

# “Attention-Deficit Churchians”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

May 22, 2022<sup>1</sup>--Sixth Sunday in Eastertide

## Matthew 21:23-32 (New International Version)

<sup>23</sup> Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>25</sup> John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’” <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

<sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

<sup>29</sup> “‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup> “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Eldorus Emerson Fancher was my great-grandfather. Eldorus was a blacksmith in St. Louis, Missouri in the late 1800s. There aren’t many blacksmith shops around anymore. Why? Because of the internal combustion engine. Over a century ago the motorcar slowly but surely supplanted the horse and carriage, and the truck replaced the horse-drawn wagon. Blacksmiths who remained resolutely focused on shoeing horses lost out to those who began to learn mechanical skills related to motorized vehicles. Progressive-thinking blacksmith shops became repair garages. Old-fashioned blacksmith shops, firmly rooted the ways of days-gone-by, lost their relevance and faded away.

The Christian Church is a glorious, productive body when it looks through a window and doesn’t see its own reflection in the glass but sees outside to a world of opportunity waiting and begging to be redeemed to God’s sake. But the temptation of any institution is to become so focused on its own well-being that it forgets why it came into being in the first place. Throughout his ministry Jesus fought that temptation—he had battles with headquarters, with the home office, with “corporate.” His adversary: the religious officials of the Jerusalem Temple.

Picture the scene: Jesus was sitting in some alcove in the great Temple of Jerusalem. He has pulled aside his disciples so he could speak to them, and some other

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<sup>1</sup> Modified from my sermon of the same title originally preached September 29, 2002.

folks in the area stopped to listen as Jesus shared some eternal truth revealed in the Torah (the Hebrew scriptures). As Jesus taught, the Temple's officials scurried toward him. Interrupting his lesson, they called out, "Jesus, who said you could do this? Are you new on the faculty here at the temple? Are you on staff? Do you have privileges here? And where do you get the idea that anything you say is authoritative and worthy of being uttered in this magnificent and holy place?"

Let's see: they asked him five questions. He answered with a question of his own. "Tell me," Jesus began. "Undoubtedly you have heard of my late cousin John, the traveling preacher who urged baptism as a means of repenting of sinful living. Was the power of the baptism John proclaimed a power that came from God, or did John just make it up?"

The Temple officials huddled to think through this startling question. "Let's see, if we answer that God inspired John to baptize people as a sign of repentance, then Jesus will ask why we had him killed instead of supporting him. But we can't that John just made up that baptism gimmick on his own. If that word got out, temple membership will toss us out of office because they're convinced that John was a God-inspired prophet. So let's play it safe."

The chief priest and elders turned back to Jesus. The high priest spoke for his colleagues. "We've determined that we cannot tell *you* where John's authority came from."

"Fair enough," Jesus replied. "And since it's obvious that it wouldn't change your opinion of me, I've determined that I cannot tell *you* where my authority comes from, either."

What was going on in this little stand-off? A power struggle? A theological controversy? I think the chief priests and elders were more interested in preserving the Temple and the way they'd always done things there than they were interested in attuning their hearts and minds to the possibility that God, in infinite creativity, might actually try something new from time to time. They were well versed in God's *promise* of a Messiah... but to imagine that God would actually send the Messiah – that was inconceivable to the chief priests and elders. They couldn't envision their community of faith living with changed circumstances.

And friends, may I gently caution you that we may be closer to the chief priests and elders than we realize! The Christian Church, we Protestant Christians, we Presbyterian Protestants, we Rocky River Presbyterians – what if we are more concerned with preserving the church we *know* than we are interested in making the church what God *needs it to be*?

You may wonder how some folks try to preserve the church they know?

- They make sure their style of worship is exactly the same next year as it was one year ago and ten years ago and fifty years ago.
- To plan next year's church calendar they look at last year's church calendar, figuring they have to do such-and-such because they've *always* done such-and-such.
- They count on the same people to do the same things every time.

That's how people "preserve" a church... like in formaldehyde – it never changes, but it's not alive and growing, either.

Is that *all* bad? Of course not. If it weren't for tradition, the Christian Church would not have survived its first generation. We have to pass along to those who follow some of the practices that were handed down to us. But imagine tradition gone mad:

- Imagine people building a new church and insisting that they install hitching posts, because their grandparents' church in Pennsylvania had them, and their parents' church in southern Ohio had them, too.
- Imagine good church-going folk insisting that they hear the scriptures only in Hebrew and Greek because those are the languages they were written in, even though about the only words they'd probably recognize would be "*Yahweh*" and "*shalom*," and even though wonderful English translations are available.
- Imagine church members collecting money to send someone overseas as a missionary, but insisting that the missionary travel by train and steamship because that's the way it was done during the great missionary movement of the late 1800s.
- Imagine asking our Sunday school teachers to illustrate their Bible stories using felt boards. (If you don't know what a felt board is, that's good!)

Oh, to preserve tradition maybe we should do away with air conditioning and gas heat and electric lights and... well, okay, maybe the church has learned to change with the times in some areas of its life.

But change the appearance of a worship space by adding artwork? Allow ordinary laypeople to lead worship? Change the committee structure and the tasks that various groups do in the church? Do away with some programs and add others? Actively invite friends who don't go to any church to come in here and see what it means, what it feels like, to give some of their time each week to focus just on God?

Beware! That sort of behavior would change a church like ours. It would make some things different. For instance, when new members join this church we no longer know everyone. (News flash: as it is, most of us don't know *everybody* in the church!)

It could be said that some American Protestant Christian congregations have lost their focus, paying too much attention to the wrong things. We have an attention deficit that has caused us to become "Churchians" instead of Christians. "Churchians" worship the congregation they know and love. They don't want to change anything. Why? Because the church has become their idol. Their goal in the church is to preserve the church. Do you know any "Churchians"? Do you live with one? Do you see one in the mirror?

Well, then, what are "Christians?" (I know, that's a bizarre question to ask in church.) What are "Christians"? Christians are people whose goal is to serve Jesus Christ—"Christ..." "Christians..." get it? Christians want what Jesus wants. Christians live like Jesus lived – and I don't mean like wearing tunics and walking everywhere.

When you're a Christian, you live like Jesus by expecting God to work through your life, by practicing unconditional acceptance, and forgiveness, and love – by practicing and practicing and practicing! Christians live like Jesus by "trying on" his approach to life: obedient to God, focused on the needs of others, committed to making

sure one's spirit is healthy and growing so it remains a source of strength and guidance. When you're a Christian you recognize that God may actually try something new, something different, something extraordinary in your life!

Remember Jesus' parable about the two sons? A father asks one son to do a chore. "No way!" the son says and storms off, but later he has a change of mind and goes back and does the chore. In the meantime, the father asks his other son to do that chore. "Sure thing, Pop!" he answers. But the other son blows it off, having no intention of ever getting around to it.

Jesus puts it to us: "Which son did what the father wanted?" Along with the chief priests and scribes who stood before Jesus we answer, "The first one." Then we ask ourselves, "Okay, we know the answer is 'the first one' – we've heard the story before – but why?" Because the first one did what his father desired. The first son did what was necessary even though he had to change his mind, change his plans, change what he was accustomed to doing so he could fulfill his father's wishes. True, the father was probably rattled by the first son's initial objection, but the boy's sense of obedience overcame his tendency toward defiance, and eventually he saw the benefit in doing what his father asked.

On the other hand, the second son was more interested in appearing to be "good" and "proper." "Why certainly, Father!" he must have said. But in his heart the second son had absolutely no intention of changing anything in his world in order to do what his father required.

Wouldn't it be nice for you and me to be like the first son? Okay, so we do a little kicking and screaming as our church faces the realities of this 21<sup>st</sup> century. God can put up with our obstreperousness when God sees in our hearts that we really want to do what God desires.

I love this church: this congregation, the Presbyterian family of churches, the Christian faith. You love it, too. And if we want it to continue to be a church, then we need to do what our Heavenly Father, through Jesus, has asked us to do. What job, what commission did Jesus give us? It was a "Great Commission." He said:

- We need to take ordinary people anywhere in the world and make them into disciples, followers, students of Jesus.
- We need to initiate them into the family of faith through baptism.
- We need to teach them to live the way Jesus taught.<sup>2</sup>

That's how we'll accomplish the chore God asked us to do. Now, we can sit here and say, "Amen! I believe it! Let's do it!" ...and then go home and do what we always do – sounds sort of like that second son, doesn't it?

But I pray that you'll sit here and realize that God's Holy Spirit is poking and prodding your reluctance to do what you've never done before – that God is provoking you to be open to trying something different, because that's what it takes to be a Christian – first, welcoming Jesus Christ into your life, then sharing Jesus Christ *in your life* with others.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:18-19