

“Do We Really Want It?”

Last week was one of those weeks that come along every now and then when there was just a little bit too much on my agenda. And so I found myself late on Saturday afternoon sitting in a McDonald’s in Muscatine, Iowa, with my laptop and my nonfat sugar-free vanilla latte and a couple of hours work left on my Sunday sermon. Just sort of how I imagine John Calvin preparing to preach on the Lord’s Day! As I settled down to work, I opened up my web browser to look up something and a little message popped up, saying something like: “A new version of Firefox is now available. Would you like to update your computer now?” Without giving it much thought I clicked on the icon, and was distracted for several minutes by prompts and questions from my computer, until I became a proud user of Firefox version 10.0.1. Of course, I couldn’t really see any difference from the Firefox 9.5.12 – or whatever – I’d been using before. But the updates just keep on coming!

I became a Presbyterian just about the time Presbyterian version 1-9-8-3 was being rolled out—what we know as the PC(USA). Like any new version it has had its strong points, and some significant glitches, and its software has been updated more times than we’d like to think about. But I’ve gotten kind of comfortable with it. And I have to admit that I’ve downloaded but not actually installed FOG version 2-0-1-1. Hopefully it won’t become too outdated before I do!

Two weeks ago, in place of the traditional orientation for new members of the Committee on Ministry—I mean the Commission on Ministry—Suzanne and Gavin

Finefield led the group in an exercise they called “The Church: A Conversation in Future Tense.” We spent an afternoon trying to imagine what a Presbyterian Church of the future, say fifty years from now, might look like. In other words, Presbyterian version 2-0-6-2. We covered the walls with sheets of newsprint filled with lists of words—something we Presbyterians are good at! There’s way too much to repeat here, but we threw around thoughts like: “Spirit led, personally loved, missional, diversity, untethered from property, lay led, Christ-centered, fluid, distinctive, radically hospitable.”

When the discussion turned to the next phase, how do we get to Presbyterian version 2-0-6-2, we had a different set of words on our newsprint: “risk taking, freedom, being stewards of our own spirituality, trusting God and each other, high expectations, being willing to let things die.” Someone in our small group suggested that we actually need to begin with a confession: Basically, admitting to ourselves and God that if that’s what it will take to get there, then maybe I don’t really want Presbyterian version 2-0-6-2. Or as he put it: “I don’t want to be the kind of disciple/apostle that Christ wants me to be.” Are we the kind of disciples who are ready to follow Jesus wherever he leads?

A few years back I had the opportunity to write a really big term paper—386 pages including notes—exploring the relationship between discipleship and material possessions through the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. And, among other things that I could talk about for hours, I’ve come to conclusion that this passage I’ve chosen this morning is the seminal text about discipleship in Luke’s writings.

Luke's telling of this story is different from the other versions in the gospels in a couple of significant ways. First, he tells this story in a way that reminds us of the great call stories of the Old Testament. When Peter grudgingly follows Jesus' instructions and suddenly finds himself hauling in a net-breaking, boat-sinking catch of fish, he realizes he's in the presence of a power unlike anything he's ever experienced. Like Isaiah in the temple and Moses at the burning bush he recognizes that he's in the presence of the holy. And yet when he protests his sinfulness, he receives a grace-filled response. Jesus tells him that amazing catch of fish is only a beginning—from now on he will be catching people.

The other significant difference in the way Luke tells this story is the way it ends. Mark and Matthew talk about the fisherman leaving nets and boats and fathers; Luke says "they left *everything* and followed him." They were so captivated by Jesus—by his power and generosity—that nothing else mattered. In fact, it takes them until chapter 18 before it seems to really dawn on them what they've actually done.

"They left everything and followed him." At this point it's very tempting for those of us who are preachers to resort to the sort of "spin-doctoring" of the gospel that Paul disavows in 2 Corinthians 4. We say, "they left everything" and then hint that maybe he didn't really mean it. We call it hyperbole, so that "everything" really just means "something"—so that we can follow Jesus and still "have it all." But, seriously, is there anything that you value more than following Jesus? It's enough to keep a person awake at night.

And then of course we have Paul, who only makes more trouble for us.

Although I've chosen this reading from 2 Corinthians 4, if you've been following the lectionary in your church, for the past couple of weeks the epistle lessons have been coming from 1 Corinthians 9. That's the chapter where Paul insists that those who devote their lives to proclaiming the gospel have a right to make their living from the gospel. And then, of course, he turns around and says that he has refused to take advantage of that right.

Brothers and sisters, ministers of the Word and Sacrament—I mean “teaching elders”—are we ready to make tents if that's what it takes to lead the church to Presbyterian version 2-0-6-2? Are we willing to invest the time and energy and money to prepare for a life of ministry, without a salary and pension and medical plan. Would be willing to walk away from those things if that's what it takes to discover version 2-0-6-2, or maybe even 2-0-1-2? And then Paul says, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some?” Not “spin-doctoring” the gospel, but moving out of our comfort zones to walk alongside folks who may not be like us? What would you be willing to leave behind?

These are far from academic questions! I know they're very personal for me. I've been making my living from the gospel for most of my adult life—it's hard for me to believe sometimes, but it's been over thirty years. Since I've moved here to Dixon, for the first time in my life I have a mortgage, and there's still at least three-and-a-half years of college tuition to pay. Would I really be willing to learn a trade and start making tents? And besides, I became a Presbyterian because I really sort of like Presbyterian version 1-9-8-3. But do I like it too much? Or to borrow some

language from Paul, am I willing to be “afflicted in every way ... perplexed ... persecuted ... struck down”? What about you?

The church that lives into God’s future will be led by men and women who are willing to lose sleep over questions like these. And let’s not lose sight of the fact that such struggle may actually be a good thing. Paul tells us, after all, that God has ordained that “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” And let us remember as we’ll sing in a few minutes that the master who meets us in the boat, “while smiling [has] called [us] by name.”

The bottom line: Are we that taken by Jesus, that we’ll leave everything and follow him? Amen.

Rev. David Spaulding
Blackhawk Presbytery at First Presbyterian Church Dixon
February 14, 2012