

“Missing The Point”

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Acts 1:6-14
Prayer

One Mercedes Benz TV commercial shows their car colliding with a cement wall during a safety test. Someone then asks the company spokesman why they do not enforce their patent on the Mercedes Benz's energy-absorbing car body, a design evidently copied by other companies because of its success. He replies matter-of-factly, "Because some things in life are too important not to share." While that is an admirable position to take, it had to first be understood by the manufacturers and filtered through a set of values that went beyond profit and market share. The value of the message must be understood before it can be effectively shared.¹

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven. This year, Ascension Day was last Wednesday. It is never a Sunday, but this scripture needs our attention. Pentecost – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - would come ten days later, and we will revisit that next Sunday. The disciples in today's scripture lacked the clarity of vision of the makers of Mercedes. Contrary to what some commentators contend, these disciples did not get it. Jesus was about to leave them, yet they still failed to understand his mission and his call upon their lives. Oh, they *thought* they understood, but they were totally missing the point.

Why am I so sure they are missing the point? Look at verse 6: "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" Jesus basically said, "I'm not going to tell you!" What must have been going through the Savior's mind at that moment? These are his hand-picked disciples. He has trained them, taught them, for three years. He has heard all of their naïve questions. He has demonstrated his love for them. He has taught them how to serve and told them to go and do likewise. They were there when he fed the 5,000. They were there when he healed and even when he raised people from the dead. They thought they got it. This was to be the Messiah promised by the prophets who would restore the glory of Israel.

He had carefully told them that his kingdom is not of this world. He associated with those who were not to their liking. He befriended foreigners and sinners, and created resentment and hostility among church leaders because of the stands he took and the people he insisted on helping. Yet they followed him. They followed him to Jerusalem for the Passover where he took bread, gave thanks to God for it, broke it, and gave it to them saying, "This is my body which is given for you." There he goes again! Jesus often said things that they really did not understand. A deceased body was unclean, and he was likening the great Passover feast to an unclean body? Then Jesus took the cup of Redemption, gave thanks to God,

and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take, drink, this is my blood poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." That was too much. No one drinks blood. Jesus was preparing them for his sacrifice and instituting the holy meal we are about to take, yet they missed the point totally.

Those faithful followers were not so faithful when the judgment of Pilate was about to fall on Jesus. They ran, betrayed, denied, and swore they did not know him. When he rose from the dead after the crucifixion, they did not get it. They were consumed by fear. Jesus pronounced "Peace," but they were still worried sick that something horrible was going to happen to them, too. By the time we get to today's text, there had been multiple appearances. They had eaten with him. Indeed, he has cooked breakfast for them.

Now they all come to this place, and he gives them their final instructions: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." How? Jesus clearly says that when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, they will receive power that will enable them to be witnesses. When he finished telling them about that, he was raised up into the clouds. The disciples just stood there bewildered until two angels break their trance and ask them why they are just standing there: "Why do you stand looking toward heaven?"

That's the question I have this morning. You and I have been given the greatest calling and the greatest instructions ever given to anyone. Yet, like the disciples, we just look up or sit in bewilderment, wondering how we will ever get that done. You see, Jesus told them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, but they did not have it yet, so they totally missed the point. Some of us have not received the Holy Spirit either. That's why we don't get it. That's why the churches are not full today. But more importantly, that's why our lives are not full today!

On April 24, 2008, Lyn Powell, the Lay Leader of the North Georgia Annual Conference, gave the Laity Address at General Conference on behalf of over eleven (11) million Laity in the United Methodist Church around the world. Lyn cited the famous tag line of the comic strip character Pogo, who said, "We have met the enemy and ... they is us." She also said, "Well, we have met the answers to our questions, and they is us."²

The Apostle Paul brought people to Christ by preaching the gospel to anyone who would listen, Lyn said. Church buildings and clergy and laity did not exist when Paul began his ministry, but with an understanding of the gospel, Paul established churches in town after town, and trained people for ministry.

"These designated pastors ... equipped the laity to go out and do ministry." The training, equipping and use of their spiritual gifts were so effective, that 2,000 years later Christianity is flourishing. "A few pastors could never have accomplished that alone. Only the laity, on fire for Jesus Christ, equipped by the

pastors, could do such a thorough job of converting the known world to Christianity."

Quoting the Rev. Lovett Weems, Jr., professor of church leadership and director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., Lyn said, "A community must see itself in the church, and if it does not, the church will begin to decline."

"If we are going to be 'Disciples Transforming the World,' then we have to get out in it," Lyn said. "And who better to get out in it than the laity?"

Lyn gave three suggestions for reversing the trends in United Methodism:

- (1) Invite, Invite, Invite! Joyfully invite others. Many people outside the church think the church is a private club and would not enter the doors on Sunday uninvited. It is the laity's responsibility to invite them, she said. How many of you have invited someone to come to church with you this year. (Show of hands) Jesus meant what he said when he said go. We who call ourselves by his great and holy name need a new name if we are not going to follow his instructions!
- (2) Take the Name of Jesus with you. Live with an awareness of his call in your life. Engage the world every day with his Spirit alive in you.
- (3) Claim ONE Personal Ministry for Yourself. Lyn redefined "Evangelism" as "transformational personal ministry that offers Christ to the World." Imagine how the world could be transformed if *every* United Methodist dedicated himself or herself to *one personal* ministry! What is *your* personal ministry? Are you involved in the transformation of the world for Christ? I didn't say church work. Sometimes that gets in the way of transformational ministry.

Lyn went on: In the past 50 years, many lay members have "disengaged from the idea of having a ministry of any kind, much less a transforming one." She said that **it was no coincidence that when the laity disengaged from the ministry, the denomination began its decline.**

Laity, she said, have become complacent and think it is their calling to receive ministry from clergy rather than be equipped by the clergy, with the clergy's unique gifts and graces, education and training, to go out into the world, do ministry and offer Christ.

Imagine the transforming effect on the communities around us "because new and exciting outreach ministries would bring more people into the church," she said. "Most people do not like church work, but they love doing the work of the church, and they will seek out a church that understands the difference."

This is a powerful witness from our Conference Lay Leader, but I'm sure these are points you have heard before. It isn't that we don't know what to do. Jesus was very specific. We also know techniques that work to reach others. If you think you don't, set up an appointment, and we will teach you some techniques that I promise you will work!

You know there are three types of people in the world: (1) People who make things happen, (2) People who watch things happen, and (3) People who wonder what happened. The problem is that we are like those disciples - still standing there looking up and wondering what happened. We have not moved on to that empowering Spirit that transforms our lives and enables us to introduce the transforming power of the Holy Spirit into the lives of others. Either we have, like the disciples, missed the point, or we lack the courage to go where God leads us.

The Table of the Lord is a place where we meet the Holy Spirit. Come expecting more than just bread and juice today. Come expecting clarity of purpose. Come expecting the clouds of confusion to be rolled away. Come expecting the fog of indecision that has paralyzed you to roll away. Come and receive his power. Encounter the Spirit of the Risen Christ here at his Table today. Then, don't just stand there, do something! With the power of God in your life, you won't be able to stop yourself.

Prayer

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

Endnotes:

¹http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93040380, Accessed April 20, 2008.

² Excerpts from Lyn Powell's Speech accessed from http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.4047987/k.6384/General_Conference_Sights_and_Sounds.htm on April 26, 2008.