

Lengthen the Cords, Strengthen the Stakes

October 14, 2018

H. Stephen Shoemaker

Lengthen the Cords, Strengthen the Stakes. This vivid image from our Hebrew text comes as God's word through the prophet to the Hebrew people languishing in Babylonian captivity.

Enlarge your tent, God was saying. Raise the poles, lengthen the ropes, spread the fabric, and as you do, don't forget to get stronger stakes and drive them deeper into the earth lest the bigger tent collapse. Boy Scouts 101.

I

This text spurred the modern missionary movement. On May 31, 1792 a man named William Carey stood to preach one of the most momentous sermons in the history of Christianity. He was an English cobbler, or shoemaker, a poor, relatively uneducated bi-vocational preacher.

On that day Carey stood to bring the sermon at the associational meeting of 24 modestly sized churches. The place was Friar's Lane Chapel, Nottingham, England. The text, Isaiah 54:

Enlarge the place of thy tent. Stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations.

Lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes. Those words were originally addressed to a captive people. Their nation had been conquered, Jerusalem destroyed, God's holy and inviolable temple violated and in ruins, the Hebrew people dragged off into Exile in Babylon. Into their distress God issued a series of thrilling imperatives:

Awake, awake

Put on your strength

Don your beautiful garments

Shake yourself from the dust

Break forth in singing

Fear not

Lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes.

In other words, get ready to grow!

The Pastor Search Committee talked with me about the need of our church to grow. This sermon begins the conversation about it with you.

The metaphor of the tent is a good one. Extend the poles, spread the fabric, and don't forget to strengthen the stakes lest the enlarged tent collapse. In spiritual terms, we need to grow inward as we grow outward.

What are the stakes we need to strengthen? The book of *Acts* tells us.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

First, we devote ourselves to the Word of God. Like the Hebrew people we are a *listening* people; listening to God, for God in the scriptures. And beyond the scriptures. As the Iona community liturgy says at the reading of the scriptures:

For the Word of God in scripture,

For the Word of God among us,

For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.¹

Second, we devote ourselves to fellowship, *Koinonia*, community.

Christ has called us to be a community of friends. It is one of our strengths

here. Community does not happen automatically. It needs to be a devotion, something we devote ourselves to.

Third, we devote ourselves to the breaking of bread. There are two dimensions to this. First, there is the regular observance of communion. Our monthly communion is one the loveliest things at Grace. The words also pertain to the regular breaking of bread in meals together. As Acts says:

They broke bread in their homes and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and offering grace to each other.

And fourth, a devotion to “the prayers”. Prayers together and prayers alone, prayers that keep the conversation with God alive, prayers of praise and thanksgiving, prayers of confession and intercession, prayers of self-offering. Prayer is part of our ministry of love.

As we grow larger we must drive the stakes stronger into the earth. We need to deepen our devotion to the Word, to the Fellowship, to the Table and to Prayer.

Grace Baptist has a particular witness to make in Statesville as a progressive community of faith within the Baptist tradition. Statesville needs such a church, and as I said last week, God wants and needs churches like ours to thrive. Of course, God wants and needs all churches to thrive. And God uses all flavors of churches to reach people with the gospel, conservative, moderate, progressive, large, small and in between. Different kinds of churches reach people with different spiritual needs. And as Grady Nutt once said, “There’s no competition between light-houses.”

But what do I mean by “progressive”? It can, as all labels, be confusing and limiting.

Diana Butler-Bass, scholar of the church in America, did a major study of churches like ours which were thriving and making a difference. The book is called *Christianity For The Rest Of Us*. The prevailing notion has been that conservative churches were growing and that progressive churches were dying. But in her research she discovered many progressive churches that were thriving and making a difference in these communities.

These churches, she said, practice a faith that is “open and generous, intellectual and emotive, beautiful and just”.² She describes “ten signposts of renewal” in these churches. Here they are.

IV

One: *Hospitality*. That is, welcoming all people, whoever they are and wherever they are in their journey of faith. All churches *say* they welcome all people. Fewer mean it. As Barbara Brown Taylor quipped, The “All-Are-Welcome” signs in most churches have the truth-in-advertising value of those signs in grocery stores that say, “Vine-Ripe Tomatoes.” Can we be a people open to all races, gender orientations, theologies, economic classes and politics? Sadly, churches in America today are becoming *politically* segregated. Red churches and Blue churches. If we choose to be a politically diverse church, we will be a witness for good in a culture descending into tragic polarization. Let’s be a church who welcomes Donkeys, Elephants, Giraffes, Zebras and all manner of political persuasion.

Two: *Discernment*. Being a place where people are actively seeking God’s will and purpose for them, both as a church and as a community of faith. We help people identify their gifts and their call.

Three: *Healing*. God wants for us healing and wholeness. Jesus called his disciples not only to preach and teach but also to heal. Many progressive

churches are becoming more interested in a ministry of healing, healing body, mind and spirit.

Four: *Contemplation*. Encouraging the kind of prayer called contemplation, where we silence our noisy minds, where the mind descends into the heart. Some prayer is *talking* to God, and some prayer is *listening* to God, and some prayer is *being*, being with God. This third kind is contemplation. Thomas Merton, the famous monk said “We expect too much from talking, too little from silence.”

Five: *Testimony*. Bass calls it “Talking the Walk.” We learn to identify and talk about what God has done and is doing in our lives. St. Francis, whose feast day many Christians observed last week, said: “Preach the gospel everywhere. If necessary use words.” Sometimes words are important.

Six: *Diversity*. God delights in diversity. Why else would He/She have made such a world as ours.¹ So we should delight in diversity too. A church growth expert once asked “How much diversity can a church stand?” implying in the question, “Only so much.” My answer is: “The church can stand all the diversity Christ brings to it.” Let’s open our doors, our arms, our hearts to all the diversity Christ brings.

Seven: *Justice*. Being willing to address the manifold kinds of injustice in the world and engage in compassionate action and what I call *justice-making*.

Eight: *Worship*. Worship that is thoughtful and engages the mind. We don't check our brains at the door of the church when we come to church. *And* worship that is emotive and experiential that engages the heart. Worship that beholds the mystery of God. Worship born of amazement.

Nine: *Reflection*. We learn how to *think theologically*. We ask, What is God up to in this? It's what E.F.M., Education for Ministry does. We are enriched by the number of our congregation who have taken this course, with great thanks to Nancy Davis who has led us in this. We think about our faith; we bring our questions, we wrestle with meaning.

Ten: *Beauty*. One of the avenues of God into our lives is beauty. Like the flowers in our worship, like the use of art in our search for God and in God's search of us. Like the beauty of our instrumental and choral music, like the beauty of our hymns.

Hospitality, Discernment, Healing, Contemplation, Testimony, Diversity, Justice, Worship, Reflection, Beauty. Ten sign posts of renewal in churches like ours. Now, none of the churches Bass studied were good in *all*

of these ten. Nor can we be, but together they show us the way toward renewal.

IV

As William Carey came to the climax of his sermon at the associational meeting, he called for the formation of a new missionary society. He uttered two lines which have echoed down through the years:

Expect great things

Attempt great things

Or, as we may have heard it

Expect great things from God

Attempt great things for God.

The next day the modern Protestant missionary movement was born as those 24 small churches banded together and went forward.

One year later Carey himself set sail for India and spent the rest of his life there, during which time he translated the entire Bible into Bengali.

The story is told that on his way by ship to India he at one point took off his ill-fitting wig which had covered his head ever since a disease had left him prematurely bald and flung it into the sea.

There's something that moves me about that. His stripping himself of vanity, his beginning of a new life among the Indian people, his being authentically himself to them. It asks me, What do I need to fling overboard so better to do God's work?

And it brings home what may be the final mark of a community of faith seeking to grow: *Authenticity*. Being an authentic community with an authentic faith. Isn't this what we want to be, want our church to be? *We are not trying to be some other church*, we're trying to be the church that God has called and is calling us to be. If we do that, *be that*, we need not worry about how to grow. We will be the growing, thriving people of God called Grace.

1) Iona Abbey Worship Book (Wild Goose Publications, 2001), p.26

2) Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity For the Rest of Us* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p.4