

GOD'S REMEDY FOR STATIC SPIRITUALITY

Acts 16:9-10

I don't think there is a profession in the world that is the object of more jokes than the ministry and most of them are about length of sermons.

A Pastor arrived at church one Sunday with a band-aid on his chin. One of the members asked about it and he said he was shaving and thinking about his sermon when he cut himself. The member suggested that next Sunday he think about shaving and cut his sermon!

And there was a little girl who asked her pastor-father why he always bowed his head and closed his eyes before he entered the pulpit. He told her he was asking God to help him with his sermon. The little girl thought about that for a moment, then asked, "Why doesn't he ever do it?"

And there was the story of the young bride in a congregation in a small town who had left a roast cooking in the oven. Her husband was an usher, so, concerned that the roast might burn, she wrote a note to her husband and handed it to another usher. Thinking it was a note to the pastor instead of her husband, He handed it to the minister as they returned the offering plates to the altar. The minister placed the note in his Bible and forgot it until, referencing a Biblical passage in the middle of the sermon, he found the note and read the words intended for her husband, "Please go home and turn off the gas."

Ministers do get notes . . . some have been handed to my by ushers, some in the offering plates, others left in the pews, or the hymnals, and some in the mail on Tuesday.

I have a collection of beautiful notes written on Sundays by an eleven-year-old girl.

She would write things like, "you are my favorite preacher," or "I got an A in spelling this week."

One time she wrote, "I got my ears pierced this week."

She wanted me to celebrate that with her!

Bill Bouknight told about one he received that said,
“That sermon sure did **grip** me.”
Of course, they spelled “grip” wrong –
They spelled it with an “e” – “g-r-i-p-e.”

I hope I have preached sermons that **grip** people,
and I am sure I have preached others that have “**griped**” people.

It seems that most of the sermons which gripe people
are the ones which cause discomfort
in the cultural, spiritual, and financial lives of the hearer.

John the baptizer was beheaded by Herod for confronting the evil Herodias,
his brother Phillip’s wife. *(Matt. 14)*
It had to do with his cultural idea of marriage.

Jesus was crucified because he confronted the spiritual abuse of religious
leaders.
They accused him of blasphemy.

Many a United Methodist preacher has been told not to preach on money.

Let me state clearly that I did not come here to preach about money, because
money is only one part of our responding to a relationship with God,
of being a practicing and productive follower of God,
as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.
I came to prod some of you out of your static spirituality.

Jesus didn’t talk about money except as it related to the recognition that
we are stewards – managers – of the earth and its resources
and are charged to use properly what God has given us.
The story of creation reminds us that
“”*The Lord God took the man (Adam) and put him in the Garden of Eden to
till it and keep it.*” *(Genesis 2:15)*
God has given us everything in creation to use, but not to use up!

Did you know that 60% of the Bible
is related to financial aid and property matters.

There are 2,350 verses that have to do with finances,
and only 500 verses that have to do with prayer.

Sixteen of the 38 parables that Jesus told are about possessions.
One out of every 10 verses in the Gospels is about possessions.

Why?

Because Jesus knew, as Paul later stated,

That “*the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.*” (1 Tim 6:10)

If Jesus believed it, and Paul preached it,

then I believe that God wants us to recognize that
the economy of heaven is not like the economy of this world.

Churches that struggle financially
are generally made up of people who refuse to believe that truth.

I have been the pastor of churches who see success as an issue of economics,
where we list the needs of the church
and everyone should take a bite out of the bitter pie.

If those churches reached the budget goal they considered that a success.

I recently read a book by a financial consultant, Rich Church, Poor Church.
The author points out that churches who constantly beg for money are
destined to be poor in things of the spirit.

Financial support of the church should never be an issue of economics.

It is really a spiritual issue.

People who give generously do not do so for economic reasons.

They are generous for spiritual reasons.

Some people give because they have been blessed.

Others give because they see the church as the greatest hope for their
children and for the world.

Most of us who give do so because we love God.

None of us should refuse to give for economic reasons.

Unfortunately, there are some whose faith is limited by a fear of the
economic demands that may impact our personal future.

They want as little change as possible,
and their giving-level is always in the past.

They are dedicated to keeping things at a comfortable level,
to maintaining the “status quo.”

They remind me of the small group of people who gathered on the banks of the Hudson River to see “Fulton’s folly,” the first steamship launched.

A voice in the crowd shouted out,
“they’ll never get her going.”

But they did.

The ship belched out steam and moved out fast,
and the same voice was heard to say, “They’ll never get her stopped.”

Skeptics are always with us,
and the future is frightening to some people because the future requires new dedications.

And yet, the future is where Jesus Christ calls us to join him.

That was the experience of the Apostle Paul on his 2nd Missionary journey.
Paul was visiting the churches he had helped establish on his first trip through the area,

and was delighted to learn that the churches were faithful and strong.

But he ran into a snag –

a time when the future did not seem clear –

a time of uncertainty, when the doors were closed to him.

I have been in situations like that – you probably have –

almost every pastor

and every church

gets into the doldrums at one time or another.

That is the inevitable result of status quo spirituality.

At that time in his life and ministry, Paul had a vision.

He described it as a man from Macedonia –

the Asian province of the Roman Empire –

calling to him to “*come over and help us.*”

So Paul and his faithful crew,

raised anchor and followed that vision,

with the result that Christianity became a religion of the world.

There are many excuses Paul could have used to stay in Troas,
but his passion for the people of the world,
who needed to hear the message of Jesus Christ,
made him respond to that vision.

Paul demonstrated that
commitment to Christ is not a matter to be taken lightly.
Jesus calls us to look ahead, not backward,
to face the future with faith, not dwell in past glories.
Jesus Christ seldom calls us to stay where we are!

There is a symbolic act – a ritual - which takes place in the Service of Ordination at The United Methodist Annual Conference.
At one point in the service a retiring minister removes his ministerial stole, the symbol of ordination to servanthood,
and places it across the shoulders of a newly-ordained pastor.

That event recalls the story from *I Kings 19:14ff*
The old and weary prophet Elijah, who was living under a death-threat, found the young Elisha plowing in a field with a team of oxen.
Elijah removed his cloak and placed it on Elisha as a symbol of his call.

Elisha asked if he could go and kiss his parents goodbye,
and we are not sure that he did, but
we do know that he killed the oxen,
used the yoke as firewood, and
cooked the meat and fed the people.
(giving credibility in the South Carolina low country that a bar-b-que is a religious event.)

That is a strange series of events, isn't it?
But look more deeply, as we must do with biblical stories.
That act demonstrated that Elisha was never going back to farming again.
He was moving into the future in faith that it was what God wanted of him.

That story reminds me of a statement Jesus made
when people were declaring their limited allegiance to follow him.
One of them asked permission to say goodbye to his parents,
and Jesus simply said,
“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

The vision God has for us is a vision for the future,
and we cannot see it when we face the past . . .
or when we are spiritually comfortable with the status quo –
when we are satisfied with things as they are.

What does that have to do with us . . . with you, sitting in the pew?
Everything . . . because until you stop focusing on that which limits you,
culturally, spiritually, and economically,
until you discover what God is doing in our church and community,
and decide to join God in that great work,
you will never commit to the greatness that God has for you,
and for your church.

And until you recognize that if you keep doing what you have always done,
you will always get the same results.
And if you continue the same level of dedication as last year,
you will never become more than you are.

The challenge to take a step up in your dedication to God and His church
is a challenge to be open to God's vision,
and to break free from the status quo.

I believe that God has a vision for this church,
And that vision is not to keep doing what we have always done.
It is, I believe, to move forward in faith and dedication.