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Fruitful and Faithful
Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17

My Baptist background had me growing up in a church in which a revival was held every Spring and every Fall. Usually, the guest preacher would begin one Sunday morning and preach every evening, including Saturday night, until the next Sunday morning. Since many of my friends would be there, I usually looked forward to the evening, though I don't recall having an option *not* to go. During the course of the week, we would hear at least once the words: "If only one person makes a decision for Christ, all of the time and effort will have been worth it."

Later, in my first called position as a pastor in Blackville, South Carolina, I heard that phrase used again. This time the words came from a layman who had asked for some time at the county ministerial association. He wanted to promote an area-wide crusade involving all county churches. He had already selected the speaker, with no input from any of the ministers, including his own pastor. I knew the proposed crusade speaker who had a grand reputation for splitting churches. That's when I heard the guilt-evoking words, void of any emphasis on excellence, efficiency, or stewardship: "If only one person comes to know Christ, all the time, effort, and money will have been worth it." My thoughts ran its course then, as it has every time I've heard that or similar phrases: "If another approach resulted in fifty people coming to a personal relationship with God, wouldn't that be a more worthy approach?" I declined to participate.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said to his followers: "I have appointed you to go and bear fruit..." (John 15:16). It was Jesus' words of commission—"I want you to be successful in making a difference in the lives of other people!" That is the commission of every follower and every church—to be effective in making a positive difference in the lives of others. "Bear fruit." Let others know how a personal relationship with God through the presence of the risen Christ can liberate one's life. Leaders within the church see their responsibility in terms of "bearing fruit," rather than just being faithful. Leaders help their church embrace

corporate spiritual health and reject dysfunctional corporate behavior. Leaders know how to establish priorities...they have the ability to look at the large picture rather than their pet project...they can make a decision even when it is unpopular and painful. Leaders know how to compromise for the good and health of church.

As a denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has lost 45% of its membership during the last forty-three years—4 million members in 1965; 2.2 million members in 2008. The Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and other mainline churches have been in decline, as well. So have the Catholic and Southern Baptist Churches for the past ten years.

Six months ago, our presbytery started a very broad “needs assessment” process with the intention of developing realistic, measurable goals. It is basically the process of coming to a consensus about the five or six most important things that need to be done and aligning the resources of people, energy, money, and time to focus on those things. It may mean eliminating things that were once useful, but no longer are. I will mean abandoning programs that are unproductive. It always means setting aside the mentality of “we’ve always done it this way.”

An early phase of this process was for each session in each church to move through a prioritizing experience. Our Session went through this presbytery assessment last October, led by one of the Listening Team members from another church. As a member of the presbytery “Listening Teams” I facilitated this process in a couple of churches in the presbytery.

The process for each church—each session—was to divide the larger group into smaller groups of five. The first exercise was to have each small group describe their church as it is now, then to describe it as they would like to see it in five years. To facilitate this process, each group was to draw a picture of a bus that symbolized their church “now,” and to draw a picture of a bus that symbolized how they wanted their church to be in five years. As you can imagine, buses in the first “drawing” all looked very similar—run-down with only a few not-so-happy people in them. Buses in the second drawing also looked very similar in each small group—buses bulging with people, plenty of teenagers and children. In one church the bus had even become a double-decker

to accommodate all the passengers.

The second phase of the process was for each small group to quickly develop a list of how the presbytery could help each church toward their desired goal (what the second bus looked like). Then, all of the listings were compiled into a single list and the group was to establish a new list in order of priority—what is the most important way presbytery can help, what is second, third, fourth, and fifth.

In the meeting with one of the churches I was assigned, we got to the part of prioritizing the combined list when someone interrupted me. “Will our list of priorities impact the presbytery budget?”

“It should,” I responded, “but that is not our concern at this point. You need to give presbytery your unbiased consensus about how you think they can best help you become that which you have described in the drawing of your second bus.”

“But,” she interrupted again, “our mission program in Africa is important and has to be supported. We can’t let presbytery drop support in that!” I tried, again, to call for their purest thoughts of how to get from “here” to “there.” Yet, as they began their priority-voting process on the greatest needs, the Kinshasa Mission Project came in #1. “That is the most important factor in your church moving from too many empty pews to a church growing with new members and new programs?” I thought. Don’t get me wrong; I fully supportive of international missions, but this was a classic example of “we’ve always done it that way” even though setting that program in the “most important” category would mean continued decline of church growth.

We’ve made many mistakes as a denomination; as individual churches, and as individual people, we’ve all made our mistakes. But, if we learn from these mistakes, they will drive us forward to a healthier new future.

For the past three Januaries, I have attended an ecumenical conference at Epworth by the Sea—a United Methodist Conference Center named in honor of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. But, the real story behind

John Wesley is somewhat different than the one we might have heard.¹

John Wesley was a Church of England priest who upon graduating from Oxford wanted to make a difference for Jesus. He wanted to go to the “ends of the earth” for his faith. At that time, Georgia was the Australia of the world. Its population was comprised of English prisoners who were released on condition of coming to the new world, in addition to the “savages,” as they were referred to in books—Native Americans. Georgia also had many slaves working the large cotton plantations. The only way you got to Georgia as a missionary was either (1) you had flunked out of divinity school and the bishop didn’t think you worthy to serve as a priest in your home land, or (2) you were so passionate about your faith that you *chose* to come to the new world. The second was Wesley’s reason.

Not long after arriving in Georgia, Wesley fell in love with the governor’s daughter, but she did not share his feelings and rejected his overtures. With crushed feelings, he refused to serve her Holy Communion on Sundays, which didn’t set well with the governor. It wasn’t long before John Wesley was on a boat headed back to England as a defeated man.

On that same boat, a group of Moravian missionaries were heading home to England after a successful tenure in Georgia. Wesley noticed that those Moravians had something he didn’t—a happiness he desired. His new friends invited him to attend their meetings at Aldersgate Street, which he eventually did some years later. At that meeting Wesley attended, the Moravians were reading from the book of Romans when he felt his heart “strangely warmed.”

Now, had John Wesley never come to Georgia in the new world, he would not have met the governor’s daughter, that ultimately led to failure in his ministry, and his boarding a ship to return to his native England, defeated. Had he not been on that boat, he would have never met the Moravian missionaries who invited him to the meetings on Aldersgate Street. Had he not gone to one of those meetings, he would not have had that powerful spiritual experience. And, had he not experienced the Aldersgate Street meeting, the Methodist Church might never have come into existence.

¹ Diana Butler Bass in her lecture, “A Realistic Sense of History,” “January Adventure of Emerging Christianity,” January 2009.

Within the mystery of God and our best devotion to follow in God's Way, our weaknesses, our mistakes, and our failures can become our strength. Perhaps the words of George Bernard Shaw in *Back to Methuselah* can become a prayer for each of us this day: "You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?"

Prayer

You call us to follow, to believe, to be stewards of all our resources, and to bear fruit. Take our hearts, our best talents, and our resources and use them for your Kingdom's sake, in the name of Jesus we pray. AMEN.

John 15:9-17

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.