

Faces Firmly Fixed: Keeping House

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 11:14-26

Driving out demons by the finger of God. That's an interesting phrase, and an important one if you want to understand Jesus' announcement. Jesus is quoting Exodus 8:19. Exodus 8 is in the middle of the story of the ten plagues. If you remember, in the first couple of plagues, Moses would perform a sign and Pharaoh's magicians would perform the same miracle, the same sign. They caused their staff to turn into a snake. They made water turn to blood. They summoned frogs. But in the fourth plague, the plague of gnats, Moses strikes the ground and gnats arise from the dust of the earth. The servants of Pharaoh can't duplicate that sign. They say to Pharaoh: "*This is the finger of God!*" You see the relevance of the quote? Jesus is saying: "Just as Moses was the true servant of God and Pharaoh's magicians were fakes, so my miracles show that the finger of God has come among you, and your followers are like Pharaoh's magicians!" "I am like Moses. I will lead people on a new Exodus. There will be a new Passover feast, and there will be a new Passover lamb sacrificed to set you free. God defeated Pharaoh through Moses; he will defeat Satan through me." So with that little reference to the finger of God, Jesus hints that he will bring enormous change.

When it comes to faith commitment in 21st century America, everyone talks about the Nones. Have you heard that word? Dave Bast mentioned it last week. If you do any reading at all about religious trends you hear about the rise of the Nones. Who are the Nones? We are not talking about convent dwellers, we are talking about people who take a religious survey and when they come to the question that asks about what religion they follow, they fill in a box that says "None." I have no religious affiliation. I am not Catholic. I am not Orthodox. I am not Protestant. Me? Religious commitments? None.

People talk about the Nones because they are the fastest growing religious demographic. The Pew Center for research is one of the most reliable places for research on faith trends. They took a survey in 2007 and found that 16% of adults said they had no religious commitment. So in 2007, 16% of American adults were Nones. In just 7 years that number went up 7%. Now, 23% of American adults identify as Nones. That number is mirrored by the number of American adults who no longer identify with Christianity. The number of people who identified themselves as Christians on the Pew surveys fell 7%. Seven is a little number. Let me put that number in terms of people. In just 7 years, 19.2 million American adults stopped calling themselves Christian. In just 7 years, 19.2 million adults started to call themselves Nones. To put that in perspective: that's more than the population of Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa combined.

Let's be clear about what a None actually is. A None is someone without religious commitment. That doesn't necessarily mean they are a person without any religious belief. Some Nones are atheists and agnostics, but many Nones are people who believe in God, and who might even say they believe the Bible, but they just don't connect those beliefs with practices and habits and institutional commitments. They might pray once in a while, go to the occasional worship service, like the occasional religious meme on Instagram, but there's no center to it. To put it in terms of our passage, for many Nones, it's not that they are against Jesus, they are just not for him. It's not that they are hostile to Jesus, they just aren't gathering with him.

This trend doesn't just show up in statistics. Pastors see this trend on the ground. Talk to any pastor. Religious commitment, religious participation, is waning. As people grow in affluence there are more and more options open to them on a weekend. Weekend getaways. Cheap flights to warm places. Cool concerts! Theater! Sporting events! Youth sports, music commitments, all of these take time and energy. Many of them demand regular participation. Pretty soon there isn't much room for the commitments and practices of faith. That's how people drift towards becoming Nones. As he walks towards Jerusalem, Jesus doesn't drift. He firmly fixes his faith on the cross *where he will give up everything* for us and our salvation, And Jesus has some fairly firm words for Nones and for all those who try to make their faith a kind of sidebar to their life. *He says it doesn't work.* He compares our life to a house. When Jesus comes into your house, when you receive God's word and his Spirit works in you, the evil is driven out. But after the evil leaves, if you just leave your house empty, if you fail to fill that house with the commitments and practices of faith, if your house is unguarded by the commitments and practices of this community, your house is vulnerable. The same Spirit you thought you'd cast out will return with seven other Spirits more wicked than himself and they will start to party and pretty soon the place will be trashed.

It reminds me of John Updike's 1996 novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. The novel traces four generations of the Wilmot family, and it's all about their relationship to faith. More broadly, it's about America's relationship to faith in the 20th century. The story starts in 1910 in Paterson, New Jersey. It starts with the family patriarch, Clarence Wilmot. Clarence is a Presbyterian preacher who loses his faith. He quits the ministry and becomes a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman. What a perfect image for the drift of 20th century faith: replacing God with human knowledge. Clarence's children drift from faith. His son Teddy becomes a Postman and lives a dull life. Clarence's granddaughter Elsie is a great beauty. She becomes a movie star. She hangs out with Clark Gable and Gary Cooper. Her life is glamorous and full of stuff, but empty. Elsie has one son named Clark. She doesn't pay much attention to Clark. The house of Clark's life is spiritually empty. He has few life commitments, let alone religious commitments. He works as a lift operator at a Colorado ski ranch. He's aimless until he meets a young woman named Hannah. Hannah promises Clark purpose and direction. She brings him to a religious community run by a charismatic figure named Jesse. The group has rigorous rules and regulations. These rules and regulations fill up every part of Clark's life and he gives himself over to this Cult. The book ends with Federal authorities coming to arrest the leader and the whole compound getting involved in a giant fire and burning to the ground. From faith, to emptiness, to fanaticism. The evil Spirit says, *'I will return to the house I left.'* *When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first.'*

The Nones make faith a kind of life-accessory. Like a hat that you put on when the mood strikes you. But Faith in Jesus is meant to fill your house. Faith in Jesus is meant to be one Holy passion filling all your frame. That's what Paul prays for us in Ephesians 3: *"I pray that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* When, instead of filling your whole house, faith becomes a cozy little room at the back of your house, a room where you go once in a while when you feel like it, well...bad things happen. That's the testimony of Jesus in this passage and that's the testimony of life. *We human beings are not meant to be half-hearted creatures, we are meant to burn – heart, soul, mind and strength all of it on fire with the Love of God.*

Here's where the Bible's view of who we are runs smack-dab into the modern version of a person. Our society will tell you that you are a choosing creature. Life is about maximizing your choices. Your life is an empty house and you get to choose what to put in it, how to furnish the place. No one can tell you what to put in your rooms. You get to decorate this house and the more cool stuff you have to choose from the better. Scripture says no, you are made to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. The love of God that is ours through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit is meant to fill up every room in the house! It's meant to shine through the open windows and flow out the front door. It's meant to fill you from the floor of your soul to the roof of your heart. It's meant to make you a new creation.

People mischaracterize life in Christ. The impression you get is that if you surrender your life to God you will become plain and dull. A mindless conformist. Give your life to Jesus and you will end up looking like one of those suburbs with row upon row of identical houses. This is false. The truth is: *Gloria Dei homo vivens*. That's something the church father Irenaeus said, way back in the second century. It means the glory of God is a human being fully alive. When Christ fills you, when he fully inhabits your house, he makes you fully alive. When Christ fills the scientist, she becomes more joyful and curious. When Christ fills the artist, he becomes more creative. When Christ fills the nurse, she becomes more patient. When Christ fills the entrepreneur, he dreams bigger. When Christ fills the lawyer, she becomes more passionate for justice. *Gloria Dei Homo vivens*. Let God fill your house and you will shine.

How do you keep your house filled with God? There are lots of ways. All the ancient disciplines of faith help. Prayer, service, regular worship attendance, family devotions, personal devotions, personal study – all these are ways in which we open up every door of our house to the life-giving Spirit. On Christian education Sunday, we should say that Christian schools are terrific tools for this too. For more than a hundred years we've had these institutions which show our children that Christ is their Savior, and we teach them that He is Lord of every part of their life. Jesus isn't simply the Lord of a little back room; he's Lord of their whole house, every subject, every discipline, every hobby, every passion, every relationship. Every day in those schools teachers and principals and staff workers and aids and chaplains and coaches are working to help children discover their gifts and talents and passions and then to make sure that their whole life is set on fire with the love of God. *Gloria Dei Homo vivens*.

A couple of weeks ago I spent a Wednesday afternoon doing spoken exams for students at Calvin seminary. It was fun. Each of the students was very different, but all of them had the fire for ministry in them. One of them works in the prison ministry at Handlon prison. He'd never done prison ministry before he got to Calvin, but in seminary someone got him involved and he started meeting the prisoners there and he loved it. We started our interview with him by asking about that ministry, and let's just say he came alive. His nervousness about the exam dropped away, he leaned forward in his seat, he gushed, he told one story after another, he got emotional, he couldn't wait to tell us about how much he loved his work. The joy of God filled his whole house. When he talked he wasn't dull, he wasn't forced into some gray box of conformity, he was a man fully alive!!! *Gloria Dei Homo Vivens*.

This Lent, as you walk beside Jesus on the way to Calvary, as you watch him give all of himself for you, may you open up every room in your life so that he can make you fully alive.