

Looking Beyond Mistakes by the Lake

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Psalm 92:1-4 ¹ How good it is to give thanks to you, O Lord, to sing in your honor, O Most High God, ² to proclaim your constant love every morning and your faithfulness every night, ³ with the music of stringed instruments and with melody on the harp. ⁴ Your mighty deeds, O Lord, make me glad; because of what you have done, I sing for joy.
- Luke 9:57-62 ⁶¹ Someone else said, "I will follow you, sir; but first let me go and say good-bye to my family." ⁶² Jesus said to him, "Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Learning from past deficiencies, we see how we can move forward in inviting others to share in the joy of our church.

In a post-game interview following a certain basketball game last Sunday night, Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert was as mindful of failure as he was of success.

According to *Plain Dealer* sportswriter Joe Vardon,

Winning the NBA Finals, as [Gilbert's] team did Sunday night in Oakland, California, reminded [Gilbert] of the many past mistakes his franchise has made.[.. LeBron] James included. [Gilbert said,] "...I almost feel in a way, young people [need] to see that not only is it OK to fail, that's the way you get to championship success, whether it's sports or business or life.... Everybody made mistakes for years, but by making them everybody learned: myself, the franchise, coaches, players, LeBron, everybody. And now, here we are, only because we learned."¹

How do we learn from the past without dwelling on it? How do we acknowledge mistakes and failures without being forever held back by them? We do that by never forgetting to focus on the opportunity that lies before us. This is true of each of us personally, and of all of us collectively as a church. Let's come back to this in a minute.

Today's gospel reading is a tough one. Jesus sounds harsh.

- A fellow says, "I'll follow you anywhere," and Jesus responds that wild animals have it easier than Jesus does, implying that the eager follower would quickly be discouraged and walk away.
- Another fellow says he'll follow Jesus when various obligations in his life are taken care of, and Jesus tells him that if he really wants to follow him, the fellow should just walk away, let those things take care of themselves, and follow him.
- A third guy also says he wants to follow Jesus, but wants to have one last chance to enjoy the things he'll need to leave behind. The reply Jesus gives sounds like an advice column from the Farmer's Almanac. Here's what Jesus tells the guy: "Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God."²

Now, even though I've lived most of my life in large urban areas, I was born in the fertile Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. So I'm still "a little bit country..." but I had no idea what Jesus was talking about. After a little research, here's what I learned about plowing a field, with one hand on the plow, the other holding the reins to guide the ox or mule. You set your sight on a distant point and plow

¹ Joe Vardon, "Gilbert-LeBron, the Cavs' big men, deliver trophy," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Tuesday, June 21, 2016, B5.

² Luke 9:62 Good News translation

toward that. That produces straight furrows which are easier to care for and are the mark of an experienced, effective farmer. Even if the furrows are occasionally a little crooked, the deviation won't be exacerbated as long as you keep your eyes forward. But if you keep looking back to see how you're doing, your furrows invariably will be squiggly and crooked. Your crops will be harder to maintain and you'll be the object of ridicule for your lack of farming skill.

Commenting on Jesus' agricultural moral, some Bible scholar suggested the modern equivalent to that experience would be reaching into the back seat while driving. Your car will tend to drift to the right as your turned body unknowingly pulls the steering wheel slightly to the right. The lesson from driving, and plowing, and for that matter, the lesson from witnessing our team win the NBA Championship is this: don't focus on what's behind you. Acknowledge the past and learn from mistakes, but then focus on what what's ahead of you; focus on what you can do in the future.

The need to focus on what we can do in the future came to mind after this past Monday night's Session meeting. The meeting began, as they always do, with one of the elders sharing an inspirational reading or personal reflection. Bill Knoble had volunteered to lead devotions this month, and he shared an article he had saved from the Presbyterian Church's denominational magazine *Presbyterians Today*. The article points out that there's a gap between what Jesus *said* and what his followers *do*. Jesus *said*, "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples...." ³

So, how are we doing with that "making disciples" assignment? As a preface to leading devotions Bill had recalled a survey he came across which asked respondents how frequently they had talked with anyone—family member, friend, neighbor, co-worker, anybody—talked with them about Jesus. The survey had response options like "I've talked with someone about Jesus in the past week" and "In the past three months" and "In the past five years..." and "Never." Around the table we got the disturbing sense that many, many of us would find the last option most accurate.

Now isn't that curious? We're here because we want to be. We're here because we love this church... or at least like it enough to make the effort to be here. We find we get something out of setting aside this time on this day every week, or most weeks, or some weeks. You simply wouldn't be here if this church had no value for you:

- you feel strongly connected to this congregation and its people;
- you value the unique encounter with the mystery, the spiritual, the "force," the presence and power we experience as God;
- being part of this church helps you express your best self through your generosity of involvement and money for mission outreach to serve needs in our community and our world;
- you cherish the support you sense in the prayers of others, and you find you want to support others with prayers for blessing and healing, prayers for hope and endurance and peace.

You know God's love for you through the example and inspiration of Jesus the Son. You find that loving God back gives you joy. You enjoy joy. You think others would enjoy joy, too. So what have you done about it? Who have you told?

Although Jesus clearly directed us in some words we now call the Great Commission to "Go to people everywhere and make them my disciples," ironically, we've been reluctant. The article from *Presbyterians Today* suggested three reasons why:

First, we all have seen or experienced Christians who try to recruit using abrasive, irritating tactics that include pushy, canned speeches that demean any religious tradition other than their own. We think, "If that's what evangelism is all about, we want no part of it." We think, "We'll show them how unattractive their tactics are: we won't talk about Jesus with others at all!" ⁴ How's that working for us?

Another reason we've been reluctant to tell people about Jesus is that we fear it would insult people. The author of the *Presbyterians Today* article recalled a friend explaining to him "that it simply would not do to invite people to come worship with us. 'They know when church is,' [she said]. 'And they know where the church is. If they want to, they'll show up.'" The author asks us to imagine the amount of courage it requires for anyone to take the initiative to come into any church for the first time,

³ Matthew 28:19a Good News translation

⁴ James Ayers, "What? Me, an Evangelist?" *Presbyterians Today*, November 2006, 22.

unsure if they'll know anyone there. "...We are careful not to tell them. Sometimes people have explained this silence... by saying, 'I hope others might see by my life that something is different, and ask why. Then I'll have the opportunity to tell them.'" Again, the author asks how that's been going? Have a lot of people been asking what it is that makes this great difference, and how they might get some, too? Or would your life need to be a lot more Christian before they would be able to see something?⁵

When it comes to sharing the joy we know in our hearts because we know Jesus in our hearts, if we looked in the mirror we'd have to admit that we haven't done right by Jesus on this count. We've made mistakes by the lake, as have most Christians everywhere. For instance, I think I blew an opportunity just this past Monday at the Rocky River Chamber of Commerce golf outing. Jackie was a volunteer stationed at one of the holes. Jackie learned from Marc Hustek that I was his pastor at the Presbyterian Church. Jackie asked me, "So what do Presbyterians believe?" I said something about how most Christians share common beliefs and that the biggest distinction of the Presbyterian Church is how we're structured to do the work of the church. My answer was responsive to her question, but perhaps not to her need. You see, I failed to ask if she was involved in a church. I failed to encourage her to join us for worship this Sunday.

Like that recent incident, the missed opportunities that all of us have had to tell someone about Jesus are in the past. We learn from the past, but we keep our eyes facing forward, because we have another chance.

The new opportunity that we have going forward is based on something we all know how to do because we've all done it many times: extending an invitation. "If we believe that the good news of Jesus really does make a difference in our lives, we can invite others to 'come and see' — to come along in the places of our lives where they will be able to examine that difference, and even explore it for themselves."⁶ What is it that you like so much about your church that you might want to invite someone to share it with you? Let me suggest six possibilities; one of them might be where you feel most engaged with this church:

1. *Sunday school/Bible study/Circle* — none of us are superb Bible scholars; we've all got a lot we could learn from the Bible... and from one another. Who do you know who would like to enrich their life (or that of their children or grandchildren) with education in matters of faith and spirit?
2. *Worship/preaching/music* — don't you think others might experience the kind of inspiration you do from hearing Glen play, listening to one of our choirs, or joining our voices in song? Might they appreciate the inspirational or challenging or affirming thoughts in a sermon? Might they enjoy one of the concerts we offer?
3. *Prayer* — people have a hunger they can't name — a hunger to care and be cared for. Being invited to engage in prayer addresses that need to be spiritually connected to others and to God, whether prayer occurs in Sunday worship, in a women's circle or men's group. You may be the first person to invite them to experience the avenue of prayer.
4. *Fellowship* — which of your acquaintances would enjoy joining you at one of our church's clambakes, spaghetti dinners, picnics, pancake suppers, chili cook-offs, Easter egg hunts, variety shows featuring home-grown talent, sporting events or theater outings? If you enjoy it, why wouldn't they? Ask them!
5. *Support for families* — raising children and teens is not always the easiest thing to do, and that certainly includes helping them discover a spiritual foundation for their lives. We have a sophisticated Sunday school program: it's thoughtful, age-appropriate, and faithful to a Reformed Protestant understanding of Christianity. And our youth fellowship groups include children from more than a half-dozen different high schools, so kids feel included regardless of where they live.
6. *Service* — in a culture that emphasizes "What's in it for me?" you'd be amazed at the satisfaction and sense of freedom many people experience from being able to do something to help others. Maybe you invite them to join you in helping to set up Trash & Treasure this fall; or to experience our Alternative Christmas Charity Bazaar the Sunday before Thanksgiving; or join you at North Church next June; or to support next year's youth mission trip in some way.

⁵ Op. cit., 22-23.

⁶ Op. cit., 24.

You've just heard six suggestions of ways that you might "make disciples of all peoples." Think about it: it's not a scary proposition where you have to worry about saying the right thing or risking offending someone.

- You select some aspect of your church that's meaningful to you.
- You talk with someone you know.
- You tell them about that aspect of your church that excites you.
- You invite them to join you (that's easy enough since they already *like* you!).
- And then like the instructions say on a shampoo bottle, "Repeat." Repeat with them if they decline your first invitation. And repeat by inviting someone else.

We may not have done a great job at sharing our church in the past, but we're not looking back. We've learned from the past; as Jesus said, now it's time to look forward. This summer, this month, this week is the time to go to people everywhere so they hear the invitation to be his disciples, too.

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