

“Choosing The Alternative Menu”

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2 Peter 1:1-11

“I, Simon Peter, am a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ. I write this to you whose experience with God is as life-changing as ours, all due to our God’s straight dealing and the intervention of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you many times over as you deepen in your experience with God and Jesus, our Master.

Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you—your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by desire.

So don’t lose a minute in building on what you’ve been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus. Without these qualities you can’t see what’s right before you, oblivious that your old sinful life has been wiped off the books.

So, friends, confirm God’s invitation to you, his choice of you. Don’t put it off; do it now. Do this, and you’ll have your life on a firm footing, the streets paved and the way wide open into the eternal kingdom of our Master and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Alternative menus, if you’ve ever gone out to eat in a restaurant you’ve probably seen them and maybe even if you’ve ordered from them. They offer different choices from the normal dishes you might dine on when you go out to eat. Alternative menus usually offer you things that are low fat, low-sodium, low-carb, low calorie. I have determined that sometimes what is really being referred to is low-flavour. Yet these menus appeared in restaurants over the last number of years because customers have demanded them. People want alternative choices.

So I found it interesting this past week, when I came across a news release from the Restaurant Association of Canada that reported how people just aren’t choosing to eat the alternative menu items. It was noted how even though people want to have these different choices, when it comes right down to it, even though these alternatives may be better from a nutritional standpoint, people will stick to what they know and order what they crave. We want the established menu. Otherwise maybe you’ll do what I do, have the salad and then stop somewhere and grab a bag of Doritos for dessert!

The desire for alternatives in life is a funny thing.

Many people in our world are looking for alternatives. Women and men not only want alternatives on the restaurant menu but in other places too. People want alternatives because they know that things in their lives just don't seem to be everything they could be -but what alternatives are we looking for?

I think that for many years now the spiritual quests of a lot of individuals have been rooted in the desire for an alternative. People have been looking for something different. People have been looking for a way of life to call their own by ordering off of what a colleague of mine calls a "cultural menu of religiosity." For many years now, people have purchased books, watched movies and now visit internet sites and that try to paint a picture for people of an alternate lifestyle. The thing is that this cultural menu has now been around so long that it has become the established menu. It's mainstream. Further, it's a menu that gives people a multitude of choices of the things they crave. At its basest level it's a religion of consumerism that feeds the human appetite.

We see celebrities endorsing this menu. In their desire to be seen as trendsetting, hip and different, they are devoting themselves to alternatives because they do not want to accept anything established or traditional. They want an image that is seen to be on the cutting edge of this new menu. It's a way of defining one's self. The ingredients on this menu aren't really new. It usually offers some mysticism, a little eroticism, a bit of superstition, a bag full of materialism and a great deal of individualism and personal achievement. As all these ingredients weave their way through the world to the point that the way people think and behave is transformed. It becomes at its heart, a religion.

That's something religion does, it conditions and shapes behavior. Take a look at your life and look at what shapes your behavior. What has conditioned you to act a certain way? That is where you will find your religion. What we now have is "designer religion" that feeds the appetites of what some experts call a "designer culture." Even though we may think we live in a diverse and pluralistic world, there is still a dominant culture with a singular message. It's a culture that dictates THE message that we need to be different, where individuals have to stand out, where an individual has to assert him or herself and their own right and privilege to make up a faith as they go, something that is unique for themselves.

But often, the dark side of this search is that it is ultimately designed to provide a structure for a pleasure seeking world. It is a movement designed to make us feel good about ourselves and

justify a materialistic lifestyle. It makes objects out of everything -even people. There is no thing that and no one who cannot be bought and sold for personal pleasure. This designer religion is one that works as long as you've got the money.

Recently I was listening to a baseball analyst who was reflecting on a conversation he was having with Omar Vizquel. As some of you know, Vizquel played last season with the Toronto Blue Jays and after a long career many feel he is destined for the Hall of Fame. Vizquel was explaining a conversation he was having with some younger players, where he was trying to impress upon them that they should not treat baseball as "a vehicle to a lifestyle." Younger players should not see baseball as a way to make a lot of money to buy and do the things they wanted to in life. Although a pro baseball salary could afford them certain luxuries, Vizquel wanted the younger players to value the game for what they could contribute to its betterment and its enjoyment, for teammates, family, fans. His point was that ultimately if they did those things they would have deeper, more meaningful careers and lives. Vizquel wanted the younger players to consider an alternative.

You see, there is this mainstream belief that preaches "as long as you've got the money," there are limitless possibilities when it comes to the experiences you can have that are now considered "spiritual" or "religious." Ways where you can buy some "heaven on earth." Of course when people and nations run out of money, or find themselves running deeper and deeper in debt, sooner or later we are forced to consider alternatives. The mainstream menu starts to cost us too much. And besides, there are a lot of people out there who could never afford to eat off this menu to begin with (or they have been bearing the cost so others can).

In a society where individuals have become so consumed with their own needs and material fulfillment and in a world where more and more people are treated as objects, I believe that in many ways the church is now the alternative menu as it really was during the earliest days of Christianity. The Christian faith is one that that calls people into a different lifestyle that focuses not on the fulfillment of individual pleasures, but on mutual relationships that begin with our rightness with God. The God of the Bible uses covenant relationships in order to bring individuals into communal relationships.

In our text from 2 Peter the author reminds us that being followers of Jesus means that we are different. We are called to live differently. Where the most important aspect of our living is not individual or material fulfillment, it's not the "world corrupted by desire" as 2 Peter puts it. The

most important thing in the life of a Christian is to know love. It's no longer about the "love of pleasure" it's about the pleasure of love.

And the author of 2 Peter gives us a list of virtues, let's call them ingredients that help us on our way to the pleasure of love. Our translation this morning reads that we are to support our faith with good character and that good character leads to spiritual understanding, spiritual understanding leads to alert discipline, alert discipline brings us to passionate patience, passionate patience to reverent wonder, reverent wonder to warm friendliness, and this warm friendliness to generous love. The goal here is love. And to be clear it's not the love of things, it is the love of people. The word in the Greek that is used by the author to describe this love is "philia" –which is a brotherly or sisterly love.

What the author is referring to is the deeply personal and intimate relationship with God that can only be known in human community. This intimacy with God is something we share with each and every person around us. Faith is not something we find on our own, or achieve on our own, or buy for ourselves -a life of faith involves others not as objects but as people. That's what makes the church pure and simply, the body of Christ. The church is a network people that are reconciled and forgiven. We're not perfect, by any means, but we have what we need to make right our relationships with God and one another.

As we celebrate world communion Sunday, and we gather to receive the bread and the juice, we are acknowledging and choosing to eat off of an alternative menu along with 100's of millions of Christians around the globe. This is the menu of the new covenant of love we receive in Christ. Christianity remains the fastest growing religion in the world because every day new believers realize that following Jesus is a genuine alternative. Even to us in our secularized western world, the reality of the table of Christ is the possibility of an alternative to the life we know. For anyone whose deepest hunger in life is to live again, and live differently, this morning it begins at this table and we do it with Christian brothers and sisters in this sanctuary and with believers around the world.

I once read of a farmer who was an active lay leader in his church. He went to one of these church growth seminars where there were all these papers being presented about how to deal with the problem of people not coming to church and not attending church meetings. The farmer said, "I can't understand why we're doing this. I never go to a meeting of farmers to figure out how we're

going to get the cows to come to the trough. We simply provide them with the best of feed.” This is what God gives us in Jesus. God’s best life is our best chance at life.

My friends, ours is not the job of worrying about whether the world approves of the gospel. Our job is to give individuals in this world the gospel as an alternative to everything else they have been fed. The table of Christ is place of reconciliation where we start to take to heart some of the challenges that face us not only as individuals, but as communities and as fellow human beings, who hurt and suffer and feel pain and struggle like you do and like I do and like God does in Christ.

There’s a wonderful quote: “Jesus did not ask Peter to feed the giraffes, he asked him to feed the sheep.” He doesn’t want great, logical arguments, high above the heads of ordinary people, he wants a word that speaks to people and says if you’re hungry, if you are spiritually searching, if your heart is aching, if you are in need of a new relationship with God, then here is Christ Jesus.”

Amen.