

Dear members and friends of St. John,

"Imagine no religion – I wonder if you can." These are words from the hit song entitled *Imagine*, by John Lennon, of *The Beatles* fame. The lyrics continue with the inference that **religion causes war and hatred and suffering**, and that if religion were to go away, there would be a world of peace and harmony – "the unity of man."

Now if the song writer had included the word "false" in the phrase: "Imagine no **false** religion...," then I would be inclined to agree with him. But the idea that **Christianity causes war and hatred and suffering is ridiculous**. This comes from an unbelieving world that wants to discredit religion, and specifically, the Christian faith.

I was talking several years ago with a man that had immigrated from Northern Ireland. I asked him about the '**war**' that had raged on for years between Protestants and Catholics in his former country. He told me that the people fighting the 'war' never come to church. They use their so-called religious affiliation to stir-up hatred and mistrust in their neighborhoods, to incite people to support them financially in their 'holy war'. The man went on relate how he knew church-going Protestants and Catholics that were good friends, and that shared the love of Christ with each other. Once again, what people see from the outside and what's really happening on the inside are two different things.

But the notion that **false religion causes trouble in the world** is easy to document. In fact the Bible, in Romans chapter 8, explains it this way, "*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.* ⁶ *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.* ⁷ *For the mind that is set on the flesh is **hostile to God**, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.*" How many times have you been in a discussion with someone about a friend or loved one that refuses to come to church? I am frequently amazed at the things that I hear, even from good Christians. I hear about how loving and caring the unbeliever is; how many good things he does for the community or his neighbor. The implication is that if God is *really* good and *has compassion for all people*, He would allow the '*good unbelievers*' into heaven, even if they refuse the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, this is a false and dangerous notion that keeps coming back like a bad penny.

Part of the problem comes from within the Christian church. There are liberal Christian churches in America today that have **abandoned what the Bible teaches** and instead state that there are many paths to heaven – Jesus is only *one* way, not the only way. But St. Paul makes it clear: A person is either a believer in Jesus Christ and His atoning work on the cross for their sins, or the person is living in the 'flesh' and is outside the kingdom of God. Period. No exceptions. You see, hiding behind the façade of goodness, all unbelievers have an inner hostility toward God. We usually can't see it because people have spent a lifetime learning to hide their emotions and feelings. "*For*

the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God..” and everyone that is not born of the Spirit of God, is spiritually lost and living in the fleshly world.

This should have a major impact on how we see our family members, neighbors and friends that don't believe in Jesus Christ. We must see them as lost and headed for destruction. Even if they are model citizens – *especially* if they're model citizens. In the recesses of the minds of 'good' unbelievers is the thought that **if there is a god**, then he must recognize them for the 'good' things they do. Many of these people are secretly hoping to earn their way to heaven. The problem: *no one* can earn their way into heaven. It can't be done. We must take this seriously – their eternal destiny is at stake. But what can you do?

Well, you can **be the person that leads them to God's word**, because the Word provides all that is needed for salvation. Indeed, the Church was placed here by God to help the lost come to saving faith. How does that happen? First, the unbeliever needs to recognize that he or she is a sinner in the sight of God. Lutheran worship begins with the Law – God's Law to show people the helpless state of sin that they live in. There is no way out – no 'good deed' that will free them from the requirement of the Law. Next, the Church brings the sweet news of the Gospel to the soul that is dying for a lifeline - a way out of the pit that sin has dug for them. The Holy Spirit works with the Law and the message of the Gospel to bring the unbeliever to new life in Christ. Your family member or friend needs this lifeline – will you invite him or her to church?

“Imagine no religion – I wonder if you can.” I can. It's called **heaven**. It's what awaits you and me. It's what is available to your lost family member or friend. It's my prayer that you see your congregation as a place that brings this free gift to a community that desperately needs it. You are an important part of a much, much bigger picture. May God bless you as you carry out your calling in His Kingdom.

Pastor Travis