Tobin Grant, associate editor of the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, characterizes this period in US history as a Great Decline in religion, using an algorithym that includes data on church attendance, membership in congregations, and attitudes of religion.

The interesting flip side of that, however, about 9 in 10 Americans now, as in the 1950s, believe in a Higher Power who created and remains involved in the Universe and the lives of those He created. Most people say they feel a sense of spiritual peace or wellbeing at least once a week (and the percentage of this number actually is rising.) About 85 percent of Americans, according to the Pew Research Center, self identify as spiritual and some of them, thank goodness, also identify as being part of a religious community such as ours. But more interesting to me are the one in five Americans identify themselves as spiritual, believe in God and pray regularly, but who aren’t part of a regular worshipping faith community. These people, those who believe in God, pray and understand and seek the spiritual peace that God gives, but who aren’t affiliated with a community of faith are the modern-day sheep without a shepherd.

In the sermon on mission, a portion of which we heard in the Gospel today, Jesus gave his disciples authority and instruction about how to reach out to these sheep without a shepherd. He also made that reaching out the primary mission of the church. This call to mission is as true today for us, his disciples, as they were to that original band of 12. We teach, we proclaim and, perhaps most importantly, we heal. We show the sheep the love of the shepherd and we show that we are a community in which Christ is proclaimed, taught and worshipped – through the sacraments and through the sacramentalities of our life together. We show that we are a community of love.

We go out into the community and meet folks where they are, without judgment, and with love, just as the disciples did on their mission tour throughout Israel. We realize that these spiritual, but not religious, folks may have encounters with us in the community and that they may be looking to find in us evidence of the peace that Christ brings. We realize that their approach to God may be different from ours, but that in shepherding them we gently lead and accept.

Perhaps we are being called into a great awakening – a rebirthing of the church anew or as American religious scholar Diana Butler Bass has put it a Reimagining of a New Old Church. We enter that reimagining the same way that the early church did by being disciples of Christ -- practicing those things Christ taught us – loving nonjudgmentally, giving dignity to all, and by continuing in the ancient teaching and preaching and healing practices. In doing this, we give to others a shepherd.

Millennials, those who came of age around the year 2000, are one of the largest demographic groups that is spiritual but not affiliated – sheep without a shepherd. Fifty-nine percent of them have dropped out of church and about one-quarter claim no religious affiliation at all. Churches struggle to reach this group, often with Starbucks like coffee bars and giveaways similar to those bobble-head dolls you get at baseball games. A millennial, Rachel Held Evans, speaks to the need for churches to return to ancient practices of discipleship in a blog she wrote that recently appeared in the Washington Post. Here is some of what she writes:

When I left church at age 29, full of doubt and disillusionment, I wasn’t looking for a better-produced Christianity. I was looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity: I didn’t like how gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people were being treated by my evangelical faith community. I had questions about science and faith, biblical interpretation and theology. I felt lonely in my doubts. And, contrary to popular belief, the fog machines and light shows at those slick evangelical conferences didn’t make things better for me. They made the whole endeavor feel shallow, forced and fake.

In other words, a church can have a sleek logo and Web site, but if it’s judgmental and exclusive, if it fails to show the love of Jesus to all, millennials will sniff it out. Our reasons for leaving have less to do with style and image and more to do with substantive questions about life, faith and community. We’re not as shallow as you might think.

If young people are looking for congregations that authentically practice the teachings of Jesus in an open and inclusive way, then the good news is the church already knows how to do that. The trick isn’t to make church cool; it’s to keep worship weird.

You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve. You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God.

What finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn’t lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments. Baptism, confession, Communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick — you know, those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 years. The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture or era. They don’t need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community.

But I believe that the sacraments are most powerful when they are extended not simply to the religious and the privileged, but to the poor, the marginalized, the lonely and the left out. This is the inclusivity so many millennials long for in their churches.

The good news is that we offer that here. We offer a place where Jesus is taught and proclaimed, where the pain of the world is healed – where the sacraments of healing are given to everyone.

As long as we do that, we won’t participate in the Great Decline as Grant calls it, but rather in the reimagining of the new old church that Butler Bass sees. We will lead those who lack a shepherd, to the true shepherd, Jesus Christ. And, to quote the millennial Evans once more – although church attendance may be dipping, God can survive the Internet Age. After all, he knows a few things about Resurrection.

Amen