

Dear Friends in Christ,

Sometimes I listen to NPR in the morning. It wakes me up by getting my blood boiling. You might say, "Wouldn't coffee be a better option?" I reply, "Coffee isn't bitter enough, but NPR is."

They recently reported on data collected from the Public Religion Research Institute. I had never heard of the institute before (I prefer getting my data from anecdotes and Synodical officials) (if you can't tell, I'm being sarcastic.). You can read the new report entitled "Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval" at prii.org.

Here are the highlights of the study - 16% of Americans say that religion is the most important thing in their life. It was 20% a decade ago. This makes sense - our country is becoming less and less religious. Further, 38% of Black Protestants and 42% of White Evangelical Protestants say that religion is the most important thing in their life. Like it or not, the Missouri Synod is demographically lumped in with White Evangelical Protestants. Statistically, then, less than half our members think that church is the most important thing in their life. I could've guessed that, but it's still sad reading.

Here's another statistic - only 45% of church goers (less than half!) agree that congregations should get involved in social issues, even if it's going to be difficult. Black Protestants, at 63%, are the only demographic with a majority of members who agree that the church should get involved in social issues.

You should always take statistics with a grain of salt. 73% of statistics are made up (including this one). But this research confirms what's already observable - our loves are out of whack.

Here's what I mean - St. Augustine (not the grass or the town, but rather the Bishop of Hippo, not the large semiaquatic mammal but the town) spoke of rightly ordered love. In his book *On Christian Love*, he writes - "But living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things: to love things, that is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally."

Time to do some repenting, spring cleaning, and rightly ordering your loves. When you don't have your loves in order, your life is a mess. First and foremost, love God. Jesus confirms that this is the greatest commandment - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all you remind and with all your strength" (Mk 12:30). All other loves come after this one. God is the most important. Period. You get that right, and things start

to fall into place. Not having God first is idolatry. Don't trust in princes, pastors, or others. Trust in God, and in God alone.

Second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Where to start with "neighbor?" Here, the order varies by person. If you're married, your spouse comes first, then your kids, then others. If you're a child, it starts with your parents. It's concentric circles. It's impossible to show as much love to a person living on the other side of the globe as it is to love the people who are right next to you. So put the phones down. Staring out your phone says, "I'd rather be somewhere else." Put the phones down, have dinner with your family or your neighbors, look them in the eyes, and love them by taking them to church. That's getting your priorities straight. And when your priorities are straight, things start to become clear.

And here's what's clear - church is important. God established the church on earth because He loves us. Here and nowhere else do you eat and drink Christ's body and blood. Do we have anything to say about social issues? You betcha. We have a ton to say, and we're going to say it because we love God and we love our neighbors. To not speak would be unloving. Is it difficult? Of course. But only difficult things are worth doing. And so God became a man and died for us. It's hard work. But after you plant the vineyard, you get to enjoy the wine with God and your neighbor.

In Christ,

Pastor