

“A NEW CHURCH FOR A NEW DAY”
James 1:17-27

The model for church in 2009 is no longer static – a group of like-minded people forever doing and being the same. It is dynamic – caring for widows and orphans and living with integrity.

Early in my ministry I made a deal with my children that out of respect for them I would never use them as object lessons or sermon illustrations, if in turn they would do their best not to provide any content for an object lesson or sermon illustration! I have yet to make such a deal with my grandchildren. First, the almost one year old, Laurel is her name. Laurel loves to play “So big!” You know the drill. You ask the question: How big is Laurel? And she says along with you as she throws up her hands: “Soooo big!” She nearly explodes with pride as she raises those arms as high as they will go. But, she takes the exercise one step further – now – when she sees her grandfather or grandmother enter the room – she automatically raises her arms – as though to ask us how big we are!! Except for the time she strains forward for another spoonful of vanilla milkshake, her favorite activity is “so big”. It is impossible to feel small or insignificant in the presence of a grandchild!

The four year, going on 24 year old granddaughter has her own agendas. She is an early riser, especially when she had a good afternoon nap the day before. She is as quiet as a mouse as she sneaks into her grandparents bedroom. Then she reaches under the cover to tickle grandpa’s toes laughing out loud and shouting “wake up, wake up, wake up you sleepyheads!” I can’t wait until she’s an adolescent wanting to sleep late so I can return the favor! The practice releases early morning joy in the lives of half-awake grandparents. How proud she is that she has achieved her mission! How happy we are that she is willing to take the risk and tickle grown up feet. It is impossible to feel small in such circumstances. Keep those two stories in mind, please, as we turn to serious matters at hand. I do believe they bear repeating when considering how God calls us to be church in turbulent times.

The first reality of being a church in America, and in Naples in particular, are the many changes going on. Many practices we have assumed, taken for granted are no longer certain. For example, it used to be a fairly safe expectation that folks would naturally come to worship. They would come out of a sense of obligation, invited or uninvited. It used to be a safe expectation that when they came they would quickly discover the glue which would help them stay. Once they stayed they would get involved and expand the Christian community called church. We heard it said – sometimes in jest – sometimes not, build a building and they will come. Build a building with the right kind of programs inside, and they will stay. Unfortunately – this is simply not the case. Old loyalties do not translate automatically into new commitments. As a church we find ourselves at a crossroads. Where hearts and minds must be converted and reconverted all the time to generate the energy and love that makes up the church of Jesus Christ. The core practices are highlighted in the Book of James – written for fledgling groups of newly baptized Christians as a kind of primer: Encouraging their best practices in the context

of persecution and struggle, in short a time of uncertain change. Religion which is pure and undefiled is this: to care for the orphans and the widows in their distress, and keep oneself unstained from the world! Or earlier – he wrote nearly the same thing: Be doers of the word and not just hearers. Not hearers who forget, but doers who act. Christianity was then, and is now a club. And the church of Jesus Christ is forever a community which buries worn-out traditions in favor of new traditions which bear the love of God into every human heart! I will always be bullish on the church – not because of its capacity to carry on the past. I am bullish because of what God can do in the church when folks like us accept His invitation to be doers of the word – caring for widows and orphans and reconstructing a new church for a new day! Let no one come here and leave feeling small!

Permit me to make some suggestions this morning, suggestions which I believe will help the church of Jesus Christ remain alive with integrity in a world of rapid changes. Picking up on the Gospel itself – and the exhortation in James – to be doers of the word: Suggestion number 1. Let's be a relaxed church, at peace with God, with each other, and with ourselves. It is neither wise nor productive to be a panicked church. An overwhelmed church. A church desperate for quick fixes to problems. It is neither wise nor faithful to the Gospel we proclaim – to be a burdened church – as though we have never heard the voice of Jesus say: "Come unto me – all of you who labor and are overburdened, I will give you rest". The new church that does the word of God will best do that work, graciously, peacefully, confidently. Challenges before us are steep. So is the love of God. Becoming a jumpy, nervous, restless church will never help matters. In fact, it will likely contribute to a loss of focus. To a loss of commitment.

Many years ago I attended a conference at Princeton Seminary on preaching. It was led by Tom Troeger – then professor at Iliff School of Theology in Denver. I will never forget one of the participants – a woman who pastored a small United Methodist congregation in south Jersey. She was forthright in her love for her church as well as her concern. She admitted before the group of us – how she didn't think she could ask for more during the upcoming stewardship season. She didn't know what she was going to say – but she realized that the old methods had grown stale. She was anxious. If she was anxious – it was a good bet so was the congregation. The very first move towards getting a grip on the stewardship changes was naming their challenges. We thanked this pastor for her honesty. Her frank talk was an effort to do the word of the Lord – as opposed to simply hearing it and then forgetting it. Rather than driving her to panic – the dialogue at Princeton released God-given confidence to conduct a stewardship program which was alive and faithful. Likewise, can we be a church at peace with one another?

A second suggestion: let us be a praying church. Please do not misunderstand me. We need to be a praying church in order to be a church connected with our maker! When I say praying church I do not mean more work to do. It is not retreating to solitude – stand-offish, withdrawn contemplation. It is not escapism to be an actively praying church. It is not becoming possessed by some outside foreign force vaguely resembling the Holy Spirit. When I mean "praying church" I am talking about the

disposition of hearts, a relationship with God and each other that is conversational – open – discerning!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: Sometimes when people ask me about my prayer life I describe hanging laundry on the line! After a day of too much information about almost everything, there is such blessed relief in the weight of wet clothes. I add a prayer for the trees from which the clothespins come, the Penley Corporation of West Paris, Maine – still willing to make them from wood instead of colored plastic! All day long, as I watch the breeze toss these clothes in the wind, I imagine my prayers spinning away over the tops of trees. This is good work. This prayer!

Our prayer life ought to help us pay attention! Pay attention to the things that need to change – and the practices which need to be preserved. Our prayer life illumines the ways we make one another feel small. And the ways we make one another feel so alive in Jesus Christ! Can we be a church whose hearts are so disposed to our God that we will do everything in our power to love Him, our neighbor, ourselves? As we enter a time with less staff and steeper challenges, will you covenant with God and each other to be a praying Church?

Suggestion number 3. Be a foolish church. Over against a church that is wound so tightly that it is ready to burst at the seams. Be a foolish church in which we live as fools for Christ! Contradicting the wisdom of the world in favor of the foolishness of the cross! Be a foolish church which takes risks. Be a foolish church which thinks outside the proverbial box. Be a foolish church which does things for no other reason than they bring joy to the world around us. Churches made up of fools for Christ laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep. Foolish churches stay up late preparing a Bible Study lesson for the next day. Foolish churches recognize folks who make a difference for the Kingdom of God. Foolish churches help small people feel big – because that's the image in which we are made. I tackled a cross-word puzzle recently which called for the name of the priest who worked and died in a leper colony. Started with a D – a couple rows later I remembered – Damien – Molokai – Hawaii – Hansen's Disease or leprosy. Others came and went. He remained – eventually getting leprosy himself and dying at the age of 49. No one forced Fr. Damien to serve the 700 lepers. In fact, some of the world called him foolish. But, that's what they called Abraham Lincoln for daring to believe that the wounds of the American Civil war could be healed. All manner of people, large and small, male and female have been called foolish for their bold decision to risk their life for others. I don't know if Fr. Damien is an official saint. But, he should be. I have seen other saints who comfort the afflicted and heal the broken. Who teach the uneducated and reach the lonely. There will be many who will ask us to be a safe, risk-free, worldly-wise church. Amidst a season of change and steep challenges there will be voices who cry out, you have but one job, to look out for yourself and keep things the way they have always been. But, the word from James as the needs of the world are different: Religion that is real is this: to care for the orphan and widow. Keep oneself unstained from the world. In short, to be fools for Christ! Doing what no one else will do to love the loveless that they might lovely be! That's what I'll do! When changes alter the church and redefine its mission. When voices call

for retreat. Never cave in to their counsel. Will you be a fool for Christ, confounding the expectations of other? Going where no one else goes? Giving even when it is hard to give?

Back to that one year old granddaughter who loves vanilla milkshakes and raises her arms in joy every time she sees her grandpa. Soon she will grow out of this stage. Yet she is the reason we need to build a new church for a new day. A church where no one feels small. A church where everyone, no matter what their station in life, feels the abundant grace of God. A new church for a new day? Build it with the love of God and they will come, they will stay. Build it with the love of God, and we will be strong for all generations to come. All generations, indeed!

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