, the United Church minister and myself a certain amount of money every year. It was the honour system, and we were trusted to use the money as we best saw fit. It wasn't unusual to get a call, usually late in the evening, from a person who had no money, no food and nowhere to stay. One or two of us would then go and make arrangements for that person to be fed and put up for the night in a local hotel. I remember one person in the village though who strenuously objected to all of this. He certainly trusted us with the money but the issue for him was that surely some of these people were taking advantage of us. The clear implication was that since *some* of these people were probably con artists, we shouldn't be helping *any* of them. I replied that of course some of the requests for help probably weren't legitimate but, as I also said, we had to be prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt; that it was better to err on the side of compassion and risk being taken advantage of than to turn away a person who really needed our help. Certainly the last thing we should do is use the possibility of being taken advantage of as an excuse not to help anybody. To care is to love and to love means being vulnerable. Indeed what we do proves or disproves the reality of our love and even our faith itself. I've never forgotten this episode that happened more than a few years ago.

Every year the Roman Catholic Cardinal in Toronto sponsors a charity fundraising dinner to help the less fortunate who live in the city. One year a person crashed the dinner and, without being invited to do so, took to the podium and gave a short speech in which he politely asked the audience not to just throw money at the less fortunate but to also become actively involved in their lives. What he said wasn't controversial but, not surprisingly, the security guards quickly hustled him out of the hall. This was perhaps to be expected but

then, for me at least, came the disturbing part. As the young man was being marched out, a large number of people in the audience stood up and mocked him. Yes, that young man's actions may well have been inappropriate, to interrupt the event and talk without being invited to do so, but what about the behaviour of the audience? This was a Christian fundraising dinner in support of the less fortunate, but which spoke louder about the people in attendance; the money they had shelled out for the dinner or their mocking laughter?

Without ever realizing it or intending for it to happen, it can be easy for us to lose our sense of compassion. Yes, people must assume responsibility for their own lives. At the same time though this individual responsibility does not relieve us of our corporate responsibility. As Paul said, "And as for you, never tire of doing what is right". Striving to do what is right for all, to care and to share, is what makes the church what it is, the body of Christ here on earth. And to return to the questions that I posed at the beginning of this message: would our community be better off without us and all the other churches? Would the world be better off without us Christians? To say 'yes' truly is delusional.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, as we come to you in prayer this late summer morning, we begin this prayer as we usually do, by giving you thanks.

We give you thanks for the gift of this day and our being a part of your good creation. We thank you not only for our lives but also for those of everyone and everything so dear to us. Help us we pray to treasure this gift and not to take it for granted.

We thank you for everything, tangible and intangible that makes life so good. We thank you for the holy wonder that is you, who spoke and it all came to be. You have blessed us with so much in so many ways and in return you ask that we strive to be a blessing; help us to be just that. As a part of our being so, help us to love just as we are loved. Help us to care, just as we are cared for. Grant that the lives of others and the world around us may be at least a little bit better for our being a part of it.

We pray this day for your blessing on all who are ill and on those who mourn. We offer up our prayer this morning for all those whose lives have been devastated by the horrific murders in Saskatchewan. Grant healing and peace to all those who have been wounded, whether it be in mind, body, or soul. We pray the same for the people of Ukraine as the war there continues and as the fear over the safety of the nuclear plant continues to rise.

Now that Labour Day has come and gone, the municipal election campaigns have begun and we thank you for all those who are willing to stand for office. We thank you too for our right to choose those who would lead our communities but as we do so, we pray for the well-being and safety of all who hold public office. It is natural that we will sometimes disagree with those who hold office. So often though, so many in our society treat others and speak to others with needless anger, uncivility and worse. Help us to remember what we often call the Golden Rule; to treat everyone the way we would like to be treated is the key to a good, full, civil life.

Last of all this morning we offer up our prayer of gratitude for the life of her Majesty the Queen and her decades of public service. We pray as well for the members of her family for whom she was not a remote figure but rather a beloved mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. We also pray for your blessing on King Charles as he begins his reign as our new head of state.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen