

What Can We Offer? – Part 1

“A Witness to Life-Made-New, Balancing Order and Ardor”

Judges 21:25; Galatians 1:11-17; Romans 6:1-11
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

July 12, 2009
Ted V. Foote, Jr.

From the first of the 1800s to the first of the 1900s – in only 100 years – the Passenger Pigeon went from being the world’s most populous breed of bird in the wild to extinction, due to human incursion into its habitat and to ridiculous overhunting.

In late November of 1964, following the landslide victory of Lyndon Johnson over Barry Goldwater, Republicans wondered how long it would be before they would be competitive again for the Presidency.

In late November of 1972, following the landslide victory of Richard Nixon over George McGovern, Democrats wondered how long it would be before they would be competitive again for the Presidency.

Who wants a species of animal or plant to become extinct? Who wants their political party’s nominees to lose election after election because so many other voters in the country reject their party’s particular philosophy? If we push such a question over to a slightly different category, who wants their sociological or religious group to dwindle in members and be threatened with extinction? Probably no one.

If you are wondering why one of this morning’s Scripture readings is the last verse from the last chapter of the Book of Judges, it’s because the 19th, 20th, and 21st chapters of Judges describe a situation where 11 of the 12 twelve tribes of Israel feared the extinction of the 12th tribe – the tribe of Benjamin. The tribe of Benjamin had entered into a period of indulgent lawlessness. In this time of lawlessness, many more young women of the Benjamin tribe had been killed even than young men. The 11 other tribes, who were cousins of the Benjamin tribe, decided they would give the surviving young men of Benjamin 400 young women whom they had captured as prisoners of war. The cousin tribes would not give the Benjaminites young women from their own tribes, but they gave them young women captured from neighboring regions. Scripture says this happened because the cousin tribes were afraid that, otherwise, the Benjaminites too soon would face extinction.

It would be as if Southern Baptists were worried Presbyterians might become extinct. The Southern Baptists do not want to give Baptist young women to the Presbyterian young men, but they capture some Roman Catholic young women whom they offer to the Presbyterian young men. A strange story? You’re very correct it’s a strange story!

Yet with recent membership numbers sliding down for Presbyterians and others, including Southern Baptists, it is not strange or ridiculous to ask ourselves some serious questions. In fact, it’s important to ask ourselves some serious questions.

First, can we turn this numerical decline around reproductively? Can young women and men who are Presbyterian (or Methodist, or Lutherans, or Disciples, or Baptist, for

that matter) simply have more Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Disciples, and Baptist babies? In all seriousness, Presbyterian and other Christians in certain African countries worry about their daughters marrying young men who are Muslim because the trend creates a widening population difference with more Muslims and fewer Christians. Yet we know, when we give the idea half-a-thought, that having more Presbyterian babies is not the solution for more than one reason.

As I said earlier, Republicans were severely thumped in the Presidential election of 1964 and Democrats were severely thumped in 1972, leading many, at the time, to question their respective prospects for continuing as a major party. Surprisingly (perhaps), in both instances, following their worst defeats ever, the length of time those defeated parties stayed out of the White House was four years: Only one Presidential term! In 1968, the Republicans were back. In 1976, the Democrats were back. After the size of those political victories and defeats in '64 and '72, who could have realistically anticipated such turnarounds and reversals? No one. Then again, being a Presbyterian or a Protestant, being a Catholic or Orthodox Christian, or, for that matter, being Jewish or Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, is not the same as developing a political strategy for winning an election or gaining popularity and votes.

Sadly, though, and to our peril, we think too much in that direction if we hear ourselves saying, "If we could only keep all the Presbyterians who started out being Presbyterians, or, in our situation, all the Presbyterians who move to Bryan/College Station . . ." Or, if we think we need a second plan beyond "keeping Presbyterians," we may say, "If we could only 'pick off' a few Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Disciples, Lutherans," etc. You get the picture.

We cannot turn around our particular denominational numerical decline by "raiding" or "picking off" members from some other religious group anymore than we can reverse the numerical decline by reproducing more of our own. Nor can we turn around the numerical decline by preaching more "hellfire" and "damnation" for those who fail to recognize that being Presbyterian or Christian will gain them a ticket to "the cool place" when, otherwise, they will be roasting in "the other [hot] place."

Also, in 21st century culture, there is a "joining crisis," sociologically speaking, especially related to religious community affiliation. (Many may wish this were not the case, but wishing doesn't change reality.) And even those who attend one religious community's worship regularly – the church may be very large or very small or somewhere in between – can always choose not to attend if it doesn't go well, or if it doesn't seem worth the time and effort. Culturally, many, for a variety of deeply personal reasons, do not plan quickly, or maybe ever, on "joining."

The verse from Judges says, "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Each person did what was right in his/her own eyes." That pair of sentences suggests that, unless there is an absolute ruler forcing persons to make choices which follow the absolute ruler's demands, people pursue their personal options. As a teacher and a prophet, Jesus recognized this. Following Jesus, the early church organizer and evangelist, Paul, recognized this. Unless someone is going to force you to do something, you are going to

pursue your personal options. So why would you, or I, or anyone else choose a way of serving and sacrifice with Jesus as Lord, if no one is forcing us to do that?

For all that may have been right or wrong about Protestant Reformation leader, John Calvin in the 1500s, he mentioned in his writings a number of times how we live life noticeably between the labyrinth and the abyss, between the maze and the canyon, between attempting fulfillment through satisfying multiple rules and the alternative of a free-fall into chaos where there are no rules under your feet. Perhaps Calvin mentioned this because he felt that tension in his own life, between organizing a religious community without the rules of medieval Roman Catholicism and wanting to avoid the chaos and free-fall of no rules at all. Too much order/too many rules recreates the twists, turns, and dead-ends of the maze or labyrinth. Too little order/too few rules leads to a free-fall of anarchy and chaos into the abyss or canyon below.

Some have said this is a matter of balancing order and ardor, defining boundaries of what is good and blessed and graceful and wholesome as distinct from what is harmful, pathological, unhealthy, self-indulgent. Paul writes in the verses we read from Galatians (1:11-17) that he was trying to fulfill all the rules in his religious tradition before the experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ set him free from that labyrinth or maze. He then writes in the verses we read from Romans (6:1-11) that we cannot operate with such freedom claimed in God's grace that sin is our best friend because, otherwise, we fall headlong into the abyss or canyon.

You and I are given, to offer the world, a Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ which *celebrates a discipline* of following that Jesus. "Celebrates" describes the "ardor"/the "spirit" part, freed from a maze or labyrinth of required rules. "Discipline" describes the "order" part, guided with healthy boundaries so that we don't journey chaotically simply by what we prefer and without regard for healthy boundaries. Presbyterians and others have this gift to offer the world in Jesus Christ. It's the gift of a life that includes *sacrificial service* as disciples of Jesus *which can be celebrated* without a labyrinth or maze of rules. We can, at the same time, be disciplined and focused on the way God is shaping us in community with others so we avoid the free-fall of "doing our own thing."

In 1787, at the close of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, a woman who was not present inside the meeting is said to have asked Benjamin Franklin on the street as he departed, "Well, Doctor, what have we got – a Republic or a Monarchy?" Franklin is quoted as replying, "A Republic, if you can keep it."

Well, Presbyterians (and other Christians), what have you got – rules upon rules? Or unbridled, unstructured freedom? What we have been given which we can share every day with God's world is a way of following Jesus Christ between the maze and the canyon: Not so many rules that we cannot celebrate God's grace with ardor and spirit; not so much disconnected freedom that we reject being joined with others in God's love for orderly, faithful service.

Let us neither fear extinction nor seek to become a majority power as Christians, but let us continually share this magnificent gift which the Lord has shared in our midst.

– All honor and praise be to God.