

## Lessons on Being the Church in a Post-Modern World

A sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr at Peace UCC on May 29, 2011

As you have already guessed, it has been a crazy week. On a good week I frequently feel like a chicken with my head cut off, but this week was really special. However, I got done what needed to get done including, and perhaps most importantly meeting with the Board of Christian Education on Monday night. Actually, that was one meeting that I had been looking forward to for a long time. "I'm sorry Jim – could you repeat that. For a minute there I actually thought you said there was a committee meeting that you WANTED to attend." Yep. You heard correctly. I had been looking forward to a committee meeting.

First of all, we needed to spend some time talking with the Christian Ed. folks about the Easter Carnival. I wanted to talk about what worked, what didn't work, what could be improved, how the carnival could be grown, whether we wanted it to be grown, whether it could be more oriented more toward ministry, etc. But I thought it was important that we not meet at church for this meeting. Instead we met at Sticks and Stones, a funky gourmet restaurant and bar that serves oven-fired pizzas. So why did we meet there? Did the pastor just want to imbibe in the Natty Greens on-tap \$2 special on Monday nights? No, I wanted to meet there because we need to start thinking outside of the box and one of the best ways to do that is to get outside of the box. The church for too long has had a mentality that Christian Education is about Sunday school classes that meet on Sunday mornings and youth groups that meet on Sunday evenings. But that's not going to cut it in the 21st century. Classes and small group meetings are going to have to happen on days and times other than Sunday mornings AND in places other than the church building. And so Monday night we went to the corner of Elam and Walker. They walked in, sat down, and I said, "Welcome to the world." Elam and Walker are part of the UNC-G community and it is a world that is unchurched and a world that is very much in need of the church's presence. It is a world that is very much in need of your presence.

I'll be the first to admit that I haven't always been a huge fan of the Apostle Paul. My sermons tend to stick to the narratives and stories of the Old Testament and the Gospels and that is not likely to soon change. But today Paul is at Mars Hill and he's at his best. Please note Paul is not at church, nor is he in a synagogue. Rather, he is at the Areopagus; the place that would have been known as the marketplace of ideas. And there Paul rubbed elbows with the philosophers and the scholars and the skeptics. He could have stayed on holy ground and expecting them to come to him, but Paul ventured into their turf, and, may I add, he was more than able to hold his own while playing their game.

Let me give you one example. I assume that most of you who have been in the church for a while have heard of the God "in whom I live and breathe and have my being." Those words don't come from the Bible. Well they do, but that is not where they originate from. Rather they come from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides. In other words, here in Acts 17, Paul is quoting "their" scholars. He is using their arguments and their philosophers to argue for the reality of Jesus Christ which necessarily means he had to have been intimately familiar with their "world." I have a whole section in my library on atheism. One church individual - not from here - once asked me with much disgust why I had such books. The answer is quite simple: if Paul knew his Epimenides, we'd better know our Hitchens. The world is reading Christopher Hitchens and other popular atheists, and if they are, then we better know what they're saying. We have no choice but to be engaged in the world.

National Community Church started meeting in Union Station in Washington D.C. which is the most visited destination in our capital with 125 million people passing through its doors each year. Their pastor would frequently be asked, "when are you getting a real

building?” And he’d always reply the same: “why would we want a real building?” Folks, they are doing church in the modern day equivalent of the Areopagus, the marketplace of ideas. Today this church owns and meets in the largest coffeehouse on Capitol Hill. And unlike the vast bulk of churches that buy the cheapest coffee they can find, AOL City Guide – a secular magazine - ranked their coffee #2 in the entire D.C. metro area. So am I saying we should follow suit? No, but I am saying that we must abandon with haste the idea that simply because our doors are open they will come. And, perhaps ironically, it is precisely because we assume that people will or “should” come, that when they do come we frequently do a less than adequate job of offering hospitality.

Let me offer you just a couple of examples. Do you know why we always print the Lord’s Prayer in the bulletin, even when we aren’t singing it? Because we can no longer assume that people know the Lord’s Prayer. Last winter before I came here I preached at another church in the area. It took me at least 5 minutes to be instructed how to do the Kyrie’s after the Prayer of Confession and how the choir would respond. Folks I have 2 masters and most of a doctorate and have been in the church 44 years. If it took me that long to figure it out, how do you think the newcomers fared?

I’ve been joking with David Fesperman, but only partially, that we should hire some Disney consultants. Now before you laugh, there really are such things as Disney consultants and they consult with businesses including churches especially in regards to hospitality and customer satisfaction. When it comes to knowing what people want, expect, need, and how to serve it to them, it doesn’t get any better than Disney. And interestingly, there is nothing old-fashioned about Disney even as they serve up the same old-fashioned themes that they have been serving for decade after decade after decade. There’s a lesson there for us. And yes I know, we aren’t in the entertainment business, but Disney educators & consultants are students of the world & students of the art of hospitality. And when it comes to being in the world, learning from the world & offering the world hospitality, we have a lot to learn.

In his book *UnChristian*, a book that I have mentioned before from this pulpit, David Kinneman uses statistical research to show how individuals, especially ages 23-41 have lost their respect for Christianity. Only 16% say they have a favorable impression. Kinneman discovered that the vast majority believe us to be judgmental and hypocritical. In addition, a majority said we are old-fashioned, out of touch with reality, boring, not accepting of other faiths and confusing. Now look at Paul today! He was none of those things. Okay, he might have been confusing, but Paul is too educated and loquacious not to be a little confusing. But what he was not was judgmental. Unlike modern evangelists, Paul never tells his secular audience on Mars Hill that they had to repent, accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior or go to Hell. Nope. If anything Paul assumes the best about his listeners of other faiths. He actively demonstrated that both he and his faith were contemporary and relevant.

Today we are assumed to be neither? And according to Kinneman, we are mostly known for what we are against especially homosexuals and people of other faiths. As I alluded to last week, in recent weeks Christian leaders have had a field day going after Rob Bell for daring to wonder if there are as many people in Hell as some in the church would like to believe. For centuries that’s been our shtick: we have been fire insurance salesmen insisting that the unbelieving customer buy some of what we’re selling. And if they don’t want to buy, that just goes to show you their sinful ways. But that’s only part of the story. There’s another story; a story in which we can take much pride. During the plagues that swept through Rome in the 2nd century, the doctors all left the city... except for the Christian doctors. And while many, many of those Christian doctors died, Christians developed a reputation as those who risked their own lives so as to care EVEN for non-believers. Now let’s compare the church’s response in the 2nd century, with the church’s response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980’s. Now we begin to get a feel for how the church’s reputation has changed.

I've been a bit worried that my sermon today was going to come across too negative, but it is important that we see ourselves the way the world sees us. And they see an insular organization that doesn't want to come out from behind our walls. They see an organization that is judgmental and hypocritical. 84% of the people in Kinnemann's study said they personally knew a committed Christian, but only 15% said that Christian acted any differently from non-Christians. I've said this before and I'll say it a few dozen more times while I'm here. In the earliest days of the church, people became Christians because Christians were different. They didn't become Christians because of a Billy Graham crusades or door-to-door evangelism or because they offered a mega-church with praise music projected on a giant screen. Christianity was an illegal cult looked upon with disdain by the elite and those in power. And yet Christianity grew because of how individual Christians lived. Not through word but through deed they showed that they loved the outside world even as they loved each other. They weren't known for what they were against, rather they were known for being a place where women and men and children and slaves and free had a place at the table. And this was unheard of. So while these communities were hardly perfect, they were different enough from others that people were drawn to the ways in which they loved each other.

And Jesus said, "If you love me will you keep my commandments?" And what were his commandments? To love. Do we love each other enough that the world notices a difference? Do we love others enough that the world notices a difference? Are we keeping Christ's commandment? Some churches certainly try, but because they're not out there in the marketplace of ideas like Paul, that message of love is muted. And so here in these two readings today we have a primer on how to be a church in the post-modern world. 1) Be in the world; 2) know the world and engage the world; and 3) when all else fails, love. Always, always, always love.

By the way, the Board of Christian Education decided to go ahead and keep meeting at Sticks and Stones on the first Monday of each month. You have an open invitation to join them as they break bread and talk about how to feed the bread of life and love to a new and different world. Amen.