



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Power of Passion: What's a Church to Do
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

April 13, 2008
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 2:42-47

Last week I had the great joy of teaching our confirmation class and their mentors about worship, and one of the things we talked about is that worship is what makes the church the church. But here in our reading from Acts, we get a chance to see a few other things that mark Christ's Church.

I said last week that for John Calvin, the marks of the authentic church were where the Word was rightly preached, the sacraments rightly celebrated and that you could find that among Christians of all types. In our reading from Acts today, we hear the biblical basis of that: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Now I am not going to repeat what I said last week about Reformed worship as Word and Sacrament together on the Lord's Day. Rather, I want to explore the other three marks that are directly related to our worship. Worship is, after all, the well from which our common life emerges and the summit to which our common life flows. Worship is the place we must return on a weekly basis, if we are to be nourished and supported that we may mature into the fullness of Christ. That is the first point: worship was essential to the early church. They knew they must be there if they were to grow in grace and truth, if they were to be fortified for their own daily ministries.

I can remember during orientation at Louisville Seminary when one of the professors talked to us about the daily services in the chapel. I'll never forget his language in describing our attendance. He said it's not required, but it is normative. In other words, it was clearly an expectation that we join the community in worship.

This is what lies behind what we tell people in our Inquirers' Classes as the first expectation for members: worship every Lord's Day when physically able, here, when in town, and the nearest Christian church when elsewhere, for Christ is present in each of those places as well. That expectation has less to do with keeping our own sanctuary full than with the pastoral concern to help our members grow in grace. In worship we come into the transforming presence of Jesus Christ as he reveals himself in the Word proclaimed, in the breaking of bread, and respond to our expressions of praise, concern and need in prayers offered to God in and through him. Faithful participation in such worship is the first mark of the faithful church. Let me challenge you to make attending worship every week a priority for your own discipleship.

But Luke doesn't stop there. He also tells us that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. The second mark of a faithful church is its investment in continuing to learn about its faith. Christian education is not an option, but a necessity, a matter of equipping us to live faithfully in the world. And it's not just for our children only. At its best, a community of faith is made up of people who continue to learn and grow in the faith, and who struggle to sort out the center and learn what it means for us in our day to

day lives to live as followers of Jesus.

Here at Massanutten, it starts in the nursery with a level of care and devotion that reveals God's love. It moves into the children's church school and Faith Village, is deepened on Wednesday evenings with WOW, and continues through confirmation and into a Senior High program. All of this is designed to nurture and teach our young people an alternative to the other gospels being preached in every other corner of their lives. And if you don't think that our children are surrounded by competing visions about how life should be lived, then you are fooling yourselves. In the light of all that we see going on around us in the broader culture, we need to ask ourselves what it is of lasting value we have to give our children? Here they are learning that following Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is not the same as being a good scout, or good citizen, though they can certainly do both. It is about learning to live with and follow the one who calls them to a dedicated discipleship. It is about following his voice rather than the distorted voices seen and heard in their magazines or television screens, and for this generation, on My Space or Facebook pages on the Internet. What an extraordinarily difficult time to grow up. That is why we have our mid-week program and church school. That is why we take confirmation so seriously. That is why we make working with our youth a priority.

But surely you've seen that life doesn't get easier as we grow older, but simply more complex. That's why it's critical that we deepen our adult education offerings here on Sunday mornings. We want you to be able to engage the scriptures and one another, to ask questions, and to come back the following week to ask further questions. And, of course, it happens not just on Sunday morning. You will find three groups involved in weekly Disciple Bible Studies here at the church. You will find it on selected Wednesday evenings as people come together to more fully understand how to live as Christ's people in this world. Such is one of the marks of a faithful church. And so we tell potential new members that one of our expectations for them is to find a place in our common life where they can continue to grow in their understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Now I want to challenge you to watch the bulletin and newsletter for opportunities to gather with others for study, and then make the commitment to participate in them.

"But wait," cries Luke. "There's more!" "They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." With glad and generous hearts they praised God in this way. Generous giving is one of the marks of a faithful church. In the church of the New Testament giving was understood to be a privilege, a means of sharing in the self-giving of Christ for us. It was a means of supporting not only their common life, but also of sharing what they knew they had received. Later, as the Jerusalem church came under great hardship and suffering because of its persecution, the Gentile church rose up to meet their need. The Apostle Paul moved through the churches of Asia Minor and Greece taking up a collection to see to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. Such generosity has always been a mark of the authentic church.

How then, in our contemporary culture, has it also become a mark of derision? We all know the joke about the minister, who in the midst of a crisis was asked to do something religious, and so he took up an offering. Not too long ago I was listening to a young

couple describe how they had stood up in the middle of a sermon about stewardship and had walked out the door to another congregation. They were offended that their church would express any concern about how they treated their money or their giving.

Luke paints a different picture of the early church and its disciples. With glad and generous hearts they praised God. Giving is one of the ways we worship God. In fact, for some it is a primary way in which they can serve God.

My best friend Chris Joiner, who is the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Franklin, TN, recently told me an amazing story. That congregation's elders were asked to read a fairly new book about stewardship called *Ask, Thank, Tell*. It's by Charles Lane, and it's been a very significant resource for our congregation as well. Chris told me that one of his elders was so moved by the book, that he decided to give away a car he was in the process of selling. The buyer was a young college student who was trying to make every penny count, so the elder contacted the broker of the deal, and told him that he was simply going to give the car to the student. Naturally, the broker asked about his reasoning, and he mentioned the book. The broker then told that story to his daughter, who decided to do the very same thing. When experienced, the spirit of generosity is contagious.

Giving is a mark of our faithfulness and one of the expectations of membership here. We tell potential new members—though rather softly—that we expect a pledge from them that they will be able to honor. When they ask us how much, I always respond, “Whatever you think will be a worthy expression of your awareness of what God has done and is doing in your life.” Only you can decide that. We will challenge you to consider tithing. But if you are not currently giving 10% of your annual income away, the important thing is that you make a financial commitment and keep it.” As God has blessed you with resources, so share them. It is one of the ways you worship and serve God.

We have experienced remarkable growth in stewardship and giving here over the past 18 months. For this year, we had 30 new pledges and 88 increased pledges to our annual financial campaign. I strongly believe this dramatic increase comes from deepening our understanding that our giving is an act of worship.

And now the fourth mark. “Day by day the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved.” The explosive growth of the early church was no accident. It was God's work among them. Luke wants us to be absolutely sure of that. It is God who awakens in people a longing for himself. It is God who nudges people to go looking for what will refresh their spirits. It is God who awakens in people a need for faith. But it is God's people who share the faith by inviting others to come and see. We call it evangelism. It is the fourth mark of a faithful church.

Evangelism comes from a Greek word which simply means “good news.” Evangelism is bringing good news, being bearers of good news. The best definition I know of evangelism is attributed to the Asian Christian evangelist D.T. Niles. Dr. Niles defined evangelism as “one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread.” That's good news. Evangelism is not about arguing someone out of hell and into heaven. It is simply announcing the discovery of something so good you want to share it with others.

It can be done in many ways. We do it through ministries of care like our Food Pantry, and assistance programs, and caring for our neighbors near and far. As we share

our resources and share ourselves we announce good news about the one who is Lord of our lives. And always, it is done for God. Of all the things we can do through our giving – feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, caring for refugees, the list goes on – none is worth much unless we are also sharing the good news of God’s love for them in Jesus Christ. Indeed, our action is an expression of God’s love. But let us not miss the opportunity to also speak that word.

We do evangelism by our presence at this crossroads of real life and abundant grace, and by the way we make this building accessible and available to the needs of those in our community. The building is, after all, an extension of our congregation’s ministry—a resource to be used by God to extend the hospitality of Christ to all who enter these doors for whatever reason.

All of these things we do together in this building here at the crossroads are important, but the most effective way to do evangelism is through each of you. And so I want to challenge you to invite two non-churched friends to worship with you between now and June. And the key to this is for you to think of people you know who are not part of a congregation and pray for them to be open to your invitation. And then simply invite them to join you in worship next week.

Worship, study, giving – of time, talent, treasure – and announcing good news in word and deed, these are the marks of faithfulness. Where it exists, day by day, the Lord adds numbers to those who are being saved.