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Luke 14:15-24

June 1, 2008

Back in 2003, Woodhaven began the hard work of establishing a long range plan. In this day and age where things change at the speed of light, “long range” is identified as a maximum of five years. After listening, studying, and praying, the committee charged with this awesome responsibility identified four focus areas: equipping disciples, evangelism, mission and ministries support. I remember feeling overwhelmed as I read the report, anxiety welling up from within me. We had set some lofty goals for ourselves. I think we were all aware that the area that would challenge us the most was the area of evangelism; we are, after all, a Presbyterian Church.

The session was determined not to allow this work to gather dust on a shelf, but to keep it as a living document, that continued to grow and change as we met certain goals and as the needs of our community changed. So, after a year’s time, we began the process of evaluating how we were doing, and where we still needed to improve. We prepared for ourselves a “report card” of sorts, marking the areas where we had completed our objectives with a check mark, those that were right on target with a bull’s-eye, and those which still required “prayerful consideration,” which was our way of saying that the particular objective was still on our “to do” list. These were marked with praying hands. Overall, our report card was pretty good. There were areas that we had met our goals (check mark!), and areas where we were right on target (bull’s-eye!). But the one area that stood out as “needs improvement” was, you guessed it, evangelism. At our session retreat, we spent a lot of time talking about this. Some of us made excuses, talking about the housing project around Lake Caroline that had not yet materialized because of a fire, and the recession that limited the projected growth of Irving. Others talked about our lack of knowledge or skill in this particular area; we are, after all, Presbyterians.

Of course, not all Presbyterians are evangelism impaired. A little Presbyterian church outside of Austin had been dwindling in membership for years. One Sunday morning the pastor encouraged his congregation to go out and invite their neighbors to come to church. One woman in that congregation took that pastor seriously and walked out the side door of their church to the home next door and invited its residents to come to worship, and come, they did, in wheelchairs, with special buddies, and other care givers. The home, you see, was for adults with developmental disabilities, and these very special neighbors began to fill up the pews.

Sometimes when the hymns were particularly beautiful, some of the new visitors would clap and cheer. Sometimes when the minister would ask a rhetorical questions, they would answer him, loudly. Communion was always interesting, one little cup of juice was never quite enough. Each Sunday, their numbers grew, but as you can imagine, not everyone was happy with the new visitors. How are we supposed to attract new member with them here? The wheelchairs are in

the way. All that noise is distracting in worship. They sing too loud, and often off key. They put their hands all over the bread; I'm not sitting behind them on communion Sunday.

The woman who had invited "those people" to worship was disappointed, but also determined. She sought out likeminded people in the congregation to be worship partners. She started a new Sunday School class. She invited their "special guest" to come with her to fellowship events so that she and others could get to know not only the challenges, but also the gifts "those people" had to offer. Admittedly, it took time for the congregation to come around, and some never did, but after a time "those people" became brothers and sisters, and worship became more joyous as others learned that it was okay to express joy and praise in worship. And communion? Well, it too became a joyous feast. They did have to add more juice trays, though, because more and more people began to see communion as a celebration of God's abundance, and one little shot glass just wasn't enough!

I guess the most interesting part of this church's story was that as the congregation began to embrace its neighbors, they began to tell their friends about how these special guests had changed their church, and they invited their friends to come and see. And their friends were excited about this little church with a great big heart and decided that this wasn't the same church they had walked away from as young adult because it was, in their opinion, more interested in tradition than people, or more interested in preserving the institution than sharing God's love. And over time, that little church grew.

It's funny, when I read all the commentaries on the Great Banquet this week, there was some discrepancy on the validity of the excuses offered by those who first received invitations. While some scholars accepted the excuses as valid and discussed the necessity for making God's invitation a priority, others stated that the excuses were flimsy and insulting to the host. At first, looking at the discrepancy among scholars confused me on how to approach this text, but then I realized that this was not so much about what the would be guest did, but what the host did. The host was not concerned about the validity of the excuse, the host was concerned with sharing his joy and abundance, and so he sent out a second and third invitation until his house was full.

Sometimes I wonder if part of the Presbyterian problem with evangelism has to do with the idea of our "target audience." Too often we get so wrapped up in our demographic studies and marketing techniques that we forget that evangelism is simply about extending an invitation. Sometimes I think we get too concerned about how to attract a particular group of people rather than simply extending the invitation to all, and then welcoming those who accept the invitation.

The host has sent us out into the world, into the streets and lanes to invite all to come to feast on God's abundance. This is not about institutional survival or about checking goals off our to do list; it's about inviting all to share in God's grace and love. We do not any fancy training on how to share to gospel. We need only to extend the invitation and welcome God's children.

Come and see what God has done.