For my birthday my in-laws gave me a book entitled “Ten Caesars” which is about the Roman rulers, not the salads invented in Tijuana. It’s a pretty good book and you are welcome to borrow it when I am finished. But being a lending library is not really my point. What has struck me in reading this book is how religious the Romans were, especially the ruling class. I had generally carried about a sort of jaded modern American politician view, which supposed that religion was something politicians put on to attract a certain type of voter and then dropped to attract a different type of voter. But it seems that the Roman rulers really believed in the gods. In fact many picked their favorite god or demigod and sort of vowed to imitate them and this had the added bonus of helping them to define their leadership. Interestingly, in the Roman world pre-Constantine, one of the criticisms of Christians from a Roman point of view was that they were atheist because they would not sacrifice at the temples. The argument was that if you did not have enough gods then you were akin to being an atheist. Now, there are obviously some problems with this piety, because the gods that the Romans worshiped often had the moral compass of a fraternity house on hundreds night (to the uninitiated hundreds night is when you are supposed to have 100 shots of beer in 100 minutes). But back to the Romans…the fact is, however misguided it might have been, there was a genuine curiosity and belief in that time that there was something beyond what we see here on this earth. And while I know it may sound strange to say, especially after Nero burned Christians to provide light for his outdoor cocktail parties, but I think in many ways evangelism was easier in those days because you were starting with belief.

Just for some quick numbers, because I know nothing gives a sermon zip like statistics. But to show you why I don’t think I am crazy in making the suggestion that Roman society may have been more fertile ground for the spread of Christianity than 21st century America, let me give you some fun numerical facts. At the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD there were probably fewer than 3,000 Christians in the world. However, by the year 350 AD there would be somewhere around 34 million. Or put in mathematical terms in those 280 years there was a 1,133,333% increase in Christians. Today we are dealing with an opposite problem because the only people showing that kind of growth are the so-called “nones”, that is people who say they have no religion or belief. These days it is not that people disagree with which God or gods they worship, it is rather that people do not even believe the premise. They do not believe that there is anything beyond the material world. As a result it might sound strange to our ears when we hear the passage from the Acts of the Apostles today where successful evangelism seems to only require a short discussion. We here this, “On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.”

Now the first thing to clear up about Lydia is what exactly it means when the text says that she was, “a worshiper of God.” And no one can say with 100% certainty, but most likely it meant that she was a gentile who was attracted to the synagogue and the Jewish religion. So she is not quite Jewish but someone who seems to be buying what they are selling. As to what nationality she is, it is most likely that she is of Greek origin, for they are in Macedonia, the birthplace of Alexander the Great. So we have a Greek woman who has come to believe the message of Judaism. And so the conversion that takes place in this conversation is for all intents and purposes a conversion from Judaism to Christianity. And this is all well and good, but like good modern people we need to ask where does this leave us? Where does it leave those of us who have never had a brief discussion with someone who then begged to be baptized? Now, if you have had that experience you can stop listening now, but the rest of us we don’t get off the hook that easy.

You have probably heard me say in my more jaded moments that most Americans have just enough Christianity to be immune, something like the way that the smallpox vaccine works. And in many ways that is true. Most people in the culture know, at least superficially, what we are about, but find other things more interesting and compelling. Our biggest competition on Sunday mornings is probably Starbucks, those brunch places where hipsters congregate and in the fall, the Green Bay Packers. Worship and devotion to God just don’t compete with caramel macchiatos, mini quiches served in prosciutto cups and being unable to score on the Detroit Lions. And so with this being the case what are we supposed to do in terms of Jesus’ great commission in which he told us to go and make disciples of all nations? Is being an evangelist these days sort of like being in charge of tourism for New Jersey? We can try all we want but no one is going to bother. And to be honest I really don’t know.

There are thousands of books which promise if you just follow their magic formula your church will be full to overflowing, but since people keep writing church growth books I am guessing no one has hit upon a foolproof formula. I mean Pythagoras didn’t write a sequel to his theorem, because it kind of solved things the first time. However, there is one thing that I do know and this may or may not be encouraging; the Bible is full of stories wherein the unrighteous outnumber the righteous. Think back to the story of Abraham pleading with God to spare Sodom if he can find just ten righteous men. Also the Bible is full of stories of prophets telling the people to repent and return to the Lord. So if you need to repent and return to the Lord it assumes that you are currently doing things of which you need to repent and are not following the Lord. In the Bible, those who worship God almost always seem to be in the minority. As mentioned before forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus there were only 3,000 Christians in an Empire that contained between 50 and 60 million people. Meaning that Christians made up less than .006% of the population at the time around the events in today’s reading. So being in the minority is not something new in the Judea-Christian tradition. But this does not mean that we are to give up. Certainly we live in a world that prefers television, sports and eating out, more than it enjoys participating in the worship of almighty God. In a consumerist society our product is just not selling the way that others are. But that does not change things for us, we know what is right and what we are called to do. The best thing that I can propose is for us to be Christian, and I would propose that we be Christian not in the way that most people seem to live out their beliefs these days, that is by haranguing and belittling people with whom they disagree. No, I think we simply try to love one another and love those who are not Christian. It will require the same humility that Jesus showed when he went to the cross, so I am not saying that it will be easy, but it is something we can, with God’s help, try to do. Some may see our example and convert, some may not, but whatever we do we should be about serving God both this day and forevermore.