

Have you noticed that we live in an extreme society? We go to extremes in almost everything. We turn everything into “extreme this or extreme that.”

First it was hamburgers! Every time we went into the restaurant the boy or girl behind the counter started asking, “Do you want to super-size that?” “Would you like to Biggie Size that for an extra 39 cents?” We all said, “Yeah, sure why not?” And so we had it our own way, way too big, and way too fat. And by 1999 the statistics showed that 61 % of all Americans were overweight, and by 2002 the American Journal of Public Health published a study confirming that we are eating out more and more, where portion sizes have gotten larger and larger over the last twenty years.

Then it was Extreme Sports. Perhaps you have seen them on television, people jumping out of airplanes on snow boards, seeing how many back flips they can do from 10,000 feet without getting smashed on the ground. Or racing down a snow covered half-pipe track on a motorcycle, zigging and zagging all the way to the bottom in the fastest speed.

Extreme Sports naturally led to the Extreme Games, the X-Games. Complete, of course, with its own website, the 2004 Winter X-Games were held in Aspen, Colorado in January, and filled with people doing extreme things. In one event competitors were attempting to jump over a 90 foot gap in the ice on a motorcycle when one of the riders nearly lost his life. The report stated “it was the most exciting – and frightening – moment of the games.”

Then it was Extreme Makeover! In case you are not satisfied with your face, or your wardrobe, or who knows what else, just get an Extreme Makeover and you will be a new person, and you can win that man or that woman of your dreams, and find extreme love.

And it is Extreme Dating! Found on the FOX network, Extreme Dating gives you a chance to watch hot young people talk about love and dating, go on extreme dates, and do extreme things to woo one another, and try to get into bed with each other at the end of their first evening together. Extreme Dating has its own website, which enables interested fans to check the schedule of up-coming shows, register for their electronic Extreme Dating newsletter. And soon there will be Extreme Dating the movie in which four twenty-something friends are searching for love and, while on a ski trip, put themselves into 'extreme'

circumstances to find love, and hook themselves up with Mr. or Ms. Right. It is scheduled to be released sometime in the fall, and I can't wait to get my tickets!

There is Extreme Lawn Care, and somewhere there is probably Extreme Hair Care.

And now there is Extreme Worship. Not too long ago one some one sent a magazine to the church office advertising "Extreme Worship." It pictured a big auditorium like the Missouri Theater, with a stage, and band playing, and the pastor, decked out in a golf shirt, with a head set, the kind like Madonna wears in concerts, people standing, waving their arms, clapping their hands. "Extreme Worship" is the coming thing! It'll bring 'em to church!

What is next? Who knows!

What is behind it all? Why are we so taken with the extreme? Who knows? Maybe we are bored, and need excitement and adventure. Maybe it is because we have too much, too many things, too much money, too much free time, and not enough meaningful things to do. What is all behind it? Who knows?

We live in a time of extremes. And that is the topic of the day – extreme religion. When I say the words I can see some of you are straightening up, sitting back in your pews, recoiling at the thought of people taking religion to extremes, carrying Bibles, stopping you on the streets with their questions, "Are you saved?", handing out tracks in the airports, pushing their religion down your throat.

Or the little boy, maybe twelve years old, who walked up my driveway one afternoon while was washing the car; his hair was neatly combed and the Bible was tightly clutched in his hand, "Mr., Can I ask you a question? Where would you go if you died tonight?" He was just a boy, but already some one had begun to fill his head with a fire and brimstone brand of religion, and program him to go out to make converts of strangers in their driveways. When he asked me where I would go if I died that night, I immediately thought of three or four smart answers, but I held my tongue for a minute, and replied, "Thanks for coming. I'm the minister of First Christian Church." With that a big smile came over his face, a sigh of relief, and he turned around and walked away. Thank goodness. But sometimes, they won't leave us alone so quickly. And sometimes we have to politely slam the door in their faces.

When I say 'extreme religion' that's what immediately comes to some of your minds, I know. But that is not what I am talking about. What I am talking about is simply taking our faith seriously. Taking our faith seriously!

One of my friends noted some time ago that most of us in the Protestant church are Christians by convenience; we are infected by with an easy-going, well-meaning brand of

faith that does not make too many demands on us, that does not cost us very much, and that really does not mean very much to us.

What we need, said my friend, is to shed our superficial religion and replace it with a radical religion, with a faith, true to meaning of the word radical, which goes to the heart, penetrates to very core of our being, which so saturates our being that our hearts are hungry with knowing Christ, our minds are set upon knowing the reality of God, our eyes are focused upon seeing the ways of Christ, and our feet are set upon following the ways of Christ in all the places where we live and move have our being.

What we need, my friend said, is the kind of religion that the Apostle Paul had. Remember Paul? Zealous defender of the Jewish faith until he was confronted by the spirit of the living Christ, and he became an ardent advocate of Christian religion. Paul said,

“I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:10-11).

Does that sound like craziness to you? It is extreme religion.

I can see that some of you are still uneasy. You are thinking that I've been working too hard, spending too much time in the sun mowing the yard, that I need to get away for awhile.

Let me put your minds at ease. I am not advocating bizarre behavior, running around, waving our arms in the air, shouting, “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!” We don't have to go extreme behavior to be extremely interested in knowing Christ and trying to live like a Christian in this world. I am just saying that we start taking our faith seriously.

Like my friend Jim who worked for one of those high-tech defense industry contractors back in the 1980's, when government contracts were being handed out like hot cakes to companies trying to build laser guided missiles for the Star Wars defense scheme. Jim's firm had landed one of those contracts, and he was working in the accounting department when his boss walked into his office one day and told him to change his time sheet, to report that he had been working 40 hours a week on the defense contract. Jim said, “You know that I've only been working 20 hours on that contract,” but the boss said, ‘I know. I don't care. I want you to change it. It's a government contract and it's important business for the company.’ Jim thought about it over the weekend, and even considered talking to his pastor about it, but Jim knew what was the right to do without asking my advice; on Monday morning he told the boss that he could not change his report. And not long after that Jim found the pink slip in his office mail, he had lost his job.

Let me assure you that Jim is not crazy. You would like Jim. He is not some zealous Bible thumper, he does not go around bragging about himself, he does not consider himself a hero; he was a husband and father and hard working member of the church, who couldn't start cheating the government in the name of company profits. That's the kind of person who understands what I am talking about. That is extreme religion.

I am just saying that we start taking our faith seriously. Like my friends Archie and Lois Goodrich who lived in Cameron, Missouri. I have introduced you to them before. When their own daughter grew up they started taking in foster children, children who had been abused and neglected, who had become wards of the state, children that no one else wanted. They loved children and always were taking another one of two to feed and clothe and love. When it was all said and done they helped to raise 28 children after their own little grew up. Archie and Lois were great people, you would have liked them if you had known them. They were not Bible thumping, confronting strangers on the street with their religion kind of people. They were just good, solid, down-to-earth church people who tried to love the little children as much as Jesus loved the little children. Their's was a real religion. That is what I mean by extreme religion.

Jesus was invited to eat supper at the home of a Pharisee, a well-off and well-respected leader of the Jews. When her husband reported that Jesus had accepted the invitation, I can imagine that Mrs. Pharisee dusted and vacuumed the house, went to the market, bought the best potatoes and grapes, set the best china and silverware on the table, and served a feast fit for a king. It was to be an elegant evening, reserved for the community's finest.

But then this woman off the street came in and threw herself at Jesus feet, and made a scene weeping and wiping Jesus' feet, wiping and weeping, weeping and wiping his feet. Surely Jesus knew what kind of woman she was, she was a sinner, the kind of woman that no righteous man in his right man who have anything to do with. Surely he would do something to stop her. Surely he would push her away, he get up and move away from her. Surely he knew what he should do.

The Pharisee was scandalized, the Pharisee who knew that it was clearly against their law for a man of God to allow such a thing to happen, who knew that certain people have their place in the world, and should stay in their places.

But all the while Jesus just sat there and did nothing, he just sat there let her go on and on weeping and wiping his feet in love and devotion. And in his act of acceptance and forgiveness, he went to root of divine love and revealed the heart of God's extreme love and care for every human being. And he must have changed her life!

Who was that woman and what happened to her? We don't know who she was; the gospel of Luke does not identify her, although church leaders through the centuries have said that it was Mary Magdalene who barged into the Pharisee's home and washed Jesus' feet with oil and tears. And you remember what kind of reputation Mary Magdalene had, for centuries we heard that she was a prostitute, a sinner. But that cannot be proven, all we know is that Mary was from Magdala, a town on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee which had a reputation for a red light district; but nowhere it is proven that Mary was a prostitute.

We don't know who that woman was who washed Jesus feet with her tears, whether it Mary Magdalene or not. But imagine what happened to her, imagine how her life must have been changed by Jesus' act of love and forgiveness. If it was in fact Mary of Magdala she became a follower of Jesus and one of the leaders of the Jesus' movement in its earliest days. All because Jesus revealed to her God's extreme love for her.

What happened to that woman after that encounter with Jesus we don't know. But it leads me to wonder what would happen to us if we had such an encounter with Jesus. What would happen to us if we had such a radical desire, such an extreme desire, to know Christ, to wrap our minds around the mind of Christ, to fill our hearts with the love of Christ, and to set our feet in the ways of Christ? I don't know what would happen, but I would like to find out! Wouldn't you?