

“Don’t Settle for Decaffeinated Christianity”
A Sermon by the Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie
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Last Friday, I took my wife, Mims, out to dinner to celebrate her birthday. We had a wonderful dinner and conversation, and after dessert we ordered two cups of decaf cappuccino. Decaffeinated coffee looks like, smells like, and even tastes like regular coffee, but it doesn’t energize, stimulate or perk you up. Decaffeinated coffee won’t keep you awake at night.

Bishop Michael Marshall, the former Bishop of Woolich, head of Evangelism for the Church of England and Rector of Trinity Church, Sloane Square in London, notes that many of us have bought into what he calls “decaffeinated Christianity.” It’s a facsimile of faith that looks like, smells like, and even feels like regular Christianity, but it won’t keep you awake at night.

Decaffeinated Christianity won’t keep you up at night worrying about how you can and should care for the poor and the needy and for people living on the streets of America, who feel little hope, live in desperation. It won’t cause you to wonder what we can and should do to support them. It won’t ask you to tithe instead of tip God. It won’t ask us to attend church each Sunday, read our Bible or even pray. No what my old friend Bishop Marshall says makes decaffeinated Christianity so attractive is that it is guaranteed not to keep us awake at night.

Dr. Lucile Pearson of Clemson University wrote an essay a number of years ago, and sociologists at Stanford, New York University and other major well-known colleges across the country have kept her study current. Dr. Pearson took that world population of seven billion people and reduced it to a microcosm of a hundred people while keeping the same parameters.

In other words, if the world’s population were shrunk but kept in scale, sixty people would come from Asia, fifteen would come from Africa and only five would come from North America. Just seven would have a college education. Thirty-three would be Christian and sixty-seven would be non-Christian. Of the sixty-seven non-Christian, twenty-two would be Muslim, twelve would be Hindu and twelve would be Nones – meaning they have no identifiable religion at all.

And get a load of this. If you shrunk the world’s population to a hundred persons, forty-eight of them would live on less than two dollars a day. Three and a half billion people survive on \$700 or less a year. That means fifty out of the hundred would be malnourished, having no reliable regular access to food or clean drinking water. Fifteen would be suffering from severe malnutrition and one would be dying – representing 70 million people around the world.

This morning as we awoke, there were over half a million homeless people living on the streets of America and 50,000 of them are children under the age of twelve. I won’t bore you with more statistics, but the question is how are you and I going to operate in a world like this where so many suffer and hurt and are in need of our love and support, compassion and care?

Bishop Marshall notes that the sad thing about decaffeinated Christianity is that it doesn't make up come alive. It leaves us feeling sluggish about our faith and doesn't produce Christ-like behavior because it has none of the power of real Christianity. Decaf faith doesn't put steel in our spine when we're undergoing a trial and it's not contagious. It doesn't even inspire our own children to want to emulate our faith, because it's not a saving faith, a transforming faith, an energizing faith that leads us to feed hungry bodies and hungry souls.

Decaffeinated Christianity has no get up and go. It's what the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." It's a kind of faith that was anathema to Jesus. His whole ministry was centered around caring for people who were on the margins of society, struggling, needy and oppressed. When Jesus began his ministry, he entered the synagogue in Nazareth. He was a distinguished guest who had returned home. It was the custom back then that if a distinguished guest entered the synagogue, he would be invited to read from the scriptures and comment upon them. So, Jesus asked them to unroll the scroll of the book of Isaiah, and he read from 61st chapter:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. Now a rabbi always gave his most definitive teaching while sitting down. The word "cathedra" is the Latin word for chair, and its where we get the word "cathedral" where the Bishop sits to gives his or her most definitive teaching, and it is where we also get the word for a professor's "chair" at a university. So, Jesus sat down and said, "Today, this teaching has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It was as if lightning was unleashed in the synagogue. At first "all spoke well of him and were amazed..." But we read that they later became angry and escorted him out of the synagogue, and they tried to throw him off a nearby cliff. After all, Jesus had suggested that he was the Messiah, God's Son, and that the prophet's words had been fulfilled in their presence that day. God was turning the tables and lifting up the poor and the needy and addressing their concerns.

Do you know why decaffeinated Christianity is so popular and why we have it? It's because we have taken the Holy Spirit out of our religion. A spiritless faith ensures that you and I won't be seen as religious fanatics. Nothing frightens Episcopalians more than the thought that someone might think that they are too religious. Do you recall that old bumper sticker which read, "If you were charged with being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" We're attracted to decaffeinated Christianity because it doesn't ask much of us. We are never asked to take a stand based on what we believe or to surrender our prejudices or attend church each

Sunday and humble ourselves before God. “Thank you, Pastor, just another cup of decaf for my family and me.”

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard said, “As Christians, we play on the floor like children with chemistry sets, not knowing the power we hold in our hands. For if that power should ever come together, we wouldn’t be wise to be wearing a straw hat or velvet hat like we wear to church but we ought to wear crash helmets or construction helmets because the power of God is so strong that we would need something to protect ourselves from it.”

The problem with decaffeinated Christianity is that doesn’t challenge us. It doesn’t challenge us to roll up our sleeves and care for the poor and needy or to change the things that produce poverty, illiteracy and lead to mass incarceration. Decaffeinated Christianity doesn’t challenge us to honor the Sabbath, transform our spending or reallocate our time. Decaf faith doesn’t lead us to spend some time with God each morning and say, “Lord, fill me with your life-giving Spirit. Use me this day to touch someone’s life. Help me to be generous, forgiving, patient and kind. Put me to work in your service this day.” No, decaffeinated faith doesn’t do any of that.

Do you remember that little tax collector named Zacchaeus? He climbed a sycamore tree to get a bird’s eye view of Jesus. Jesus spotted Zacchaeus and told him to come down from the tree and invited himself over to Zacchaeus’ house for dinner that night. That evening, Zacchaeus’ heart was touched by whatever Jesus shared with him and his whole life was altered. Greed was converted into generosity. Past dishonesty was replaced with restitution. Jesus transformed Zacchaeus, and the change brought about in Zacchaeus’s behavior became the talk of the town. You see Zacchaeus developed a living faith, a saving faith, a faith with some get up and go in it, and when we develop such a faith, God puts our faith to use to touch the lives of everyone around us. Wouldn’t you like such a faith?

G.K. Chesterton famously said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” If anyone is put off by Christians not living up to their ideals, I suggest that they really read the words of Jesus and put them into action. Don’t look to others to do that, look to yourself to do it boldly. And begin by finding someone or a few people who you really see doing that, and it will inspire you. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “The faith is not so much taught as it is caught.”

I close with a story. Will Willimon was the Chaplain at Duke University for many years. Perhaps some of you have heard him preach. One day, he received a phone call from an irate father, who was angry over what the father thought was Willimon’s undue influence over his daughter. You see her father was a doctor who had sent his daughter to Duke with the intention that she would become the third generation of doctors in their family. But after listening to Willimon’s sermons and taking a summer mission trip to Haiti, the young woman decided to dedicate three years of her life to serving as a missionary. The following exchange occurred over the phone:

Willimon: “Now just a minute. Didn’t you have her baptized?”

The father: “Well, yes, but we are Presbyterian.”

Willimon: “And didn’t you take her to Sunday school when she was little? You can’t deny that. She told me herself that you used to take her to Sunday school.”

The father: “Sure we did. But we never intended it to do any damage.”

Willimon: Well, she was messed up before we got her – baptized, Sunday-schooled, called. Don’t blame this on me. You were the one who started it. You should have thought about what you were doing before you had her baptized.”

Well, my friends, we need some real Christianity with some get up and go to pick us up and not leave us sluggish and half asleep in our faith. Let me be your spiritual barista. May I pour you a cup of faith? What would you like – decaf or the real thing? The choice is yours to make. Amen.