

Reckless Self-Forgetfulness, Part 1
February 24, 2013
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: Isaiah 58:1-12

Today we take our first steps in a process that I hope will involve every one of you. As we witness here in worship every week, our Lord is continually doing a “new thing” at Caldwell. Now we enter a phase of deep listening – to God and to one another. Your session and others have helped shape a season headlined “Caldwell in 3D: Discernment, Discussion and Dreaming.”

Together, we will discern by sharing and praying over some information intended to stimulate and provoke our collective thinking. Based on that, we will gather in small groups to deepen relationships and to discuss and share our hopes and visions. Then, we will capture our dreams for how we will seek to be the body of Christ in the next three to five years.

I am grateful every day for the Mission Statement that has and will continue to be our compass for the journey. What a rich and hope-giving expression it is. In it reside two words in specific that we are invited to study and ponder. In the second line of that mission statement, we profess that we will “seek to hear God’s call not only as individuals but as a progressive, *missional* community striving to reflect the Kingdom of God in the here and now. The word “missional” is more dangerous that it might sound as I will explain. Then in the fourth line, we claim that we are “called into a meaningful, transformative community” Just as with the word “missional” we dare not take the idea of being transformative or transformed too lightly, for to be truly transformative can lead to hard choices.

So, what does it mean – what might it mean here at the corner of Fifth and Park in Charlotte, North Carolina – to be missional and transformative as the body of Christ? Let us take the next three Sundays to dive into these holy waters, stirred by the Holy Spirit and bubbling with possibility. We start, as we always should, with the word of God.

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In the 58th verse of the prophecy of Isaiah, the word of God is not what God’s people expected.

In these verses, we join God's chosen nation of Israel as it returns from a long and bitter exile. Israel had pleaded with God to return to their homeland and resume life as it had been before being forced out. But when Israel does return to Jerusalem, life is not what they had hoped for. Their great temple, the center and of their faith and their life together, lay in ruin. The land was poor. Socially and economically, God's people struggled to survive.

Before long, as we all do, God's people lapsed into bad habits. In their case that meant poor treatment of the poor, their day laborers and their neighbors. Yes, God's people fasted and went through the motions of worship. But they did so for their own personal benefit. God sees it for what it is, hollow and insincere submission. Through the prophet Isaiah, God rejects Israel's self-absorbed, personal piety and makes plain the kind of worship and service God would rather see (58:6-9).

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

In other words, God says through Isaiah, God's delight lies not in religious practices intended only save one's own soul. God does delight in faith that is matched with works, works of compassion and justice for others.

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As with Israel, the church lost sight of that somewhere along its way, more than a few times.

What started out in the Book of Acts with a tiny sect of marginalized Jesus believers grew and grew over two thousand years to become a global enterprise, sanctioned formally and informally by political and government support. Those on the outside became insiders. Settlers seeking comfort replaced those first bold pioneers willing to go wherever God directed. Especially in the west and north of the equator, what began as a passionate movement became, in too many places, a complacent institution whose leaders traded outward-facing mission for inward-focused maintenance.

Here in America, the popular wings of the church came to be known as the so-called “mainline denominations” - we Presbyterians – along with Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians and others. Over the last 100 years, we preoccupied ourselves with erecting buildings for ourselves and filling them with programs to serve ourselves. When we did “do mission” we did it “to” or maybe “for” others rather than “with” others. We mainline Protestants built colleges and hospitals to proclaim the Gospel. We paid for missionaries to evangelize people on the other side of the world. We had no idea the world outside our door was changing. Or perhaps we just didn’t know what to do about it.

Now, as scholars and church leaders observe, things seem to be coming full circle. We mainline believers are no longer in the main. Tens of millions of Americans have given up on the church, who call themselves spiritual but not religious. There are the “nones” and others whom you’ve heard me discuss before and others who associate the church and its denominations more with hypocrisy than with holiness.

There, too, is the glorious but largely uncharted reality that America is being transformed into a pluralistic stew of creeds and cultures, religions and traditions. Charlotte is ahead of most of the country with:

- 6 Islamic masjids/mosques and many smaller house masjids.
- Two Hindu Temples, growing explosively.
- A Sikh Gurdwara
- 3 Unitarian-Universalist congregations (one brand new)
- A Baha’i Faith Assembly
- 2 Buddhist Temples and a few house temples
- A Sufi gathering
- A Unity congregation
- Two Science of Mind congregations
- Two Reform Jewish temples, 1 Conservative, 1 Lubavitch, 1 Jews for Jesus Temple and 1 Orthodox ... all in Billy Graham’s back yard.

Given these realities, we live in what sociologists and religious leaders alike describe as the post-Christendom era, a time when mainline Christians are moving from being insiders to outsiders. What we do here today, gathering as a people, claiming the same

identity as children of God, worshipping, building community in the name of Christ in order to take Christ's message out in the world, is becoming more and more of a counter-cultural act, perhaps not as much in the South, yet, but increasingly nationwide.

Oh the church at large has tried to reinvent itself. It's become largely non-denominational. We've been given the prosperity gospel. We've seen the rise of the mega-churches. Now it's the multi-site churches that seek to build "brand awareness" and deliver a good customer – or I should say worshipper – experience and to franchise from one city to the next. Other new models and concepts will emerge, some will stick, others will fall. We can only say with any certainty that the future of the church for the children downstairs learning about lent will be far different than it was for us.

In all these ways, we are more like those first apostles in the church's earliest phases, those who sought to spread a movement rather than maintain an institution. Some use a hopeful term to describe these times as the New-Apostolic Era, when the church faces profound but potentially transformational questions.

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All of that, sisters and brothers, forms the context for that one word we focus on today – missional. As one author puts it, the missional church can be an answer to a society that is at best indifferent to the church, at worst antagonistic. The missional church can be an answer in a time when being Christian is an intentional choice but not necessarily a popular one.

The missional church turns to the congregation as its primary structural element rather than depending on higher ecclesiastical government. Commitment and dedication define the missional church rather than efforts to attract and curry favor with members with inward-focused programming, the so-called "build it and they will come" model of church that some say is on the way out.¹

The missional church can be described as the "sent" church, based on the Great Commission Jesus gives the apostles in Matthew 28; "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Jesus says, "Go" not "Stay." The word "apostle" come from the Greek for one who is sent with a purpose or a commission.

¹ Cultivating the Missional Church, Randolph C. Ferebee., p. 12

The way forward, friends, is described often by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said: “It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world.”²

Another leading voice in the early missional church movement belonged to Leslie Newbigin, a Reformed author, theologian and missionary to India. Listen to these words of his:

It will only be by the movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every aspect of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when the local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.³

Did you hear that part – about renouncing an introverted concern for their own life? I told you at the outset that this is dangerous stuff. Our own denominational constitution says the same thing: The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.⁴

In too many places, at too many critical moments in the life of our nation, our city and our denomination, we seemed to have forgotten that. Perhaps because it is not for the faint of heart or the weak in faith.

But it is there we find life, sisters and brothers. It is there God’s church can find new life. We know a little bit about that here at Caldwell. Because of what we have been given here and because of how each of you has engaged in it, we know what it is like to have the chance to strive to be more outward-facing than inward-focused.

We know the blessing of having more than we need and what it means to give it away ... in ways that bring others to our campus and into our lives ... in ways that offer radical hospitality ... in ways that give voice to the voiceless ... in ways that feed the hungry ...

² Ibid, p. 38

³ Ibid, p. 37

⁴ Book of Order, F-1.0301

in ways that shelter to the homeless ... in ways that break down divisions of race and ethnicity ... and in ways that welcome and encourage the immigrant.

O, how we have been blessed!

But I dare say that we are just getting started. The past five years have given us a chance to experiment, to take risk, to achieve financial stability and sustainability, at least for now. But we cannot stay here. Remember, Jesus said to the apostles, “Go” not “Stay.” So now we enter a season of discernment, discussion and dreaming. We do so emboldened and encouraged to believe God’s words that God will give more than “we can ask or imagine according to God’s power that is at work within us.”⁵

God said through the prophet Isaiah:

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

One commentator said what God is asking for is nothing short of “reckless self-forgetfulness.”⁶

May our Lord give us the strength, the courage and the faith to be just that reckless.

Amen.

⁵ Ephesians 3:20

⁶ Tom Currie in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, p.6