

“Our Equipping God”

Exodus 3:1-14; Ephesians 4:1-14

January 29, 2023

I returned back home to Mount Holly several years back following two full weeks in Pittsburgh. First of all, let me just say that it was so nice to be back. The whole time I was there, Pittsburgh was covered in about a foot of snow. Oh, it gets better. The misery of near-daily snowfall was broken up only three times. Once by sunshine. The other two snowfall gave way to freezing rain. Just about every hour of every day I was away, I yearned for the day when I'd be back HERE! I was in Pittsburgh to do some continuing studies and I did learn a lot. During the second week of classes, we studied the intersection between Christ and Culture. Fascinating stuff really. For the majority of that week, we talked about a book called *American Grace*. Now, before you get to thinking it's a book about faith, it isn't. *American Grace* is actually a book written by sociologists reflecting on a recent Faith Matters survey. The Faith Matters survey is a comprehensive study done every 5 years which asks participants a multiplicity of questions about religion, values and ethics. Within *American Grace* are hundreds of graphs tracing the current state of things on religion here in America.

Let me just say this, the data is fairly depressing. There's been nearly a 10% drop in people reporting themselves Christian over the past two decades. Even the growth in the evangelical churches has clearly peaked and is on a downward turn. Also, not to be overlooked is the fact that the percentages of people responding as having no religious attachment rose steadily. Here's what this means to us. For the most part, fewer people are joining churches than are leaving and a larger percentage of younger generations are choosing never to start. What that means is that for every Elevation Church growing to 10,000 members, the people they're attracting are mostly leaving other churches to go there, not coming to Christ for the first time. Now I'm not going to belabor the point that I've already made in past sermons beyond this simple statement of fact. The Christian religion in America is declining at a rate where the statistical likelihood is that our children's children won't profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Using the present rate of losses and projecting forward, Christians in America will represent less than 3% in one hundred years from now.

All that to say that I found myself rather challenged by the data, given the fact that for three weeks I rather audaciously asked you to join me in a dream to grow this congregation over the next five years. Given the data, I tell you what...I ought to right now confess my ignorance to all those charts and graphs and offer a more *reasonable* goal. Perhaps we should change our vision to simply having the same number of members we have right now in five years. Honestly, that alone would be quite an accomplishment really in light of the quote-unquote facts. But the fact of the matter I believe that despite that the numbers seemed to be aligned against us that we *will* do what here at Cook's Church what, according to graphs and charts, would seem to be impossible.

You see charts and data and graphs don't account for the power of God. A God who tells us over and over again that what's impossible for us, is in fact possible for him. A God who throughout history has equipped his people with everything necessary to accomplish his good purposes.

So, I ask you to continue to dream with me. Believe that by the power of the Holy Spirit working among and through us, that we can grow beyond our wildest imaginations and not because it will make the church budget bigger or it'll make us feel good to know that more people are here. We're called to grow this church for no other reason than in knowing the Lord Jesus Christ personally, that we feel the pain of the world and know that there's a solution. That there is a balm in Gilead. That healing and hope come through a relationship with the Risen Lord. Y'all, I admit, having a dream is a difficult thing. To believe it possible is to be willing to pour the totality of your life into it even knowing in advance the only currency you'll be paid in is hope and purpose. But the only other alternative is simply not to dream. To believe that all we can do is fight an uphill battle with the sole purpose of holding on to what we've got. That's terribly depressing. It's a place as bleak as the Pittsburgh skies in the dead of winter. You see, not to dream is, in a way, to die. You may live, but it's a wan and lacking life, it's akin to a living death.

Folks, there hiding within the numbers of the Faith Matters survey are the seeds of the church's re-growth. The survey clearly shows that people still have spiritual needs. They still ask religious questions. Being created in the image of God means that all people wonder about things greater than themselves. People still have existential queries "Who am I? Why am I here?" "What will become of me after I die?" Those questions confront everyone, even those people who presently think little of church.

But here's the thing, those questions can only be answered with love and hope both for today and the eternal future by a people of God claimed by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit doing Christ's ministry in the world. But I don't think we can't do it simply slogging ahead in the same manner that we've done in the past. There have to be new ideas, new ministries, greater involvement by the members of this church and those people travelling with us. We must rededicate ourselves to being the Church of Jesus Christ doing the things God would have us do.

So, what are we called to do? Looking at Scripture, what we see God doing is what Jesus Christ did and those are the very same actions the earliest church performed. I believe those actions which form the mission of the church are gathering the poor, the lost, the sin-sick and the brokenhearted. We're called to educate all in the wondrous love and grace of Jesus. We're to nurture both those people here travelling with us and folks in the world which surrounds us. Finally, we're to equip the saints for ministry so that they can be sent out into the world to gather, educate, nurture, equip and send with us!

Insofar as the church and its members are willing to do these things is the extent to which any church will grow. I'm afraid sometimes we make church about a host of other things that aren't really what church is about. They seem real and right but they're the very things which distract us from performing our joyful duty to the Lord through growing the number of saints. We expend our energy doing what we think are quote-unquote "church" things losing sight of the fact that church isn't a building or its programs, *church is a people of God sent out into the world to make disciples of all the nations!*

During the three weeks prior to this Sunday, we talked about gathering, educating and nurturing.

Today we're going to talk about equipping the saints for ministry. It's a phrase dear to my heart which comes from Ephesians 4. There, as Paul writes to the church at Ephesus, he says, "*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*" Paul shows that God equips the members of the church with specific gifts in order to build up the body of Christ. *It shouldn't come as a big surprise to us.* God's been equipping His people with what they need to accomplish good things since way back.

Moses needs a little firepower to get God's people freed from the Pharaoh. Suddenly in his hands is staff that can turn into a serpent. When God's people have their backs to the water and the Egyptian army bearing down on them, Moses raises that same staff and the waters of the Red Sea part allowing safe passage. When God's people cried out under the lash of oppression in the Holy land during the time of the judges, God lifted up people and gave them the necessary strength and cunning to save His people. When the people of God needed wisdom, God equipped prophets with His words to share with His people.

In the fullness of time, when we needed a savior, God sent Jesus into the world. Not only did He offer His life for us and for our salvation, Jesus equipped His disciples and apostles with amazing powers. After His ascension into heaven, Jesus Christ sent His Holy Spirit into the world to ensure that all of God's children would be forever equipped with all the necessary gifts to build up the church, the body of Christ on Earth.

Now look, after having looked at all those charts and graphs for that week, I want to break here and do a little survey of my own. Are you a saint, I wonder? Now look, I know that's a little bit awkward. We don't like to presume too much. We like to be humble. I understand that. But you see, the New Testament understanding of the word is clear. We TOGETHER are the saints of the church. It isn't so much a function of special holiness as has largely been purported over the last 600 years. Rather the saints are the members of the Church of Jesus Christ. *We are the saints.*

And I use the connection with today's football games deliberately. Tonight, on the fields, roughly 120 men will determine who wins and loses the big games. I remember reading that A well-known coach was once asked, "How much does football contribute to the national physical-fitness picture?" "Nothing," the coach replied abruptly. "Why not?" the startled interviewer asked, thinking such a focus on a physical game was bound to translate into a greater desire for fitness. "Well," said the coach, "the way I see it, you have 22 men down on the field desperately needing a rest and 40,000 people in the stands, much less the millions watching it on television, and they all desperately need some exercise."

A similar situation exists in many churches today. It's not unusual to have a small group of diligent Christian workers struggling "down on the field" while others in the congregation are acting like spectators, "sitting on the sidelines, eating hot dogs and popcorn."

God's strategy for the accomplishment of His divine purposes isn't like a sports event, y'all. It doesn't call for the job to be done only by the "professionals" or even those just with a "heart" for it. According to the Scriptures, all believers have their own positions and spiritual gifts that they must exercise "for the profit of all"

So, one last question in our survey. If we together are the saints, who's supposed to equip us for ministry? Everybody, again, raise your hand. The answer is all of us. We're called to equip one another for the work of ministry. There's a mutuality at work. Everyone of us is both a saint to be equipped and an equipper of the saints. What does it mean? It means that in order to grow this church we need nothing save one another and the gifts God has already blessed us with to accomplish the impossible!

So how do we do it? Well, to begin with, we love one another. That's where the nurture I talked about last week comes in. If you read Acts, you'll see that the earliest disciples were dedicated to one another. One of the things that astounded me aside from the fact that they shared everything was how dedicated to one another the earliest church was. They spent time together, they ate together, they worshipped together with glad and generous hearts. In so doing, they were equipped with everything necessary to do signs and acts of wonder. It suggests to me that we, as a church, always need to hold each other dear to our hearts. We pray for one another. We're involved with members of the church outside of Sunday at 10am to 11am. We seek each other out when times are good and when times are bad.

In fact, as Step one in your journey to equip the saints, I'd like to ask you to do two things for me. Do these two things and I promise, you'll be on your way to equipping each other for the work of ministry. Every week, pick a name from our list of members. A NEW name every week. Take the time and call that person sometime during the week and see how they're doing. If their job is amenable to it, swing by and say hello. However, you get in touch with them, ask that person if they have anything you could pray for or with them about. Tell them about the things in your life that need prayer. Every night that week, pray for that person. Bring their name and their concerns to the throne of the Lord. Oh, and don't everyone start with A, otherwise my guess is that "you" will be calling me asking what the heck I was thinking. When you've talked and prayed for everyone, start again! Believe it or not, that simple Christian contact equips the saints for ministry. When other people are involved in your life, gifts start emerging that maybe you never even knew you had in you.

Equipping the saints also presumes that we're involved in ministry ourselves. You can't teach or equip others for something you don't know how to do. Does that mean you have to be great at that ministry, a natural? No, absolutely not. Sometimes, the best teachers are only marginal performers in the pursuit they teach. Somebody once told me years ago about the golf coach at Wake Forest. Apparently, the man had a positive genius for teaching others how to play superlative golf. He himself carried like a 15 handicap. He played, but he wasn't the best at it.

Now look. There may be a whole lot of people who look at me, wearing this robe and think, there's the guy who equips the saints. To some extent you're right. To a larger degree you'd be terribly wrong. Can I let you in on a little secret? Do you want to know who equips me for ministry? I am never more equipped to do my job than I am every single day interacting with members of this congregation. I remember occasions in our ministry together in which I've been given the necessary tools, insights and thoughts and it wasn't by theologians or Bible scholars, it was through you. Your faithfulness. Your dedication. Your stories of faith. You ALL equip me. I see the kinds of actions and enthusiasm and dedication and I'm just undone by it all in JOY. You all equip me so that I can do my part of building up the body of Christ. Like I said, from the pulpit to the pews, we equip one another because we're the body of Christ on earth, here for no other reason than to share the Good News of Salvation in Jesus.

Right now, our church has no singles ministry, no ministry to people trying to recover from addictions, no ministry to people getting or having been divorced. There are some major areas of human hurt and longing that point the direction for our new endeavors. I'm asking that all of you pray over the area of this community which you believe grieves God and get involved in a ministry to meet that need through our church. The amazing thing is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, the saints will be equipped, ministry in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will occur and it'll be done by no other hands than our own!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.