

A PEOPLE WITH OPEN ARMS (Concluding the series: Who Are We?)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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Among the thousands of tourists that come to Nantucket Island, there are swarms of young people who go around the beaches, the streets, the shops with bare feet. These bare feet, the merchants say, track up the store, so the merchants put up huge signs which read, "No admission to people with bare feet." You probably have seen such signs around here. They read, "No shoes, no shirt, no service." But, in Nantucket there is one small store with an enormous sign out front which reads, "Bare feet welcome!" That is the sign in front of the store of the local sandal maker. He loves bare feet. Every pair of bare feet represents not a problem but an opportunity for a sale. Bare feet welcome!

Churches are constantly putting up invisible signs, signs not readily known to the congregation, but quite visible to the outsider. Some say, "People with problems not really wanted." Some say, "You just try to get in this church; we are exclusive." Or, "If you were born between 1915 and 1935, you will feel at home here." Or, "Babies not welcome; we dare you to find the nursery." What about our church? What invisible signs have we erected? I know we have one which announces that people in wheel chairs are not wanted, for we have no rest room that can accommodate wheel chairs.

I appreciate the visible signs that have been placed around our buildings directing people to the various rooms; but what invisible signs would we like the public to read? As minister of this church, concerned about its future, I hope we will have a large invisible sign which reads, "We are a church with open arms, everyone is welcome here." My hope is that we are known as the church with a message, a place, an opportunity for all people, that all people will know they are loved, wanted, needed, and appreciated.

Alfred Bamsey wrote in the Christian Century,

"We can recover who we are as a denomination if we'll return to our evangelistic roots. A friend recently said, 'We United Methodists have turned from soul-saving to pew-filling.' ... United Methodism is frantically scurrying around in search of the best techniques whereby we can get new people to join our churches...But the people are too smart for us. They aren't going to be hooked by our secular tricks...We want them to help stave off our increasing expenses or beef up our languishing committees. But they know we don't really want them."

That is a strong indictment of our denomination. What about our church? Are we saving souls? Or filling pews? Or neither? What are we about? What is our task--our primary goal as a church and as individual Christians?

Jesus gave us our assignment in clear, concise, vivid language (Matthew 28:19), "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Go, make disciples, is our task, our primary task as a church. In this sermon series on the bicentennial of Methodism in the United States, I have asked the question, "Who are we?" I have said that historically we are a people of conviction. We can experience the love of God in our hearts, we

can know by the witness of the Holy Spirit that we are God's people. This conviction sustains, motivates and propels us into the world to do God's work. I said that our life style is love, not known by our dress or particular habits, but by our love for all people. I said that we are a people with a mission: "reform the continent, spread scriptural holiness," was the challenge of the first century. We minister to people, we respond to human need.

But, our primary task, the focal point around which we revolve as a church, is evangelism. We are called to make disciples, but we are hesitant as a church about this task. We don't want to be pushy. We don't want to be emotional. We don't want to buttonhole people. We don't like TV evangelists. We don't want to play a numbers game. So we throw out the baby with the bath, and leave evangelism to the fundamentalists. Are the fundamentalist churches and preachers the only Christians who care about people?

Evangelism is our task as a church and as individual Christians because, as John Wesley our founder preached, "Everyone needs to be saved." People are in a state of sin, separated from God, lost in their own egos: selfish, alienated, isolated. Because we love, because we care about people, we gladly, joyfully, tell them the good news. Wesley's message has been summarized as follows: EVERYBODY NEEDS TO BE SAVED, EVERYBODY CAN BE SAVED, EVERYBODY CAN KNOW THEY ARE SAVED, EVERYBODY CAN BE SAVED TO THE UTTERMOST. In our lesson this morning, on the Day of Pentecost when the church was born, Peter preached, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Salvation is the relationship with God, purchased for us by Jesus Christ, where sins are forgiven, power is given to live your life in the service of Christ, and you experience a new life. Things go better with Christ! People are in need of Christ. People are in need of the fellowship of the church. People need the strength they derive from belonging to a fellowship of similar people. People need nurturing in the faith. Children and youth need the church.

Why are we so hesitant to tell? To invite? We are quick to share a new recipe, or the latest news on the basketball championship. We are quick to tell about a new medicine or pill. We are quick to share where to get bargains. Why are we so hesitant to make disciples, to tell people what is available to them to answer their soul problems, their spirit problems, their relationship problems? Why are we so hesitant?

A church that doesn't share, a church that doesn't have evangelism as its primary goal, is a church that is not a loving church. It is a church that is rapidly dying. Have you looked at the statistics of our congregation over the past 25 years? Our consultant pointed out to us that for the past 22 years, regardless of who the ministers happened to be or happen to be, the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto has declined steadily in membership, attendance, finances, all measurable statistics. We are dying. We are dying because we are not a church with open arms. We are not evangelistic. Evangelism is not a top goal. We have not been concerned with the total person. We will give to feed their hungry bodies, but we have ignored their hungry souls. We are dying, and I, for one, am not interested in being the chaplain who officiates at the funeral of this

congregation. And evangelism as a goal is more than pew filling, more than getting new members to pay the bills (that is exploitation, not evangelism). Evangelism is concern for the total person. Alan Waltz says it strongly, "We have become pre-occupied with our own institutional and personal concerns. We count our strengths in the wrong terms. We have focused on those things which preserve our lives, rather than on proclamation of our faith and service to others."

In an orphanage, there was an 8-year-old girl who was unattractive physically. She had come from a home where she had been abused, so there were some behavior problems. The superintendent overreacted to her. When another child came and reported that she had seen this child writing notes to someone outside the institution, the superintendent was really suspicious. He said, "The next time you see her doing this, come and tell me." The tattletale came a few days later and said she had just seen the girl write a note and hide it in a tree near the wall. When the superintendent found the note, he pounced on it, read it, and then hung his head in silence. The note read simply, "To whoever finds this, I love you."

There are multitudes out there and in here who are lonely, desperately needing to be loved, writing notes in their own ways, wanting to be loved for their own sake and not for exploitation, wanting to belong. They may not know the words, but their heart is craving to know Jesus Christ, to be filled with his love and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Alfred Bamsey says it eloquently:

"People are cracking from suffering; they are searching for meaning; they are out of their minds about illness, their children and their own directionless lives. What they don't need is a beautiful place or a grand sermon, and while friendly people would help, they are not central to salvation. What our forebears believed was that to know Jesus Christ was to get breath for their lives, blood for their beings, bread for their empty souls...That is what powered the early churches. They grew because knowing Christ so changed their insides and their outsides, made them so different in their hearts and their heads, that they couldn't help but transmit that knowledge...Our task is sharing God in Christ. God will do the rest."

We are a people with open arms. There are many signs that this is happening in our church. We are growing. We are deepening our spiritual lives. People are having religious experiences here and are telling us about them. A church with open arms is a church where you, the lay people, are inviting, sharing, telling others. Let's not be hesitant in fulfilling our primary task of making disciples. Let us be confident, courageous, moving forward in faith, for God is with us.

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