

“Fanatics for God” [Galatians 1: 11-24]

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The problems facing the church today is that there are too many members – and not enough Christians. Rev. Carl Braaten, Lutheran

Dr. Bratten knows all too well that there is a big difference between being a true follower of Jesus Christ and in having your name on a membership roll in some congregation. In our contemporary world, many people see Jesus Christ as just another one of the options from which to choose. Some choose to follow Christ the same way they select a shirt or a dress or perhaps even as they would buy a car. If the church feels good, fits right, and does not cost an arm and a leg, then it might be the one for me! Too often the tire kicking can make the decision as to if the wheels are too soft or they are so hard they hurt my toe. A lot of people think Jesus offers one way to live and they fail to realize He offers the only way to live.

Some church members feel they can attend worship whenever they feel like it and after a time may decide to skip a Sunday here or there, then a few at a time, then will plan if its convenient to try to get to the next Communion service, or at least once a year. For some, all that matters is to stay in the “good books.” After all, so goes the reasoning, that is really all that matters. I had several members express their feelings and surprise after an article I wrote concerning membership in one of the congregations I did a consultation. What would the church be like if more members took their responsibilities as followers of Jesus just a little more seriously? Church statisticians suggest that the congregation is healthy if you have 1/3rd of the constituents in attendance at any time acknowledging there is a large portion of those numbers who change frequently due to health, work, school and leisure time activities. I wonder about the summer attendance when it often is less than 1/12th the constituents. An Interim Moderator, Rev. James Stewart shared some of his current study materials at a meeting some months ago and quoted from one of his text books concerning Christian discipline. The quote essentially said we as Christians are to fit our lives into our church life, not our church life into our lives. This is especially true when leisure time activities become more important than worshipping God or receiving spiritual nurture.

The Lord had no doubt as to the mission of His bride, the Church. Following the resurrection and before His ascension, Jesus met with the disciples and told them that He could no longer be with them physically but would be with them in Spirit. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!* This awesome responsibility to carry on the Lord’s earthly ministry was not what most of the disciples and apostles really wanted to get into. It would have been so much easier if the Master had just stayed put. They could have continued to enjoy His company; Jesus could continue to do most of the teaching, the preaching and the healing. But then Jesus told them He wanted **them** to go out into the world in His name. They should trust Him to give them the boldness to preach His Word when the crowds told them to back off and be quiet. Jesus promised to give them the power to heal when people told them it could not be done, especially by them. He said He would give them courage when the world became hostile.

Searching Scripture, we see God has always called people of faith to be bold, almost fanatical for the sake of the Gospel. Over and over again, we read that God calls people of faith to be bold for His sake. Moses received God's Call to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. I think the Charles Hesston film may be a little over done but I can imagine Moses standing in front of Pharaoh and his army stating his demands unflinchingly: *Let my people go! Or else!* He stood between the raging waters of the Red Sea that were parted and the Hebrews stood around grumbling. Moses told the people to stand firm and see the salvation of Lord and that it would work for them that very day. The Lord would fight for them and they only had to be still (physically and verbally). Then God spoke to Moses to get the people out of there and not to let them stand still any longer but to move forward NOW! Read the Scripture, put yourself in the scene and it is not difficult to see the images in the words as Moses cried out to them, *Move! Move! Move!*

In the New Testament the greatest example of moving forward in faith for me is Paul. In my mind, Paul was the greatest missionary, the greatest theologian and the greatest teacher of the early Christian Church. He moved the Church of Jesus Christ forward, in spite of many setbacks and threats to himself. When speaking about his career, Paul said, *Five times I had the 39 lashes... Three times I have been beaten with sticks... Three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day.* [2 Cor. 11: 24-25]. He was jailed, spit upon, chased out of towns and once stoned and left for dead. Paul was a person who literally staked his life on the new understanding of God found in Jesus who proclaimed that Jews and Gentiles would be molded into a new community in Jesus. Paul firmly believed that in Christ there is no east or west nor best or worst. Paul realized that thanks to the Son of God who came to seek the lost and save those condemned by the Law, we may never justify the use of the phrase, *God forsaken.*

Paul was a hunter of Christians who himself became the hunted. He was a persecutor who became persecuted. He was a teacher of the Law who became a preacher of the Gospel. Paul was born a Jew and named after the first king of Israel, Saul. His Roman name, Paul, identified him as a Roman citizen. He was brilliant and had studied under the best rabbis. He was devoted to his religious practices and when he heard about Jesus, he thought Jesus was a heretic who needed to be stopped and so he made it his personal crusade to cleanse and purify the faith. He held the cloaks of the mob and cheered them as they stoned and killed Stephen the first Christian martyr and it was at that time he decided that his calling was to purify the Hebrew faith and if necessary he would kill as many Christian pagans as possible.

Studying his teaching and missionary career, the life of Paul tells us three things. First he declares that without God's grace we are lost. No matter what we have said, no matter what we have done, God's forgiveness, God's love and mercy are there for us. He told the Christians in Rome he was convinced that *nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.* Secondly, Paul would have loved our generation with all the sports. He enjoyed sports and often used athletics to make metaphorical points about the Gospel

message. He spoke about the discipline we need in our lives as Christians and compared it to a boxer training for the big fight. He talked about the dedication and commitment to the Lord's work if we are to be truly worthy of the name, "Christian." He used the image of running a race as hard and as long, as we can, as a witness to our faith. And finally, (third) he says the followers of Christ can and must make a difference in the world.

Robert Schuller is quoted many times about a story he once told about Oral Roberts, Billy Graham and himself. When they all got to heaven, St. Peter met them at the gate and said, *Fellows, I am sorry you arrived a little early. Your rooms aren't ready yet. You will have to go downstairs to the lower level for a short time.* Billy Graham exclaimed, *St. Peter, do you mean we will have to go to Hell? Yes Billy, but it will not be for long. Please be patient with us,* St. Peter reasoned. The three all went downstairs and it wasn't long until Satan was calling upstairs demanding of St. Peter, *Aren't those rooms ready yet?* St. Peter replied they weren't quite ready, was there a problem. *I need to get these guys out of here before they ruin my place. What's the problem? Roberts is healing the sick; Graham is preaching the Gospel of Hope and Schuller is raising money to air condition the place!*

Paul is called a 'Saint' because he was a saint. He truly is a model for Godly living and Christian commitment. He shows us what can happen when we allow God to come into our lives and take over our lives and work with us and through us. When we do the Lord's bidding we cannot always tell what will happen to us or to the people we meet. Jesus challenged us to carry this message to all of His people. Christ has entrusted us to hold and share His Gospel. He wants this message to be more than just words on a page and He wants to be more than just a historical figure.

My prayer for you as a congregation as we begin the summer season, is that this will be a celebration of the past ministries but will also be filled with hope for the future ministry. I would like each person here to pray and consider, *what can I do to be an integral part of the ministry of Jesus Christ here at St. John's Church, Cornwall?* Imagine what can be accomplished for Christ if all of us will come together as active participants with the faith of Peter and the dedication and commitment of Saint Paul. I began my sermon with a quote from the Rev. Dr. Braaten and I am persuaded to agree with him. We need to become motivated, to be turned on and to be Fanatics for God! We need more Christians and fewer card-carrying associates or members. I present this invitation to you today, that as you confess Jesus Christ, you will join those early disciples and apostles and, *Go Tell!* Amen.