

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXVII, No. 1 (Issue 54) May 2019

Faithful in Mission: “What Does That Have to Do with Me?” A Look at the Church in America in Light of Matthew 25:14–30

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Abstract: The church in America has been losing many of her baptized members every year. This article aims to discuss the reasons why this generation has grown to be unfaithful by asking Noah, a 1.5 generation latinx millennial who grew up in church. Noah has loved God ever since he was young and had been very active in church too. Noah had a strong connection with God throughout his life until . . . he didn't. Going to church began to feel like a burden. I discuss in this article why I think this is happening to Noah and many other thousands of baptized members every year. I also discuss what does the church has to do with this new trend.

Introduction

It isn't news that the church in America has been losing many of her baptized members every year. But why? Why is this generation so unfaithful? I decided to ask Noah, a millennial who grew up in church. Noah has loved God with all his heart since he was young. He was very active in church too. Noah had a strong connection with God throughout his life until . . . he didn't. Going to church began to feel like a burden to Noah. He still went to church, but he found himself thinking about many other things while sitting on the pews. Was he beginning to become unfaithful? Or was the church unfaithful in its mission *to* him? I wonder. . .

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The sermon that Sunday was about the parable of the talents, “Well done, good



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and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master," heard Noah in a distant echo as he came back to earth. Noah's mind wandered as he asked himself some questions that made him feel SO guilty: "What does it even mean to be faithful? What does this have to do with me? To whom or what am I supposed to be faithful? Do I HAVE to be faithful? What would happen to me if I am not faithful? How can I tell if I am not being faithful? Is there a faithfulness meter?" The questions did not stop in his mind. They followed him to school, work, games, home, and even to the shower!

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I invite you today to help me try to answer some of these questions for poor, black-sheep, rebel, unfaithful Noah, who dares to question church and even the sermon! Shame on you Noah! (Did I say that out loud?)

What Does It Even Mean to Be Faithful?

The dictionary defines faithfulness as being loyal, reliable, constant, and true to the facts or the original. But what does it mean to be faithful in light of Christianity? Is it being reliable, constant, and true to the Word? The church? God? Our neighbors? Is faithfulness *not* to miss a Sunday worship service? What about Sunday School? How many Sundays can Noah miss before being counted with the *unfaithful*? If he comes back to church, is he part of the *faithful* again?

What Does This Have to Do with Me?

"In the parable of the talents, the master represents Jesus, the servants represent the believers and the talents represent the gifts that God has given to His children. The master entrusts his servants with a substantial amount of money as their capital. Each servant is given according to his business ability and each servant is expected to trade with it and make profit for his master," the sermon continued. Noah asks himself again, "What does that have to do with *me*?" as he silently stares at nothing.

See, Noah is a millennial, 1.5-generation latinx (yes, latinx can have names like "Noah" too), who is in college working toward his graduate degree. How is the parable of the talents relevant to him? He wants to be faithful to God and his church, but he doesn't find a connection between his actual life and the requirements of the faithful saints of his church.

One Point What?

One point five (1.5) generation latinx are individuals who migrated to the United States at 18 years of age or younger. They speak fluent Spanish and (almost) fluent English. The problem is that first-generation latinx who came to the United States after 18 years of age consider Noah and his 1.5 friends to be “gringo-wanna-be” because they speak English and learned the US culture. Noah does not really identify with first-generation latinx, because they consider 1.5s to be “*vende patria*” (pardon my Spanglish). Noah does not really identify with second-generation latinx, on the other hand, because of his “almost” fluent English. Second-gens constantly acknowledge the 1.5s’ accent and feel the “responsibility” to “help” them to perfect their English. Noah is left to be torn between these two worlds for his entire life. Could Noah be faithful in his attendance to church while having a hard time connecting with his church family?

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What Does It Even Mean to Be *Faithful* for a 1.5-Generation Latinx?

Help me here. Noah needs some answers! If being faithful equals coming to church, we are losing Noah. Church is not attractive to him anymore. The service in English is awesome, but it doesn’t connect him with his roots. The service in Spanish is awesome, but his kids get bored because they do not understand the language, plus their jokes do not seem to be funny for Noah anymore. “Is there a church for *me*? How am I supposed to be faithful to God and His church if the church is not being faithful to *me*?” asks Noah. Ouch. This Noah sure is a lost soul.

He likes the Wednesday night Bible studies in English, but he can’t “abandon” his first-gen *compatriotas* of the Spanish Bible group. He decides to make up an excuse and sneak into the English Bible study anyway. (How brave of him!) He walks into the Bible study in English, and they are talking about the sermon on Sunday. “We need to be faithful and reach out to our ‘neighbors of color,’” says someone. To which the leader responds: “I do not see color. . . . we are all equal” (Noah rolls his eyes, as this is one of the most common racist sayings of all times).

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Rough start? What would *you* tell Noah?

To Whom or What Am I Supposed to Be Faithful?

Before you say something to poor, black-sheep, rebel, unfaithful Noah, who dares to question church and even the sermons, you must know that Noah is really . . . *me*. The story of Noah is really my story. I began to question many things and ask myself if the decline in faithfulness in the church in America, which is losing thousands of souls every year, is really due to the unfaithfulness of the church itself. “Why is the church not paying attention to *me*? Why does it not realize how different *I* am and how different *my* needs are?”

I thought, “Poor, black-sheep, rebel, unfaithful church who dares to ignore 1.5-generation millennial latinx even in its sermons!” Then it hit me. . . It is *I* who needs to be faithful to my *calling of faith and love* even in the midst of identity crisis or any other crisis, for crying out loud!

Faithful to God in Faith

I know this subtitle sounds redundant, but focus! Going back to Matthew 25 and the parable of the talents, the kingdom of heaven is “like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability” (vv. 14–15). (Don’t go “Noah” on me. Come back to earth!) One of the talents or gifts that we receive from Jesus is *faith*. Martin Luther, in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed, reminds us that the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel. He calls us *to faith* in Christ and gives us a new identity in our Baptism so that the old Adam (and old Noemí), who was only focused on his *own* needs, could now look up and believe in (something other than his needs) the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins. By faith you and I receive the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life every time we attend church, whether in English or Spanish or Sign Language.

Faithful to God in Love

The talents gifted to us by God also include intellectual and physical abilities, as well as material possessions. But the one talent I am more fond of is the *opportunities* that God provides us to use these other talents to serve Him as we serve our neighbor. This is called *love*. The love that we received from God through Jesus in the Sacraments becomes active in our faith, as our mouths proclaim that Jesus is God and our hands *serve* our neighbors.

Do I HAVE to Be Faithful? What Would Happen If I Am Not Faithful?

See, the master in Matthew 25 expected his employees to trade with the capital he gave them and make profits for his business. The first two servants gained 100% of profits for their master. Our Master expects us to be faithful, full of faith, so we can bear fruit. As Christians, we are the salt that God shook through the world. We are the light that dares to enter darkness. We are to live for Christ as we live for our neighbor. The new Adam (and new Noemí) can now live outside himself and be faithful to the calling of faith in Christ and love for his neighbor, strengthened with the Blood and Body of the Covenant.

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God's kingdom cannot be stopped. If we decide to be unfaithful and ignore our new identity, given to us in our Baptism, becoming negligent or indifferent to the *opportunities* that God places in front of us to love and serve our neighbor (because we are full of ourselves), He will give those opportunities to someone else. The last servant in Matthew 25 did just that. He said: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours" (Mt 25:24–25). What happened to the negligent servant will happen to those who hide their opportunities. His master told the negligent servant: "you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. . . . And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 25:27–30). God's kingdom cannot and will not be stopped. If we decide to allow our circumstances to become an excuse to be unfaithful and negligent to the opportunities that God places in front of us to expand His Kingdom, He will give those opportunities to someone else. Period.

How Can I Tell If I Am Not Being Faithful? Is There a Faithfulness Meter?

Yes, there is a faithfulness meter. His name is Jesus. You must be thinking: "If Jesus is who I need to compare with, I am SO losing at this faithfulness thing." Well, it is true. Jesus is the only one who is faithful, indeed. He is the only one who is perfect. In Him only, through the faith received and strengthened in our Baptism and the Sacraments, you and I can say we ARE faithful. Not because of how awesome

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we are, but because He paid it all—“All to Him I owe.” (I know you are singing the hymn in your head. Come back!) He was and is faithful so that we, too, can face God in His earned faithfulness.

So, What Does This Have to Do with Me?

Yes, I know that going or not going to church does not prove that one is being or not being faithful in one’s Christian life, but the gifts of Absolution and the Lord’s Supper that are offered in church are necessary for our lives of faithfulness. In any case, we are losing Noah and many others. As the Church, the Body of Christ, we still have quite a way to walk to respond to the opportunities that God is placing in front of the new face of the church in America. We need to find ways to better serve the 1.5-millennial latinx and all of the other specific generation and ethnic groups. And let’s NOT start talking about the intersectionality that most of us browns face daily, even in the church.

If we want to stop the church in America from losing many of her baptized members every year, maybe we need to teach more about growing aware of our dependence on God too. He calls us through the Word and Sacraments and reminds us that we cannot be faithful on our own. Through His Means of Grace, we receive forgiveness of sin and, along with it, the faith to do His will. God reminds us in His Word that because of our dependence on Him and the victory won on the cross, we can fulfill our responsibility of bearing fruits of faith and love toward God and our neighbors.

“And Noah?” you may ask. If you asked that, it is because you were so distracted that you missed a couple of paragraphs up. Read it again. As for me, I am SO thankful that my Master opened my eyes and led me back to the Truth. My eyes do not need to be on what the church does or does not do. My eyes are on Christ, *el autor y consumidor de mi fe*. As for you, don’t be so hard on the black-sheep Noahs. They can end up being a smart, talented deaconess who got a *little* distracted. . .

Coram deo, coram mundo.

Amén.