

Sermon for February 16, 2020 – “Give ‘Em What They Want”
5th Sunday After Epiphany, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Peter 1:1-13
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As the mainline churches struggle with declining attendance numbers, finances, clergy numbers, etc., I’ve seen many churches trying anything to get people to stay, to come back, to be seen. These efforts have resulted in a trend that a pastor in Canada had been trying to name. A few years ago he finally came up with something: Anchorman Christianity. Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy was a movie that came out in 2004. It starred Will Ferrell and is a tongue-in-cheek take on 1970’s culture, particularly the Action News format. It portrays a San Diego TV station where Ferrell’s title character clashes with his new female counterpart. The film was wildly popular commercially and critically and is now widely regarded as one of the best comedy films of the 2000’s. The sequel, Anchorman 2, came out in 2013 and was also a commercial and critical success. Now, the Anchorman movies aren’t for everyone. They contain crass humor paired with the absurd, but it speaks to this trend of what lots of churches are doing these days. In Anchorman 2, Ron Burgundy says, “Why do we have to tell the people what they need to hear? Why can’t the news be fun? Why can’t we give them what they want to hear?” I mentioned that Anchorman contains crass, absurdist humor but on another level it’s also brilliant satire. We all grow weary of the 24-hour news cycle and the fight for ratings and views which earn advertising dollars. But we’re kidding ourselves if we think that this, “Give the people what they want instead of what they need” attitude hasn’t crept into Christianity in North America. And let’s face it, it works. It gets people to tune in, click the link or sit in the pew. It makes people happy and there’s nothing that makes church leaders feel better than a room full of happy people.

“Evangelical culture in America is very fame-driven”, said Derwin L. Gray, a former NFL player and pastor of megachurch near Charlotte, NC. “It has the propensity to use people instead of to develop people.” As a pastor it’s really hard to insist on giving people what they need. It can be a whole lot easier to give them what they want. Let me prove that by offering nine easy steps to giving people what they want.

First, give them easy answers. People don’t need good teaching and preaching, they want easy answers. Just offer people a list of concrete easy-to-follow advice and they’ll not only love it; they’ll want it repeated so they can write it down. Even better if you can bullet point it for them! Seriously, look at all the internet lists out there, ten easy ways to do this or that. We all click on them. It’s called click bait! Concrete advice is so much easier than in-depth explorations of things like faith, theology, history and ethics. Don’t waste time helping people grow or learn or to live with tension and complexity.

Second, give them outrage. People don’t need me telling them about complex problems, people want to be mad at something. We’re hard-wired to respond more viscerally to negative emotions like anger. The media knows this well. It is way easier to preach outrage about taxes, government regulations, other religions, political agendas, or the evils of this or that than it is to encourage people to grow in empathy and compassion.

Seeing the ‘other’ as human or seeing issues as problems, as things we’re called to do something about, well, that takes work and a good measure of God’s help. Who has the time or energy to be calm, collected and compassionate? Outrage is way easier. As Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff once said, “Whatever it is, I’m against it!”

Third, give them the Bible they know; or what they think they know. People don’t need me to tell them what the Bible really says. They want to hear what they think it says. Cleanliness is next to godliness. The Lord works in mysterious ways. To thine own self be true. Love the sinner, hate the sin. Money is the root of all evil. This too shall pass. Spare the rod, spoil the child. God will not give you more than you can handle. And my personal favorite, God helps those who help themselves. None of those phrases is in the Bible! People have argued with me over these. Most people think they know what’s in the Bible, why tell them otherwise? At one of the churches I served while in seminary I was told not to bother too much with preaching from the Bible, people already knew what it said. Besides it’s a lot easier to preach when you don’t have to explain what the Bible’s actually saying, no one wants to hear that anyway. It’s like the old saying, “Never try to teach a pig to sing it wastes your time and it annoys the pig!” Besides, it’s more convenient to preach from the bible of old wives’ tales and clichés than the 66 books we used to know.

Fourth, give them someone to blame. Terrorists. Gangs. The poor and homeless. Those in power. Gays. Illegal immigrants. Ethnic minorities. Liberals. Conservatives. Progressives. And so on. People don’t need to know that their problems likely have complex causes (with themselves at the center). They want to hear who they can **blame** for their problems. So let’s stop trying to help people see the pervasive effects of sin in the world or the suffering and brokenness of others around us, instead, let’s blame people for their own problems and while we’re at it lets blame those ‘others’ for **our** problems too!

Fifth, give them approval but no oversight or accountability. It can be really tiring to say ‘no’ as a pastor. People don’t need to hear it especially when they want to hear ‘yes!’ It’s hard work getting people understand why such-and-such is important why I do some of the things I do. It’s way easier to just let people do whatever they want.

Sixth, avoid conflict at all costs. People don’t need to know how to have healthy relationships with God or other people, they already have that figured out. That’s not what they come to church for. Never, ever challenge church people. Why would you want to do that? Maintaining principles. Challenging bullies. Taking a firm stand just causes problems. Problems cause conflict. Conflict causes anxiety. And anxiety is really stressful. Pastors burn out on that stuff. It’s way easier to just avoid conflict altogether. Besides, we wouldn’t want people to leave...would we?

The **seventh** and final step is to give people nostalgia. C’mon, we all know people don’t need reality that’s way too depressing. They want to live in the world they fondly remember. They want to be reminded of what they once had and loved however long gone it may be. People want to be reminded of how great the church used to be not what it could be in the future; not what God might be calling it to be.

That sort of thing means change and change is hard. Really hard.

So, those are the seven steps, there are actually a few more, but that's all for today). Anyway, now that you know what they are I want you to know something if you haven't realized it already, that I will never follow them. Sorry, but I won't. You see, I'm not here to give you what you want, I am here to give you what you need. I've said it before, I'll say it again...I love you all, dearly but I love God more. It's way easier as a pastor, as church leadership, as church people, to give people what they appear to want. Giving people what they want gets results, higher ratings and more butts in pews. But it's disingenuous faith. It results in "worship-tainment." It creates "church consumers" instead of church members. It allows people to stay stagnant in faith instead of growing in relationship with Jesus. And speaking of Jesus, He wasn't all that interested in giving people what they wanted was He? Nope, He was all about what we really need. Because He knew what they needed.

Henry Ford famously said, "If I had asked people what they wanted they would have said faster horses." Today, if you were to ask the average churchgoer what they wanted I'll bet you dollars to donuts that most would probably say "a bigger church." Or they might say "a church that meets my and my family's needs." In other words, they'd want a faster horse. In other words, more of what we already have.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is this, and here's the thing, we don't need the bigger or more accommodating churches people want. We need a church that Jesus wants. We don't need a faster horse; we need something else entirely. We need a church that wants what Jesus wants. No matter what size it is or how comfortable/uncomfortable it makes us feel. Henry Ford changed the world, sure, but not by giving people what they wanted but by giving them what they didn't even know they needed. What's interesting is that Ford didn't even create something new. Karl Benz is recognized as the inventor of the modern car. His motorwagen was built in 1885 in Mannheim, Germany and he was awarded the patent in 1886. What Ford did was popularize the car by mass-producing it on a moving assembly line. He didn't wait for people to want it, he made so many of them that they couldn't be ignored causing people to start realizing their value. Similar to Henry Ford, Steve Jobs said, "A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them." Much like Henry Ford and Steve Jobs a pastor's calling isn't about giving people what they want but what they don't even know they need yet. That's what great churches do. They don't promise more of what we already have, they show us entirely new ways of being. They don't try to pamper us, they empower, encourage and equip us to bless others. They don't help us find ourselves, they help us find Jesus. They don't play to the crowd; they help us stand up to the crowd when necessary. They don't entertain us, they teach us. They remind us that we need to continue to learn in order to continue to grow. They don't give us more of what we want, they show us what we **really** need. They disciple us. They hold us accountable. They help us to grow spiritually. They help bear one another's burden. They point the way to faithfulness.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.