



“Hanging On or Handing On?”

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I remember flipping through the pages of a church magazine many years ago. It was a Monday morning, and I was heading to the back pages, the classified ads. That’s where all the churches posted positions when they were looking to hire a new pastor. I was just finishing up my doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University, and it was time now for me to figure out where I was going next. I needed a job, I needed a call, and I was looking for the right church. Let me tell you, of all the churches that posted magazine ads that day, I don’t remember any of them except one. One ad jumped off the page and spoke to me so profoundly; it stirred so much imagination and vision and theological reflection that the ad has stuck with me to this very day.

The ad simply said this: “Congregation seeks pastor who will lead the world back to church.”

When I saw that ad, the very first thing that got stirred in my mind was my ego. I started thinking, “what a triumphant vision this conjures up!” I could picture myself marching through the streets of this small town where the church was located, and calling out to the world (whatever that meant) to come back to church. Maybe I could be that pastor to lead them to come back to church. “Come one, come all!” I would shout to people on the sides of the street. “Come and worship our great and glorious God, full of love and grace! Come one, come all!”

In my mind's imagination, I could see people falling in behind me. There were children carrying puppy dogs and kitties, some were carrying balloons and streamers. I could see young couples pushing strollers. There were singles, there were doubles, there were families strolling together. Older people in the parade were throwing their canes aside and kicking aside their walkers as this pastor led the world back to church. I felt like a modern-day Pied Piper. Better yet, I thought myself to be a little bit like Harold Hill from the Music Man. Out in front, "76 trombones led the big parade". And we all paraded down the street to Main and South. I don't know if the town had a Main and South, but it sure did in my imagination. We paraded down to the church and we came up the steps. It didn't have a ramp or a lift in my imagination, but we didn't need them. This pastor was leading them all to church! There was an elderly couple in my imagination, and they creaked open those heavy doors to the church and welcomed us all inside. We all filed inside and filed into our pews and joined hands and starting singing the songs of our faith. "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation!" It was such a wonderful vision, and as you can see, I have a very active imagination.

When my ego came back to earth, when my sense of pride settled for a moment, I started to ask myself, "Why does that sound so appealing to my ego? What kind of church would really want a pastor who would lead the world back to church?" Does the world even want to come back to church? If you go by the statistics in this nation, I'm not even sure if half the Christians want to go back to church anymore. What a challenge for a pastor to lead the world back to church. But there was something even more troubling than that: I started holding my ego and sense of self next to Jesus, and I thought, "Is this the church that Jesus wants? Does Jesus want a pastor that will lead the world back to church?"

If you think about it, Jesus did the majority of his ministry outside the church. Almost all of his ministry was in the world; in fact, the first time I can think of Jesus being in the church of his day doing ministry work was when he was casting demons out of the church. The second time he was in his hometown synagogue, and they were casting him out of the church. He was reading from the Book of Isaiah, proclaiming that the

Word of God had become flesh, and they chased him out. The rest of his adult ministry happened in the world. Jesus was crossing lines and boundaries in order to reach people with the Good News of God's love. He crossed lines of gender, sex, nationality, ethnicity, religion – he crossed it all so he could reach the world. Jesus, you might say, was in the world and for the world.

Then I thought about the very essence of my own call. From day one and right through to this day, I believe firmly that our role as Christians is to be in the world and for the world. Our job is to go out to the people who have yet to hear the Word, or people who are hurting or lost or lonely and bring to them the Good News of Jesus Christ! I'm not sure I really needed to be in a church who wanted a pastor to bring the world back to church. I did my theological reflection there in the back pages of that church magazine and thought, "My ego and this ad... they're both out of order." By out of order, I mean if you shuffled the words around a little bit that the theology is better. If you shuffle the words around a little, you don't get this triumphal ad. Think of Jesus at his triumphal procession to Jerusalem - he was on the back of a jackass. He wasn't some Harold parading people into the church at all. If you re-ordered the words a bit, you got a better theology, at least one that spoke more to my experience in the church and what the church's experience has been for the past 2000 years.

Rather than an ad that says, "Congregation seeks pastors who will lead the world back to church," what if that ad read, "Congregation seeks pastor just foolish enough to lead a courageous and faithful congregation to the world"? Isn't that what our faith is really about? About the people of God being clothed with power from on high, the Holy Spirit animating our faith, filling us with courage, joy, and conviction and leading us into the world that we might share the Good News there? The great Austrian composer Gustav Mahler once said, "The tradition is the handing on of the flame, not the worshiping of the ashes." I think the same thing can be said about the church and its faith. Faith is about the handing on of the flame and not worshiping the ashes. It's about us being filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit and being sent into the world that we might share the flame and the light of God's love with everyone we meet along the way.

Today's Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church, the birthday of the Christian movement. It's been said that these stories we tell, the birth narratives we tell about our lives, often shape the rest of our lives. The stories our parents might have told about us when we were born somehow affect and shape the rest of our lives. My wife and I have stories we tell about our children and the day they were born or the days leading up to it, and those stories have become a part of their life stories. Guess what? The church has a birth narrative too. It has a story that we tell over and over again, and it's a story that shapes our identity and theological understanding of who we are as the people of God. The birth narrative happened 2000 years ago.

Luke said in the Book of Acts that the first church was not very impressive. If you read the first chapter, the second half says it was about 120-130 disciples of Jesus, who were waiting in the city just as Jesus had called them to do. Every day they worshiped in the temple with great joy, but they began becoming a bit stressed. They're overcome with fear and anxiety, although Luke doesn't tell us why (John has a post-resurrection story that might give us an idea as to why they might be frightened). After all, they were followers of this criminal Jesus! They were followers of someone who was tried, convicted, and executed for a political crime, and to claim that they had some sort of affiliation as student or disciples, their own lives might be put in jeopardy.

Luke does not say that, however; he just says that they were hanging out in this house, all 120 or 130 of them, and they're meeting in an upper room to take care of business. This is why I think we understand them to be a little anxious, because Luke says in that upper room, they held the very first congregational meeting ever. I think that's what churches do when they're hungry for a vision, or they thirst for God's Holy Spirit. I think they do administrative work. Don't get me wrong; there's nothing wrong with the administrative tasks of the church. I'm proud to be a Presbyterian and I'm proud to do things decently and in order. I'm glad we have this democratic organization. But if that's all you're doing is administrative work, you might be in trouble, and that's really all they were doing. They were worshipping and holding congregational meetings. They weren't going into the world yet because there was no mission and no vision.

You know what they were meeting about? They were meeting to elect new Elders for the Session or, to use their language, they were electing a new apostle for the vacancy that was left when Judas died by suicide. Then there were only 11 apostles, and they needed someone to come in and fill the rest of Judas' term. They had two nominations, and they debated and prayed. "Who does God want us to elect to replace Judas?" The person they elected was Matthias, and he became the 12th. That was the church before the Holy Spirit. There's a Presbyterian scholar named Tom Long, and he said, "This is the first church. Not the church at its best, but the first church. Locked up in fear, entangled in administrative tasks and duties, a church without vision and without the power of the Holy Spirit".

And then it happened. Luke says that the Holy Spirit came upon that first church with a rush of a violent wind. I love how we sing "Spirit of Gentleness" in the church; it's one of my favorite hymns and I sometimes like to strum it out on guitar. It's lovely, but that's not what Luke said happened in Jerusalem that harvest festival Pentecost day. He said the Spirit came with the rush of a violent wind! I think people who live in southern Ohio during tornado season understand "rush of violent wind", don't they? If I was telling this story to children today, I would say that the Holy Spirit huffed, that the Holy Spirit puffed, and it blew open their locked windows. The Holy Spirit huffed and puffed and blew open their locked doors. The Holy Spirit huffed and puffed and blew open their fearful and locked hearts, and filled them with joy and conviction and a power that animated them. It filled them and lifted them up out of their seats and their one locked house and out into the streets, where people from all over the world had gathered for the harvest festival.

They spoke all sorts of different languages, and according to Luke, people were perplexed by what was going on. This group of 120-130 people moved into this street, and there's this preaching about God's Good News and God's love and Jesus Christ. They've gone into the world and for the world, they've passed the flame of faith. They can't get it at first; some people gather around and think, "These are the followers of

Jesus. They must be drunk on the new wine.” I love Peter’s response; to me, it’s one of the funniest lines in the New Testament: “People of Judea, these people are not drunk as you suppose, for it’s only 9 o’clock in the morning!” This is what the prophet Joel had prophesied, that God’s Spirit would overtake people and they’d come in the world with God’s power and speak with faith and conviction. People understood it didn’t matter what language they spoke.

The only other thing I likened this to is on certain Sundays when I preach, after worship people will greet me and say, “Pastor, you spoke directly to me today. When you said such-and-such, it spoke directly to my heart. You were talking about me, weren’t you?” In my mind, I’m thinking, “I don’t remember saying such-and-such,” yet you all heard it. You all witnessed it. Such is the power of God speaking through the Holy Spirit, for the only other thing I can likened it to is when a friend of mine came to speak in a rural church where I was pastoring many years ago. He was the lead evangelist for the United Church of Christ in Zaire, and he was working on his Ph.D at McGill University in Montreal. We were taking classes together and we got to know each other and I said, “Would you consider coming out to my little rural church and speak during a week of prayer for Christian unity? It’s a unique opportunity and it’s rare that we would have someone of your stature to come talk to us about faith.” He agreed and stayed with our family, but the challenge was that he spoke six different languages but terrible at English. He struggled with English and kept trying to talk about the “-isms” of our world. We rehearsed at our house the night before and we prayed, and as long as people lean into the preaching and listen with their hearts, maybe they’ll hear.

But when he preached, it was a struggle for even me to understand what he was saying, and I’m thinking, “This church is going to run me out of town. They’re going to be so upset that I brought him here and they don’t understand. Maybe they thought I was trying to get out of preaching that day.” But I remember we gathered around tables in the fellowship hall after worship, and over coffee we were talking about worship. I dared to ask the people at my table, “What did you think of the sermon today?” I remember this older gentleman at our table said, “Well, Pastor Giuliano, we couldn’t

understand a word he was saying.” For a second, my heart sunk; but then he said, “But we understood what he was talking about.”

That was the experience of those people who gathered in Jerusalem. When the Christians were empowered by the Holy Spirit, when the Christian movement was born and the very first church took the flame out to the world, there were people from all nations, ethnicities, and even religions. They might not have understood what the Christians were saying, but they knew exactly what they were talking about.

I remember as a very young preteen, my older brothers told me about a very famous John Lennon concert. They said that he ended the concert with “Give Peace a Chance” and got the crowd all singing it. The concert ended, the house lights came up, and as the thousands and thousands of concertgoers filed out of the stadium and into the streets, they started singing and chanting the song by themselves: “all we are saying is give peace a chance”. As a crowd of 50 or 100 started singing it, others joined them too, and it got louder and louder as they poured into the streets, right there in the middle of the Vietnam War. The world was in conflict and at war, and people poured into the streets and went into the world singing, “Give peace a chance”.

I don't know about you, but I've got a vision this Pentecost Sunday. It isn't of some Harold Hill leading his 76 trombones at a big parade and everybody filing back into church; my vision is of the people of God right here in the heart of the city, who are here for the city. Going into the world, with their words and actions and prayers, their mission of service. I have a vision of these people here, who have been on this sacred spot for almost 200 years, celebrating our birthday each and every day by flinging wide the doors of this church and going into this world that God loved so much that God gave his only son, that all who believed in him would not perish but have eternal life. Our God who sent his son Jesus into the world and for the world, who now empowers us and calls us also to go into the world and to be for the world that we might pass the light of God, that we might hand off the flame of our faith to a whole new day and a whole new generation.

Happy birthday, church. Happy Pentecost Sunday. My gift for you today is a vision of a church that dares to go into the world and for the world.

Praise be to God. Amen.