

Lessons learned bring 'remarkable change'

by Christopher Jones

I remember elementary recess. Tag was an all-time favorite game. The boys and girls would chase each other, and after avoiding being tagged by the chaser the chased person would exclaim, "You missed me. You missed me. Now you got to kiss me." Such an innocent game was tag. Both sets of people, girls and boys, enjoyed it. They felt like there were mutual outcomes: enjoyment and stress relief. Although recess usually ended too soon, we nevertheless experienced re-energization.

Thirty years later I have learned a valuable lesson from this game: labor, whether in adulthood careers or childhood schoolwork, requires recess moments. God understands this as well, hence, the Sabbath. As a kid gym and recess were my times to "cut loose" and enjoy myself. As an adult, Sunday worship is such a moment.

For many of us Sunday is our only moment since weekday evenings and Saturdays are filled with homework and chores. Unfortunately, I, and perhaps some of us, have been guilty of exhausting people during Sunday worship through our messages. We sometimes do this by proclaiming messages filled with a lot about very stressful things. For me, many of my messages were prophetic, calling the people, city and nation back to truth and justice. Although it is necessary to be prophetic, the way in which I was doing it was, dare I say, irresponsible and insensitive.

Before continuing let's acknowledge that yes, the biblical Sabbath was sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, and it was for rest, avoiding exhaustion and depletion. The early church deemphasized this biblical Sabbath and began celebrating Sunday mornings due to it being the day Christ rose. We now refer to this day as the Christian Sabbath or the Lord's Day. Although the concept of "Sabbath" has experienced a calendar shift as well as a renaming, its purpose, however, remains the same: rest. Rest, however, is not limited to idleness and sleep but can also include actions that allow you to recover and recharge from living.

We know that we need encouragement and direction. The weekly message is an excellent time for both needs. The cultural and political wars we are experiencing, however, can cause us to lose sight of our goal to motivate and direct. We, instead, could inadvertently overemphasize addressing injustice and ungodliness so that we lose sight of our main calling: to shepherd those that God has sent to us. Instead of shepherding them we fight the good fight of truth and justice. We address the meso- and macro-issues in politics and accidentally underemphasize the micro matters.

Some of our members are in the midst of a marital spat or are stressed about finances or have lost sight of how to pray since the kids were born. They come to worship service, hoping for a word of direction. Instead, they receive a strong message about another area of injustice or brokenness that we must address. They agree that the area of injustice or brokenness should be attended to,

but they are still recovering from something else. They wish the minister would see that injustice and brokenness leave a legacy, a wound, that, if not attended to holistically, may cause the survivor's plight to be prolonged or worsened.

To be sure the minister knows this, for she understands that issues of race or gender are acknowledged today but have not adequately been remedied, and are, in some regard, worse because of the absence of a full remedy. The pastor, however, missed the office in which he or she sits: the micro-level. The local church is the domain in which he or she is charged to promote healing and growth. This micro-, or local, level, unlike the regional or national meso- and macro-levels, respectively, require intentional, slow, nurturing, pastoral care that attends to the needs of the members in front of him more than some of us heretofore may have engaged.

Moreover, is it possibly a trick of the enemy to have so much evil before us that it is next to impossible to resist speaking on it during our messages? I believe in my case it was, for my actions left one justice-pursuing, love-exhibiting local church weak and ineffective because its members were becoming depleted. We already see that progressive churches are some of the most financially depleted ministries there are. What if more of us become emotionally burdened and exhausted as well? Where is God's remnant without us?

Fall of 2017 was a turning point for me as it relates to this oversight. I witnessed key leaders being maligned, leaders who did a lot of good. I was grieved by the boldness of hate and division. I have never been a person to hold my tongue, and if ever there were a time for holy indignation, it was then. The senseless action in Charlottesville, Va., is an example. After one of my most passionate sermons a senior lady approached me and said, "Reverend. Have you ever heard Anne Murray's 'A Little Good News?'" I had not, but I looked it up, and after hearing the song, I wept. I wept because my intentions were good, but a member, an incredible woman of faith, was telling me that she was grieved rather than uplifted.

To be sure, not every message will be uplifting—all of them should not be, for that matter. I, however, knew that I could not hide behind this assertion for I knew the truth: I had lost sight of my calling to encourage and direct the people in front of me for my true passion for fighting the good fight of truth and justice. I knew that I could and should do both, but I could not deny that tending to the spiritual and emotional needs of the flock was underemphasized.

It was not that my passions got the best of me. Rather, it was my fears: I somehow thought that if I did not preach it, the struggle for love would be weakened regarding its struggle against hate. No, I did not think that I was so pivotal that a large portion of our collective struggle rested on my agency. Rather, I perceived myself as a chain link, and I was determined to make sure that I would not be the link that was broken. I did not realize that by exhausting the people in such a manner I would 1.) not see the greatest sign of God's work: a church that looks like heaven, and 2.) I would weaken the efforts of the congregation by not building them up where they needed it most.

My irresponsibility and insensitivity were solely the result of assuming that the Sunday message, if truly Christian, was to be prophetic. Our national political scene is filled with "something to preach about." How can a minister resist diving into a field so plenteous with examples of lack of

love of neighbor and morality? Watching a news station just for five minutes can yield a four-week series. I did not lack inspiration, but the church was not changing for the better. The numbers evidenced this fact.

I was never a numbers man, but I felt myself firmly in God's hand, and God asked me a rhetorical question: Am I, God, not concerned with numbers? I said, yes Lord, you are. You desire for all to know you. Many of us, however, are trained not to attend too closely to numbers because numbers (e.g., membership, attendance, baptisms) are not necessarily a reflection of faithfulness to the gospel.

I was convicted and knew the truth, numbers do not equal faithfulness, but some numbers reveal that we have lost our way. Our numbers were stagnant, and the people were not lively. After some key changes our new numbers revealed that we were now beginning to move in the proper direction. To be sure, if we were to "seek and save the lost," then some numbers needed to change. A year later a remarkable change has occurred:

- We are now 30 percent European American, 10 percent Latino American, and 60 percent African American. That's compared to 80 percent African American and 20 percent European American in 2017.
- In our membership 50 percent voted Democrat in the last five years, 30 percent voted Republican in the last five years, 10 percent did not vote, and 10 percent wished not to state. That's compared to 95 percent Democrat and 5 percent unidentified in 2017.
- 55 percent adults and 45 percent minors, compared to 85 percent adults and 15 percent minors in 2017
- 50 percent female and 50 percent male during both periods
- 100 percent of adults wish to volunteer right now, versus 25 percent of adults wishing to volunteer in 2017

Some key changes that did not compromise my calling but diversified it in more creative ways have changed our church start. Although I cannot state what all should be done if your situation is similar to mine, I at least can offer some key changes we made that have had remarkable results in our pre-launch church start:

Consider having unity conversations. We have eliminated Sunday school prior to church. Instead, we have reflection groups after church. We shorten our worship services to 45-60 minutes. Immediately following worship—since the people are already present—we have 45-minute conversations and pray hard at the end of these conversations. We call these moments "One Church Initiatives." Our focal passage is Matthew 5:23-24. We frame the conversation, stating that one person usually feels offended and the other is either offended or believes everything is fine. The key is realizing that a united body is a powerful body, but a divided one is frail and prone to schism.

Remember, "an ignoramus is someone who has not read what you just read." This was a popular saying at Princeton Seminary. It helped us to be patient with each other and remember the need to teach. This teaching, however, is on touchy subjects. We sometime forget that to touch and unravel the threads of certain beliefs and postures is to suggest

that someone's upbringing and/or education was/were problematic. A sermon is too monodirectional and prone to a misuse of power. Conversations are precarious enough, but at least people can opt in or opt out, and we can listen and dig into our resources and shepherd people toward unity and love. Sometimes we force people to opt out of church altogether because they cannot engage in our "preferred" discourse while maintain a positive sense of their own self-worth.

Let them flock together and then come together when dealing with minefield conversations. Some conversations are "all who will, please come." Others—oh my—can keep you up at night. We have experimented with encouraging our members to form like-minded groups, and then we later come together into something more heterogeneous. For example, we are preparing for a conversation on Obama-Trump & Race in which we will deal with one core idea: how can we talk about Trump and Obama without thinking we are betraying a core part of who we are by acknowledging that the one we dislike may have done some good. We also will do something similar in a series on understanding the end times.

Frame repentance within the cross. By this I mean that Christ's existence is to reconcile us, so there is no need for us to hide from the second person of the Trinity since his very existence is a reconciling existence. We have messed up and gone astray, and he is here not to judge and tell us how bad we are but to bring us back home.

Ask ourselves whether our members are tolerating us because they love us and our vision, or are they eager to participate because we are not only justice loving but also remembering to build them in the areas they need building in today.

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