

“SUMMER REFLECTIONS: *CANOEING THE MOUNTAINS*”

Isaiah 43:15-19; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 7:13-14

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Over the waning weeks of the summer, I've been sharing with you some reflections on the reading I did while I was on a spiritual retreat back in mid-July. Much of my retreat experience was focused inwardly on my own personal and spiritual journey, and I've reported those reflections in two recent sermons. But I also kept an outward focus in my reading, digesting books about the state of the Church and the work of ministry, and I want to share something of what I learned in these areas as well. Even though I have 43 years under my belt as a pastor, you should know that I'm still open to new insights and trying to remain current with the latest thinking about the Church and its mission.

And so, in this final sermon of the series, I'll be reflecting on a book I read written by a church consultant named Tod Bolsinger, a volume entitled, *Canoeing the Mountains*. The title is meant to be ironic and catch our attention, and I hope it has caught yours as it did mine. Here's where it came from. In the first decade of the 1800's, when Lewis and Clark went on their famous expedition to find a passage to the Pacific Ocean, they traveled north by canoe all the way to the source of the Mississippi River. They were expecting to find another passageway by water that would take them to their final destination. But when they looked westward, what they saw was not a body of water but a range of mountains – high, rugged, imposing mountains! The mode of travel they had employed up to that point was now useless. They didn't need canoes and paddles to get to the Pacific; they needed pack animals and hiking boots!

And this is where Tod Bolsinger derived the title of his book, *Canoeing the Mountains*. He notes that the Church faces a situation in the 21st Century similar to the one Lewis and Clark faced in the 19th Century. For decades, we've done ministry utilizing a certain set of assumptions and tools; but we now find ourselves in a new, unexpected situation that calls for a different point of view and a different skill-set. If you and I aren't attentive to the changes taking place around us and don't adapt to them, we'll be like explorers who are trying to cross mountains in canoes!

The changes I'm talking about should be as obvious to you as they are to me. When I was in seminary nearly 50 years ago, the local church was the Sunday morning place to be for a majority of Americans. For the most part, pastors could be assured that they would be preaching in sanctuaries that were full of worshipers. Since then, the institutional Church has been in serious decline. To show you how far we have fallen over the last half-century, I'll quote a story Tod Bolsinger tells in his book:

“One night after a long day of meetings, an older pastor let out a heavy sigh. He was nearing retirement, and we were working together on a project that was supposed to reorganize our entire denomination in order to help our church better minister to a changing world. And *that* changing world weighed on him. He remembered well how not long ago life was different. He said to me, ‘You know, when I began my ministry in a church in Alabama, I never worried

about church growth or worship attendance or evangelism. Back then, *if a man didn't come to church on Sunday, his boss asked him about it at work on Monday.*”

Sociologists and historians refer to this recently-passed period as “Christendom,” the seventeen-hundred-year-long era when Christianity stood at the privileged center of Western society. To quote Bolsinger again, “Christendom gave us ‘blue laws’ and the Ten Commandments in school. It gave us ‘under God’ in the pledge of allegiance and exhortations to Bible reading in the national newspapers . . . It was the day when every ‘city father’ laid out the town square with the court house, the library and a First Church of [some denomination] within the center of the city.” Adding to Bolsinger’s list, Christendom also gave the institutional Church big numbers in the pews and the offering plates.

But for most of us, these days are long gone; Christendom is a relic of the past. Bolsinger observes that we now live in an age “when Sundays are more about soccer and Starbucks than about Sabbath, when Christian student groups are getting de-recognized on university campuses, when the fastest growing religious affiliation among young adults is ‘none,’ when there is no moral consensus built on Christian tradition (even among Christians), when even a funeral in a conservative beach town is more likely to be a Hawaiian-style ‘paddle out’ than a gathering in a sanctuary.”

You and I feel the effects of these changes in our own sanctuary and even more so in our wider denomination. At its peak several decades ago, the United Methodist Church had 10½ million members in America alone. Today, Methodists in the U.S. number about 7 million. Our membership total here in Woodbury has defied this trend, growing from 204 to 233 over the past six years; but the number of people in the pews tells a different story. As recently as 2016, our average worship attendance was 94; the following year, it was 85; last year it was 71. On this traditional Rally Day, it’s worth noting that we are now offering only two Sunday School classes for children and youth, for the simple reason that our number of eligible students has shrunk considerably.

I report these figures not to alarm, much less blame, anyone. How could I, when so many of you have remained faithful through the thick and thin of our church’s recent history? But the truth is, Woodbury UMC is likely feeling the same pinch felt by thousands of congregations nationwide. Churches are losing active participants faster than they are gaining them; and the fields around us, though “white with harvest,” are becoming more and more resistant to sowing and reaping. A lot of church members are keeping their distance or leaving their congregations outright; and most unchurched people, especially younger ones, are simply not interested in organized religion.

Now, all kinds of factors have been cited to explain these downward trends. Some observe that other religions and quasi-religions have made a sizable dent on our Christian majority. Others claim that our society has become more secularized and materialistic and has turned its back on God altogether. Some say the Church is behind the times and out of touch with the needs of today’s culture, while others say the Church has gotten too cozy with the culture and compromised its basic principles. Some folks have gotten hurt and disillusioned by their previous church experience and aren’t motivated to find a better alternative. Others are tired of the struggle to keep their churches alive and viable, and simply give up.

However, there is one explanation for church decline which I believe is the most obvious and pertinent. Simply stated, people today have more choices than they had fifty years ago. When I was growing up in South Texas in the 1950's, Sunday School and worship were the sole activities available to me on a Sunday morning. Going to church was the only choice; and if there had been other choices, my parents would have made the choice for me and taken me to church! But for most persons today, church attendance is just one of many items on a cafeteria line of possible pursuits on Sunday mornings. You know what they are: working, studying, shopping, leisure activities, athletic and cultural events, and just plain old "down time" to rest and be together with our families. And for a lot of people, corporate worship is not the most compelling entrée on the cafeteria line! Granted, many of these folks still claim to believe in God and be "spiritual," but they choose to practice their spirituality in private ways.

What this means for Christianity is that church membership no longer comes with the territory of being an American citizen; it is now a matter of choice, and more and more people are choosing not to affiliate or participate in organized religion.

Now let me ask you: has it ever occurred to you that there is a silver lining in this dark cloud? Before we rush to judge other people for not being religious or get into a panic mode about the future of the institutional Church, let's be reminded of an important truth: faith in Christ and faithful church membership were always intended to be matters of choice. If you and I are practicing Christians simply because such a practice "runs in the family" or because Christianity is the majority religion in America, then we aren't very Christian! When Jesus calls his first disciples, he asks them to make a choice – to choose the kingdom of God over some very attractive alternatives. He asks them to lay down their fishing nets, or to forsake their dependency on riches, or to let the dead bury their own dead, and follow him. Jesus doesn't want people merely to rubber stamp their religious heritage; he isn't interested in winning a popularity contest for himself; he is concerned to make true disciples who will eventually become committed church members.

And here's the surprising element in all this: Jesus' invitation is certainly open to all people, but he recognizes that most will not be able or willing to accept his invitation. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks in no uncertain terms of the difficulty of entering God's kingdom: "the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:14). I've often wondered if church growth experts have ever read that saying! These gurus keep us fretting and feeling guilty about declining numbers in our pews; but it seems that Jesus isn't as concerned about big numbers as he is big commitment. Because discipleship really means something and costs something, Jesus prophesies that the number of his committed followers will turn out to be small! His prediction seemed to be contradicted by the astounding growth of Christianity, which soon became the dominant religion in the West; but perhaps Jesus' prophecy is now being fulfilled in our post-Christian age.

What I'm suggesting is that the death of Christendom may actually be a good thing; it may signal the birth of a Church that is leaner but stronger, a Church consisting of people who have made a deliberate choice to follow Christ and be a vital part of Christ's Body, a Church made up of serious disciples, not just a bunch of names on a church roll.

At the same time, one indispensable part of being a disciple is to make other disciples. Churches that are small or getting smaller are still obligated to share the good news and invite

others to receive it. But this is no easy task in Woodbury, Connecticut, or any place where religion is just one entrée on the cafeteria line, and not a very appealing entrée to many. Faith communities today face formidable challenges if they want to remain vital and relevant. Like Lewis and Clark, we have arrived at the source of the Mississippi, and all we can see is mountains, not water. So, what kind of map and equipment do we need to cross the mountains?

My reading over the summer has convinced me that all churches, including ours, must adopt at least two strategies if we want to have a viable, meaningful future. First, the Church must maintain its integrity even in changing times. When Lewis and Clark encountered mountains instead of water, they didn't give up being explorers and abandon their journey. They didn't forget who sent them and why they were sent. They remained Lewis and Clark, following the orders of Thomas Jefferson. In the same way, the Church must remain faithful to its message, to its mission, and to the One who commissioned us, even as the world around us changes dramatically.

For starters, we must remember that Christian congregations are not just social clubs or community service organizations. We are a people set apart to be the Body of Christ in the world. And this Body is not to be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:13) or by the latest cultural trends. As Paul famously put it to the Romans, we must not be “conformed to the world but [rather] be transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12:2). We must remain committed to the faith once delivered to the saints – faith in a sovereign God; faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ; and in our case as Methodists, fidelity to the Wesleyan tradition, which emphasizes both love of God and love of neighbor. In so doing, we'll be offering people “a choice, not an echo” – the same choice Jesus offers to people in his time. If we water down or dress up our invitation to make it pleasing to the most number of folks, we will do both them and the gospel a great disservice. If we offer people the choice of real discipleship, they may reject it, but at least they will have that choice.

And then, alongside integrity, the other stance the Church must assume is that of flexibility. Now, I realize that maintaining both integrity and flexibility may sound like contradictory goals, but they are not. We can remain who we are and continue believing what we believe, and, at the same time, be open to new ways of expressing and applying the timeless gospel. This is where I found the book by Tod Bolsinger to be especially helpful. Again, he likens today's Church to a team of explorers venturing into uncharted territory. Quite unexpectedly, we find ourselves trying to traverse mountains instead of waters, and canoes just will not do as a mode of transportation. Our goal remains the same, but we'll need different vehicles in order to reach that goal. And so, our own church may need to find new organizational forms to make our ministry more efficient and effective. We may need to offer fresh styles of worship in order to appeal to outsiders who don't know the Doxology from “Do Re Mi.” Above all, we surely need church leaders – and that includes your 71-year old pastor – who refuse to say, “But we've never done it that way before.” In sum, the Church of the future must continue to tell the “old, old story,” but also be creative in how we tell it.

In today's Old Testament reading, we find the people of Israel languishing as captives in exile, doubting that they will ever be set free to return to their Promised Land. What's more, if they do have the good fortune to go home, they assume that their lives will be the same as they were before they were carted away to Babylon. In other words, they are stuck in the past and paralyzed in the present. But the prophet Isaiah speaks an unexpected word from God: “Do not

remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 3:18-19a). God is telling the Israelites that they indeed have a future, but the future God gives them will be different from the future they expect.

Friends, what if God is speaking this same word to the Church in the 21st Century? What if God wants us to stop pining for the "good ol' days" when our Sunday School classes and sanctuaries were brimming with people and our ministry was carried out in familiar and successful ways? What if God is doing a "new thing" with the Church, which requires us to be open to adventure and innovation? If God is flexible in God's methods, shouldn't we also be flexible?

Flexibility means that we as a church need not only to think outside the box; we need to live outside the box. In the golden age of Christendom, we could just open our doors, say "Come inside," and people would readily enter. But now, when we say "Come," many people, including some of our own church members, decline or ignore our invitation and choose to spend their Sundays elsewhere. And so, our motto for this post-Christian age must become the same as it was in the pre-Christian age. Our motto can no longer be "Come"; it must be "Go." "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

In practical terms, this means you and I must redefine "church activities" to include our relationships and acts of service outside the walls of the church. We must be visible out there because we are not visible in here. When you and I express care for inactive church members, when we serve clients at the Food Bank, when we interact with waitresses at a local diner, when we show up and speak out at a meeting of our town's Board of Selectmen, we are not only fulfilling the Great Commission; we are reaching people the only way many of them can be reached – by meeting them on their turf, by loving them where they are and as they are. And, who knows – after we have obeyed Jesus' command to "go," outsiders might just "come" and see what we and the gospel we proclaim are all about.

Friends, it is impossible for the Church to "canoe the mountains"; but with unflagging faith and the right tools and maps, we can cross the mountains we are facing, get to our own Pacific Ocean, and accomplish our mission as the people of God. So let it be!