

## **“(YOU GOT TO) MOVE IT, MOVE IT”**

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

Sunday, May 16, 2010

Text: John 17: 20-25; Acts 16: 16-34

Good morning!

Well, to start the morning off right, I've got a quick story to tell you. It seems there was a priest and a minister from their local congregations. (Now, there's a hint that a good joke will follow!) A priest and a minister are standing by the side of the road holding up two signs that read: "The End is Near! Turn yourself around NOW before it's too late!" They planned to hold up the signs at each passing car.

"Go home!" yelled the first driver out his window as he sped by. "Leave us alone, you religious nuts!" And he took off out of sight, leaving the two clergy in a cloud of dust. Then from around the curve, they heard screeching tires, a long loud crash, and then a big splash.

"Do you think," said the minister to the priest, "do you think instead of our "Turn Back / The End is Near" signs, we should just instead put up signs that just say "Road Closed / Bridge Out Ahead"?"

Words are important. The message may be the same, eternal truths may never change, but how we say things makes a difference.

It's how the listener hears it, that's important, not how we meant it. Which is why the message of the fundamentalists and literalists in any religion, of any political party, why those who insist on saying something "just so", using the magic words, will wind up with a dying faith. Success rests on changing, on adapting the message and the media, new approaches, new marketing, if you will, a new language, a new focus, for changing times.

Most of you know well some of the trends in our national church, the Presbyterian Church, the PCUSA. Total membership declining – last year nearly by 50,000 members – our total of 2 million members is less than half of its high 40 years ago, its national budget a fifth of what it was at the height of the baby boom.

And it's not slowing down. They just announced a 70-person cut in staff, a 15% reduction in next year's budget, which by the way is now only four times as big as the combined budgets of the large Presbyterian Churches in Manhattan: Old First, Fifth Avenue, Brick Church, Madison Avenue. That's the national PCUSA!

Membership may not be a problem at vibrant, growing places like our First Church. But even the Presbytery of NYC, really a dysfunctional family if ever there was one, hasn't been able to get their act together in over a decade.

The situation is desperate. Something's clearly not working, for mainline Protestants (even Southern Baptists showed a decline in members this year), as the evangelical churches continue to boom.

So what are we to do?

Well, the evangelicals and the pentecostals and the fundamentalists all seem to be claiming a monopoly on scripture. Of course, it's not true. Scripture is at the very heart, at the core of our faith, too. So let's look at today's common lectionary, the scripture we just heard read aloud in this morning's service.

The lesson from John's gospel message today, something of a Dr. Seuss "Fox-in-Socks" tongue-twister, says it over and over again. Jesus says: God is one with us, and we are one with God. The love God has

for us, that same love, is within each of us. But Jesus goes further. Jesus says that the very glory of God, the glory of God shown in Jesus' life, that same glory is within each of us.

We just need to center our lives, our actions, our words – no, even further, our politics, our institutions, even our church – need to be lived out fully reflecting that love. And, if even a tiny fraction of the glory of God does lie within each of us, then we need to give our very best – our minds, our intellects, our analysis, our creativity, so much more than just our hearts – and in everything we do, we need to do all for the glory of God.

John's gospel is like that – huge, mind-blowing metaphor, inspiring for sure, but the hard work lies in its practical application. In contrast, today's lesson from Acts follows Luke's typical storytelling, where God is in the details. Hear the stories, and see how faithful lives are lived.

The language is so easy, so ordinary, so casual. Paul and Silas could have been you or me. Hear the language; I'm not paraphrasing, this is the text. Listen:

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination, and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her." And it came out of her that very hour. Her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

That's the exact text, a direct quote. You can just feel the emotions in the passage!

Paul was annoyed at this crazy woman who followed them for days. (I think a better translation from the Greek for "annoyed," a better translation would be "mightily pissed.") And Paul ordered the woman to calm down, which she did. But that annoyance, I am certain, was nothing compared to the slave-girl's owners when they realized that her crazy idiosyncrasies, her reputed fortune-telling abilities, were gone, and their profit center along with it.

These are real people, real stories, the top-rated reality show of the year AD 49.

Paul was just doing what seemed to make sense, what any of us might do. And he gets thrown into jail. Well, in jail they pray and sing, pretty much again a standard Sunday at First Church, and the other prisoners listened and heard.

A great earthquake frees all of them from their chains, and the guard, certain he will be crucified – literally – for letting the prisoners escape, gets ready to commit suicide. But Paul stops him: "We're all still here," Paul tells the guard. And the guard and his whole family and household, nannies and all, all became believers.

Again, very common stories. Paul didn't really do anything remarkable. He was just there. Present. Centered. Speaking his truth.

It's maybe as simple as that, like Woody Allen's rule of thumb -- "80% of success is just showing up". Maybe a big part of it is that we just need to be there. I guess I'd add my own couple of suggestions to Woody Allen's: Keep an open mind. Be humble and realize our limitations, that we can never fully understand God – and anyone who says they do is only fooling themselves. Know that our work will never be done. We are ever-reforming. We need always to be open to change.

But we can be guided by God. We can listen for that sometimes small, sometimes still, sometimes quiet voice, confident in our faith that God will give us what is needed. And God does.

Just this week, in the midst of the completely impossible financial crises in New York Presbytery, and again in the national Presbyterian Church, I've found signs of hope, of new vision, of a change in our signs along the side of the road, if you will.

New York Presbytery, for the first time in 10 years is at least considering a more realistic plan regarding reducing its roles and its staff, increasing its use of volunteers, and establishing a broader financial base of support beyond the four large Manhattan churches that have been providing for the Presbytery's survival. Well, it's a start, and that gives me hope.

The national PCUSA just last Friday announced a major shift from doing mission on the church's behalf, to inspiring, equipping and connecting the church for mission and ministry. From doing, to equipping. The future is about training and networking, not about grants and deep-pockets and paying the bills. Mission areas need to take responsibility for their own futures, utilizing the natural connections they already have, and partnering with others doing the same work. Like it or not, it's our current reality. And we needed a new and creative approach. For the PCUSA, the resulting re-focus on service and mission, rather than on the no-longer-valid centralized control of bigger, better, and bureaucratic – can only help draw more people to our vision, to the church, and to our God.

And it's not just in our own house. The New York Times just reported on a heated family argument among conservatives that has come to the forefront in recent weeks, about the movement's intellectual health. Prominent conservatives have called out by name the kind of close-mindedness in the movement, manifested by ideological intolerance and misinformation. These are staunch conservatives, now, referring to Fox News and National Review and Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck as “worryingly untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy demand overtakes any motivation to report accurately.”<sup>1</sup>

And as a result, these conservative commenters continue, many in the conservative movement have developed a distorted sense of priorities and a tendency to engage in fantasy, like the belief that the President was not born in Hawaii or that the health care bill established “death panels”.

Now progressives certainly have a lot of specks in our own eyes, for sure, and political correctness can shut out dissenting voices on the left as well. But I am heartened at the thought that maybe, just maybe, our public debate can return to rational, fact-based discussions on policy differences.

And we've talked before about the emergent church, the missional church, the church focusing first and foremost on service and mission. The Millennial Generation is leading the way on this front, with their focus on purpose and meaning, in their own lives and in the causes they support, their rejection of labels and stereotypes, their crossing of ideological boundaries and categorization.

As one church commentator has put it, the new call of our church, the Multi-channel church, is not necessarily to steer new potential members into a Sunday pew, but to help them go deeper with God. Seminaries will teach ministers how to build organizations, motivate colleagues and leverage resources, develop entrepreneurial skills in deploying human assets and decentralizing church life – not just training ministers to preach and teach.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe God does work in mysterious ways.

Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, the final season in our church year. Number three of the Big Three, the 3<sup>rd</sup> most important holiday in our church. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost. Yet it's a mystery to most of us, especially us strict Calvinists.

You'll remember last June, when Bishop Gene Robinson was with us. In his bright red and purple Episcopal robes, perhaps as a commentary on Presbyterian severity, he observed that he thought he was a bit of a missionary. “I mean,” he said, “your vestments are so drab.” Just look at these black robes.

And on the internet, even the “Mystery Worshipper” who goes from congregation to congregation critiquing, commenting on Sunday services, and posting reviews, even he has written about First Church. And how the clergy up here, in our black Presbyterian robes, on this great bench facing the congregation, look like a panel of judges sitting in court.

Well, Pentecost invites us to abandon those drab garments, spiritually, if not literally. Pentecost reminds us of God’s radical plan, beyond our wildest expectations.

God has chosen God’s people as his own. And God has shown himself in intimate communion with humanity, fully human. And together we share the comfort of Christmas.

In the end, God sacrifices all, letting the world do its absolute worst. Then God emerges triumphant. Not even death itself has any power. And together we share the joy of Easter.

But Pentecost? The birthday of the church? Well, Pentecost is just as joyful and amazing. Pentecost is about the flames of the holy spirit inspiring, igniting, inflaming passion for God. Pentecost reminds us of the joy that is at the core of our faith.

In a real way, it’s God saying, “The rest is up to you. Yes, you are mine, And yes, I will be with you always. But . . . It’s your world; it’s your life; it’s your church.”

So, for next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, we shift from the season of Easter, from the white pulpit colors of this Seventh Sunday of Easter, to the fiery red of Pentecost. The red of the flames of the Holy Spirit, fluttering over the heads of the early church believers – exciting, inspiring, inflaming them to action. Calling us to action.

And so, I propose something different for us all for next Sunday, an invitation if you will. After our morning Starbucks, after our three sleepy hits to the snooze button on the alarm clock, next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, let’s prove Bishop Robinson wrong in his prejudices against us “drab” Presbyterians. Let’s wear as much red as possible – red dresses, red shirts, red pants, red jackets, red socks, red shoes, red ties, red scarves, red hair, whatever.

We can all wear red! (As hard as that may be for New Yorkers wardrobes of dozens of different shades, but all of black.) And we will reflect the passion and the joy of our faith as we enter the season of Pentecost, God’s invitation to us to get involved, to become the body of Christ, to reflect, as the Kindergarten and First Graders sang so loudly last week, “I am the Church. You are the Church. We are the Church, together.”

You know, with three elementary-school-age children, the soundtrack to my life is no longer mine. My girls dominate the music in my life, and let me tell you, it’s mostly Disney these days playing though my head. Over and over and over and over.

So that’s the inspiration for the sermon title, from the movie “Madagascar.” Singing lemurs, led by their ringtail lemur King Julien, inspiring us as we approach Pentecost.

[Singing and Dancing] “You got to move it, move it. We got to move it, move it. I like to move it, move it. Move it!”

It’s really a Pentecost hymn, you know.

It’s up to us. God creates, sustains, redeems us, for sure. But God empowers us to be actors, to be playwrights, in our own play unfolding. That’s what Pentecost is about. It’s all about us. We got to move it, move it.

And while we’re at it, let’s be sure to change our metaphorical signs, outward and inward, in the church and in our lives, as we live God’s vision in our ever-changing world. So if you remember nothing else from

today's message, remember . . . if we're getting the wrong reaction from our old signs – “Turn Back / The End is Near” – sometimes “Detour / Bridge Out Ahead” may just work too.

Won't you join me in a brief prayer: Eternal God, source of all that is good, and all that we have, we draw close to you today. Grant us strength, grant us courage. As we share our passion for your gospel, take our hearts and set them on fire, so that in our service and our dedication to you, we may find our greatest joy. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Reported by Patricia Cohen, “Epistemic Closure”, New York Times, April 28, 2010, p. C1.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Ehrich, “Multichannel Church”, Presbyterian Outlook, May 17, 2010, p 24.