

This week the Pew Research Center published their report about religious affiliation in the US over the past 7 years. Some of you have already seen their report and it has been reported in the news.

So this morning I want to first summarize what Pew discovered. I will then offer up a time for anyone who would like to share how you interpret this information and then I will seek to tie all of this into our two Scriptures this morning.

So what did Pew discover about the religious affiliations of Americans? In the past 7 years the percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians has declined from 78% to 70%, a decline of 8 percentage points. The so-called mainline church like us has decreased from 18% of the population to 14% of the population.

Those of us who have been paying attention to the state of organized religion in the US are not surprised by this. The Catholic Church has seen a decline of 3% while those who identify themselves as Evangelical have declined by about 1%. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have stayed the same. So if Christianity is in decline according to the statistics then what is increasing?

Well other faiths besides Christianity have increased slightly. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus make up the group that grew by about 1%. So which group is growing fastest in this country? According to the Pew Research Center, the fastest growing group in the US are those that identify themselves as "None of the Above." Those who consider themselves agnostic, atheist, and nothing in particular have grown by about 7%.

So when you hear that those who claim to be Christian has decreased by 8% while "None of the Above" has increased by 7%, what are some of your initial thoughts? Does that surprise you?

I just finished reading the book by author Diana Butler Bass called *Christianity After Religion*. Bass says this about why so many people are leaving Christianity and joining “None of the Above.”

p. 17-18 from *Christianity After Religion* (She lists reasons people have left organized religion)

I share all of this to say that this is the context that we now find ourselves in as we look to the story we have read today. We read both the end of the gospel of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Luke and Acts were written by the same person. In both of our readings today we hear the story from Scripture of Jesus leaving the earth.

These stories fully complete Jesus’ time on earth. He has been born, he lived, he died, he was resurrected, and he returned to earth but then he left again to sit with God for the remainder of eternity.

But did you catch the last question that the disciples were asking before Jesus left the earth? They wanted to know when he would restore the kingdom to Israel. “To” Israel. They wanted to know when they would dominant the religious scene. They wanted to know when they would be the most powerful.

Today if we were in their shoes we might be asking questions like, “When are the pews going to be filled again on Sunday morning?” “When are stores going to no longer be open on Sunday?” “When are soccer games only going to be scheduled for Saturdays and not on Sunday mornings?” “When are my children and grand children going to participate in Sunday School like I did as a child?”

And Jesus’ response to the questions from the disciples? “It is not for you to know.” He then tells them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and bless them and that they will be his witnesses to all the world. And as he says this and as they are watching, Jesus is lifted up and a cloud removes him from their sight.

At this point the disciples are doing what any of us would do. We would be gazing at what we just witnessed. It's like being on a highway and you come upon an accident. What do you do? You stare at what has happened. Rubbernecking I believe it is called. And that is what the disciples do at this point. They stare up to heaven and are wondering what is going to happen next.

But then Luke tells us that two men in white robes appear. And what do they say? "What you lookin at?" That is basically what they say. They ask the disciples why they are looking up toward heaven and hoping to catch another glimpse of Jesus. The two men tell them to quit longing for what they just lost and move on into God's future. Quit looking back and wishing for what you once had and instead look into the future that God is creating.

According to Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion* we are in the midst of the 4th Great Awakening. History tells us that we have had three great awakenings in our country. The First Three Great Awakenings occurred in the 1700s, the 1800s, and the early 1900s.

An Awakening is when we look at our structures and say, "this ain't working anymore." We look at our broken structures and we do something about it. Awakenings are times of great fear and excitement.

If we are really honest with ourselves we know that we are adopting different lifestyles than we once did. For instance, if we say that we attend church regularly only a few of us think that this means weekly. Most of us who believe that we attend worship regularly really mean that we are in worship services once to twice a month. Our lifestyles are changing and we are changing.

So what does this all mean? Once again we return to the biblical story that we read. The story we read occurs after Jesus has appeared to two men who were walking on a road to Emmaus after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus appears to these men as they walking away from Jerusalem and asks them questions about what they have seen. Jesus listens to their responses and then he eats with them. As they eat together they recognize that he is the Christ.

The Session of this church meets again today to continue our discussion about what God is calling us into. At our meeting last month we discerned that God is calling us into "Making Connections." Today we are going to talk about what this might mean. I want to turn back to Bass' book and let her offer us an idea that we may be able to build on.

p. 264. (Story of finding community at a local farmer's market)

She then asks what we must do to prepare for spiritual awakening. She says that there are 4 ways that we can prepare. First, we prepare by reading the texts of our faith. For us, the text I think we read over and over is the text I just referenced, the story of Jesus coming upon the two men walking to Emmaus. So the first action to prepare for awakening is to read our Biblical stories with fresh eyes.

The second act that we are invited to engage in are two practices of faith. The first is prayer and the second is the offering of hospitality to others. So we pray and we offer hospitality to others.

The third act according to Bass to prepare for spiritual awakening is to have fun. Have fun. Play games. Go for hikes. Join in with others in a meal.

So to prepare for spiritual awakening we read our biblical stories, we pray, we help others, and we have fun. And the fourth action, according to Bass, is to show up and participate. Don't be a spectator.

(Tell story from Saturday night about how the church and preschool came together on a fund raiser for a church member and teacher which raised \$2500 for her expenses)

Some may be fretting that the biggest growing category of religious expression is “None of the Above.” I actually think that those of us inside the church are called to partner with folks in the “None of the Above” category and develop relationships with one another and carry out God’s will together.

God is calling us into some very important ministry opportunities. You are invited to come along and trust God in this journey. AMEN.

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-<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

-Bass, Diana Butler, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, HarperOne, 2012.

-Text: Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11

-Given: May 17, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)