

God Does Not Show Favoritism
Coming to Terms with the Future 2
By Larry Augsburger
Acts 10: 22-48
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- I. Last week I brought the first of two sermons on coming to terms with the future.
 - A. I talked about:
 1. The incredible rate of change that keeps accelerating and creating a future that is very different from even the most recent past.
 2. And how those changes are creating a challenge for the church.
 - B. I pointed out that the church needs to change if it is going to effectively be the faithful church of Jesus Christ in the new and different future it is facing.
 - C. Now today I want to pick up the question, “What are some of these changes we are going to need to make?”
- II. As a way of illustrating our need to make changes in order to face into the future I want to call to our attention the story from Acts 10.
 - A. You see Peter faced the same situation we face.
 1. He liked the past in which the Jews were the exclusive people of God.
 2. And he expected that fact to stay the same even with Jesus as Messiah.
 - B. But what he discovered in Cornelius’s house was a bunch of Gentiles eager to find out how to join the people of God, which, to Peter, was a revolting development.
 1. What these people wanted represented an unwanted future for Peter.
 - a. He was facing a huge change that he didn’t want to make.
 - b. He was clinging to a paradigm he didn’t want to see shift.
 2. But in an incredible statement of submission to this unwanted future, Peter says, *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right.*
 3. In saying this Peter was accepting that, even though he didn’t want to adjust to this different future, it was something God was calling him to do.
 - C. And in his acceptance of the need to change in order to face a future he didn’t welcome, he stands as a model of how we should react to the future we’re facing.
 1. It’s not a future we welcome or want:
 - a. But it is the future in which we are going to be living.
 - b. And it is a future in which God wants to continue to extend his hand of healing, forgiveness, mercy and salvation to all people.
 2. As we live in that future we’re going to have to make some significant adjustments if we’re going to be faithful to Jesus Christ.
 3. And I want to suggest what several of those adjustments need to be.
- III. Now the first adjustment we are going to have to make is to accept that average church members are on the front-lines of missions in a way they have not been for a long time.
 - A. Last week we talked about how the front line of missions has shifted from somewhere way over there to right here on our own door step?
 1. Well, a call for average church members to step up to work on those front lines is the logical result of that shift of lines.

2. Although I am a Menn. pastor, I read a lot about WWII, and something that happened during the Battle of the Bulge illustrates this point.
 - a. The Ardennes area of Belgium was the rest area for troops that had been pulled off the active part of the front lines for convalescence.
 - (1) Technically it was still front lines.
 - (2) But everyone knew it was a quiet sector.
 - b. The fighting was off in other areas. Nothing going on in Ardennes.
 - c. So on the morning of December 16, 1944, when the German army swept over them, many units were unprepared.
 - (1) They were in the quiet sector. They were on convalescence.
 - (2) The front lines of the fighting were over there somewhere.
 - (3) They weren't supposed to have to fight.
 - d. But the front lines had shifted, and the battle had come to them.
 - e. Ready or not, they were called to step into the battle.
 3. This shift of front lines is exactly what has happened to NA Christianity.
 - a. For years NA Xns have felt excused from front line work.
 - b. But the line of battle has shifted to where we are and ready or not, we are being called to step into the battle.
- B. Another, less militant way of illustrating this is to say that we need to shift our understanding of our role in the kingdom from hotel guests to hospital staff.
1. For many years, with the front lines of mission way over there, there hasn't been much front line work for us to do, so we've become comfortable.
 - a. In fact we have come to think of the church as a hotel for saints:
 - (1) In this model members are guests to have their needs met.
 - (2) They are consumers evaluating the service.
 - b. The staff in this hotel is the pastor or the pastoral staff who make sure the guests get what they want when they want it.
 2. But with the move of the front lines of missions back here to our area, we need to dust off the New Testament model in which the church is a hospital for sinners and in which the church members are the staff to bring healing to the broken and sick of society.
 - a. This is a vastly different concept of the church from the hotel for saints model we've been living with.
 - (1) No one is quite sure what it's going to look like.
 - (2) But somehow we are going to have to learn how to become a hospital kind of a church.
 - b. And the biblical model for this, which we find in Ephesians 4:11-13, is that the pastors and staff serve as coaches and trainers to enable the members to become servants for building up the body.
- C. What all this means is that the congregation of tomorrow can no longer just be a comfortable place with little effort required beyond institutional maintenance.
1. The congregation members of tomorrow are going to be more hands on and the church is going to be a much messier place.
 2. Members are going to have to understand themselves as agents of mission.
- IV. With this understanding of ourselves as front line workers in the kingdom of God, we are

going to have to make other significant adjustments.

A. First, because we are trying to reach people who distrust Christianity or find it irrelevant and who often feel anger or hostility toward the church rather than trust and warmth, we are going to have to declare the good news not by our words, but by our love, service and compassion.

1. As we talked about it last week, people are way turned off by the attitudes they attribute to the church—closed mindedness, judgmentalism, hypocrisy.
 - a. What they are looking for is someone who cares about them without judging them.
 - b. What they're looking for is someone who loves them enough to weep with them, listen to them, and offer them a helping hand.
2. What is going to minister to these people and draw them to the kingdom of God is whether they receive acceptance, care and love from us.
3. Henry Chadwick, the great English historian of the early church explains church's growth in its early centuries by saying "The practical application of love was probably the most potent cause of Christian success."
 - a. It was because early Christians loved and served their neighbors that those neighbors were converted to Christianity.
 - b. Christians were winsome and attractive because they exercised extraordinary love in their day to day lives.
4. We need to relearn this lesson—that the demonstration of love by means of caring and service is central to drawing people into the kingdom.
5. In the twenty first century faithful churches are going to be those churches which abound in extraordinary love.
 - a. The issue is not going to be the eloquence of the pastor or the architectural distinctiveness of the building.
 - b. It's not going to be coming up with a slick slogan and campaign.
 - c. It's going to be members who act in loving, caring ways.

B. Second, because people today live with such broken lives, we are going to have to be a much more healing presence.

1. The disintegration in modern society has resulted in many wounded people
 - a. I thought about this during Clergy Clinic on Family Emotional Process in which I participated at LMPC this winter and spring.
 - b. Astonished by brokenness of the families of many other pastors.
 - c. I felt out of place with my nice, neat, genogram of healthy families.
 - d. My heart bled for a couple people in my group, and that kind of brokenness permeates millions of families in today's society.
2. People want help in fixing their broken lives and addressing their sorrows.
3. I'm thinking about Pam, a woman I worked with intensely at OG.
 - a. Pam, who was about seven months pregnant, came to a Visitor's Sunday less than 24 hours after her husband had moved out of their house to live with another woman.
 - (1) Several of us spent the entire SS hour with her in my office as she wept—all but the neighbor were complete strangers.
 - (2) Pam had no church experience and knew nothing about the

Christian faith, but she knew she desperately needed some support and love, which the people of OG provided.

- b. As her pastor, I hung in with Pam through thick and thin including doing discipleship instruction during her lunch hour which was the only free time she, as a working single mother, had.
 - c. I baptized her and then married her to a wonderful man who found a home at OG through his relationship with her.
 - d. I walked with both of them through intense, complicated, heart-breaking blended family issues.
 - e. This month, Pam and Phil are celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary and they are active at OG.
 - f. I just marvel at the Christian woman Pam has become.
 - g. Admittedly she's an extraordinary person to begin with, but the critical things were sitting and weeping with her for a whole SS hour and then hanging in through thick and thin.
4. The church's task in the coming years is going to have to be to learn how to be a much more healing presence in people's lives.
- C. Third, because people are looking for a deeper experience with the spiritual than they usually find in church, we are going to have to increase our spiritual vitality.
1. People see the church and church members as going about the same old same old with no real power or any vital contact with the spiritual.
 2. And they long for some sense of connection with God.
 - a. You see, this is a very spiritual era in NA history.
 - b. But one of the last places people are looking for their contact with the spiritual realm is the church.
 - (1) They're looking to Wicca. They're looking to paganism.
 - (2) They're looking to pyramids and other New Age stuff.
 - (3) But they're not looking to the church—which they consider to be a spiritual dead zone.
 3. Doing just the routine weekly stuff without a more vibrant sense of contacting "the other side" doesn't get it for them.
 4. They do not see the church as a doorway to the spiritual realm, and we are going to have to increase the vibrancy of our own spiritual experience if we are going to serve as guides to the spiritual for them.
- D. Fourth, because people come to the church with very little or even no Xn knowledge or experience, we are going to have to reconsider the language we use in our worship, sermons, music, lessons and discussions.
1. It used to be that almost everyone knew the gospel and scriptural terms because they grew up in a church-influenced society.
 2. But in today's world, people do not have that foundation.
 - a. They do not understand the language of the church—hymns, KJV English terminology, metaphors, scripture references.
 - (1) Boy, I tell you, that was an incredible issue for Pam.
 - (2) She found hymns and church music to be an absolute dead zone and referring to John 3:16 meant nothing to her.

- b. If we wish to connect with people like Pam we need to use different language.
 - c. I used to do Sunday afternoon church services for the juvenile detention center in Logan County.
 - (1) Quickly found how hard it is to bridge the language gap.
 - (2) It is hard work for someone steeped in the language of the church to express the good news of the gospel in a way that a completely nonchurched person can begin to grasp.
 - 3. And that means we need to reach out to them in new and different ways.
 - a. Now the most effective way of reaching out to people in today's world begins with genuine love and caring.
 - b. But then when we open our mouths and begin to speak to them or attempt to lead them in worship, we have to work to do it in ways that they can understand.
- V. It's hard to say what a church making the adjustments I've just laid out will look like, but we are going to have to try to find out.
 - A. Peter found out that God does not show favoritism, meaning that He was as interested in the people of the future Peter didn't want to deal with as he was in the present people of God.
 - 1. And what that means to us is that God is as interested in the Pams of life as He is in us.
 - 2. We who are already in the church need to make changes and adjustments to attract and welcome these people to the faith.
 - B. What I have done today is to outline several of those changes.
 - 1. Accept that we are on the front-line of missions.
 - 2. Shift our role from being hotel guests to being hospital staff.
 - 3. Declare the good news by our love, service and compassion.
 - 4. Be a healing presence.
 - 5. Increase our spiritual vitality.
 - 6. Change our language.
 - C. Some consider these changes to be so major as to be prohibitive just as Peter found the changes he was looking at to be prohibitive.
 - 1. But Peter reconsidered and concluded that God does not show favoritism.
 - 2. And the lesson is the same for us.
 - a. Our God does not show favoritism.
 - b. He wants to draw the people of that very different and unwanted future into his church just as much as he wishes to keep us.
 - c. And he wants us to make the changes necessary to draw the lost people of the unwanted future we're facing into his kingdom.