

You Asked for It: How Can We Grow Our Church?

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 5:1-11

Today we begin another summer series of sermon topics you've requested. What a line-up! –we'll consider questions about predestination, biblical authority and interpretation, and Celtic spirituality, and practical matters such as surviving broken relationships and learning to live "more with less." This is not just a blatant way to try and keep your attention on worship during the months you're more likely to... er "commune with God in nature." It's not primarily meant to provide a platform for weighing in on the issues of our day, or to keep your preachers from becoming slackers. I hope it will be an explicit expression of what is true all the time: that preaching is a partnership between minister and people, an on-going conversation shaped by Scripture, tradition, experience, and that mysterious movement of the living Spirit of God illumining our hearts and minds. God—and not the congregation—is the intended "audience" for worship, which makes this summer series an offering we give to the One who is our Founder and Ruler.

The topic chosen for today springs from a true and disturbing reality: The membership of Fairmount is declining. Our current membership of 1350 reflects a 40% loss since 1980 when over 2000 members were on the rolls. There are some here today who can recall past times when three weekly worship services were packed, but that has not been the case for several decades. Fairmount's sobering statistics mirror those of our denomination. Last year the Presbyterian Church (USA) experienced its largest percentage membership decline since Presbyterian reunion in 1983. According to the Office of the General Assembly, membership at the end of 2003 totaled 2,405,000---a decline of 47,000 from the previous year, and down from 4 million members in 1983.

Can anything be done about this decline? The mainline church's angst is compounded by the unprecedented growth in non-denominational congregations espousing theological perspectives quite different from the progressive, intellectually diverse, and socially-active ones of the Reformed tradition. How come they're growing and we're not?! Is it possible to learn from them, while retaining our distinctive theological perspective and broadly inclusive values?

There's no better source to consult for insight on these questions than the book of our origins. We turn to a biblical text from the early days of Jesus' earthly ministry. He is beginning to build a reputation as a riveting preacher and compassionate healer with an urgent message: "The kingdom of God is approaching." In this passage, he issues an invitation to join him in this mission. Listen for God's word to the Church today, in the reading from the gospel according to Luke in the fifth chapter at the first verse. [Luke 5:1-11]

A young woman called home to tell her parents about the wonderful new man she had met. "What's his religion?" the mother asked. "I'm afraid he has none," the daughter replied. He's an agnostic." "Oh dear, that will never do. It would be impossible for you, a devout Roman Catholic, to live with an agnostic. You'll have to sell him on the faith." The next time she called she told her parents how well things were going: "I sold him on the holy Trinity." And the next call after that, "I sold him on Baptism." Finally, when things seemed destined for a happy ending, the girl called home totally dismayed. "What happened?" asked her mother. To which the daughter responded, "I oversold him. Now he's going to become a priest."

Unfortunately, too many people believe this describes the church's task of evangelism: attempting to "sell" people on the idea of Christian faith, to preach at them until they "get it." No wonder many of us hesitate to speak with others about faith. We don't want to appear pushy or superior. Perhaps we haven't fully experienced how faith impacts daily living. Or may be we're afraid we'll say the wrong thing, because we have so many questions ourselves.

In exploring the decline of mainline churches, a recent *Plain Dealer* article noted that contemporary Americans are interested in spirituality, but cobble together their own version of religious faith, "mixing and matching what they perceive will be most relevant to their needs." And more are doing this as an individual quest, apart from religious communities. That number grew from 8% of the US population in 1990 to more than 14% -- over 30 million persons—in 2001.

When Jesus called the disciples, he invited them to "come and follow." In response to this invitation, people were led to a new way of living and participation in a community of apprentices. Peter and James and John and the rest had no idea what they were getting into when they "left everything and followed him;" the path opened up to them as they went along together. Even Peter's sense of personal inadequacy ("go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!") did not disqualify him.

After the resurrection, encountering the risen Christ gave these same disciples new energy and commitment to share the message with others. "Go and tell," Christ commissioned them.....and you and me.

Yes, every single Christian is called to be an evangelist, one who shares good news with others. We are called to be "catching people" – the phrase literally means "to bring people out alive"—to be life-bearers in deed...and in word. This is hard for us Presbyterians. Once at a national church conference I heard a speaker ask rhetorically, "What have Presbyterians contributed to evangelism?" and a person from the audience answered loudly, "Restraint." I know much of our restraint comes from our own experiences of being assaulted with truth or insulted with simplistic "answers." But on the other hand, if we have caught a glimmer of light, how can we not point another towards it? If we have found a measure of joy or purpose, how can we keep silent? If we have found within this church friendship or support or challenge that has nurtured growth, why not share it with someone we care about?

There is no other way to grow a church than to "go and tell." And while we do that with advertising, with a lively website, with welcoming events such as the Strawberry Festival, with public actions such as building a Habitat house and leveraging the Boys and Girls Club project, there are no substitutes for personal witness and invitation. To tell the story of God so loving the world. To tell how that story has made a difference to you personally. You don't have to use religious jargon or theologically sophisticated reasoning. You don't have to thump a Bible or quote Scripture. You only have to say what is true for you, and what you hope they might discover as well. To share even your own doubts and fears, because we all have them. Perhaps the best definition of evangelism I've ever heard is that it is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

Try this friends: think about what Christian faith means to you. Why are you a church member? What are you doing here this morning? What do you expect—or hope—to find here? Choose one reason and think of a person you know with whom you can share it. For example, if you appreciate the music in worship, the multiple opportunities to sing in choirs or play hand bells, or the outstanding concerts in the Fairmount Music Series, tell someone. If you are moved by the promises made every time we baptize a child, and the commitment made by Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, confirmation mentors, tell someone. If you have gained some new insights about yourself and your faith through participation in a small group, tell someone. If you resonate with Fairmount's distinctive progressive theological stance that welcomes diverse people and perspectives, tell someone. If you have been inspired

by a mission project that contributes to the greater good of our community, tell someone. *And then invite them to join you!*

Faith is deeply personal, but ultimately it is not private. God comes to us at the core of our being, but God's presence makes us aware of our innate connection with God and with one another. What the more fundamentalist churches do right is equip their members to take the church into the world. We more restrained mainliners can learn from their example. But I suggest to you that the church we take into the world is distinct in its inclusiveness, breadth of theological perspective, and utter commitment to social justice. And truly, some of those 30 million unchurched folk out there could find here a place called home.

Together we are greater than the sum of our individual members. We are part of a transcendent reality—despite our bumbling fallibility—"the body of Christ"—divine hands and heart and mind and spirit, alive today. We go and tell our neighbors, our friends, the people we know who are hurting or restless, guilty or complacent. A church I know reminds its members of this sacred task with a sign whose message faces in towards their parking lot. It reads, "You are now entering the mission field."

How do we grow our church? Well, fact is we can't. Finally only God can produce growth; only God can raise the dead to new life; only God spark the flame that will illuminate the church and the world. But we can bring people to the source of healing and hope and light and life. I strongly believe God wants Fairmount to be a growing church, a welcoming church, a place for increasingly more diverse people. We can trust God to do God's part. The meal we will share in a few moments tells us that God loves without reason or limit. God's grace is all we need—all anyone needs—for life. We can trust God. Will that trust lead you and me to the task of catching people?

**TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S
ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER.
AMEN.**

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