

BECOMING AN APOSTOLIC PEOPLE 9/18/16 Rev. Luke Ham

This morning that we continue is our three part series of sermons entitled, “**The Once and Future Church,**” which taken from Loren Mead’s book which addresses both the changes and the challenges that the Church must address.

Last week, Pastor Ron shared with us the need to look closely at our church structure and how it can be effectively adapted to do ministry in the 21st century.

We talked about how Methodism expanded so rapidly in the United States because of the Circuit Riding Preacher that would ride into a new town or village and promptly start a church by organizing the lay people for ministry. And once things were set up, the Circuit Rider would move on to another newly settled area and start another church.

A model for ministry that clergy organized and lay empowered.

A model of ministry that was outward.

But, for various reasons, over the next 2 centuries, the church started to become clergy-centric....that is focused on the trained religious professionals.

And last week we heard that according to Mead, we must learn to transfer the ownership of the church back to the laity to which it rightfully belongs. A revitalized church will not happen without a revitalized laity—a laity that is passionate about the ministry that it has been called to share.

So that is where we are picking up this morning. As we think about one of those church words that we hear in scripture readings and in the titles of creeds: Apostle.

But what is an Apostle?

The word Apostle comes from the Greek word *Apostolos* which literally translated means “one who is sent away.” But not sent away in a negative context, but rather sent away as a messenger. Some linguists assert that the meaning is closest to being sent out as an ambassador.

So I’ve found that’s an easy way to think about it since the both begin with the same letter....An Apostle is an Ambassador.

Of course in our Christian context, those that the Bible specifically refers to as Apostles were ambassadors for Jesus.....Ambassadors for Christ.

Now the modern church has various understandings and uses of the word of apostle.

Some churches believe that the title only applies to those who witnessed and were commissioned by Jesus himself. And for those of you who know your Bible, you know Paul gets included in that list because of Jesus' appearance to him on the road to Damascus.

Then came this idea of apostolic succession...where the apostles were able to commission more apostles and in theory all Bishops can trace back through a lineage of succession to the original apostles.

The bottom line of all of this is that the church has always loved to use titles for folks. Reverend, Deaconess, Apostle, Lay member, Lay minister.

And these titles are there for a reason...folks that have trained and been set aside for specific ministries are of course important...

However, there can be some unintended negative consequences when we start getting too wrapped up in titles and who has what authority...

Because sometimes when we start labeling some folks one thing, and others something else...we start to think that it is only the ones with the right title, or the perfect training that get to call the shots or carry out the work of ministry.

We start to think that it's not each and every member of the church's responsibility to discern the will of God and be an ambassador to the world.

In *The Once and Future Church*, Mead asserts that the church must become fully apostolic. He states that while it used to be the clergy and Bishops that determined the apostolic task and it was the laity who supported it, now the time has come for all of God's people to enter into this work if the church is going to be a positive and meaningful force in the world.

Each and every member must see him or herself as an apostle.

As Paul so eloquently put it, distinct parts with unique roles and responsibilities to play but all of sacred worth...all equally necessary to the one body...

And so we will be spending this morning thinking about 4 key elements needed if we are to become an apostolic people....a people that understand and are ambassadors of God's mission to the world.

First, we must be open to and listen for signs of God's mission in the word...Mead refers to this as Receiving.

This involves looking with expectation at what the people of God are up to and understanding that God's call on our lives can in part be revealed in the pain and the joy encountered through one another as we live as apostles.

What would it look like if when we gathered together each week, we took the time to each write down a place we experienced pain and a time when we experienced joy or redemption?

And not only shared those joys and concerns, but also looked for the patterns of loss and needs in our congregation and thought about ways to address them.

It's no secret that one of my favorite times of the worship service is joys and concerns. I believe it is a fundamental ritual for us to share what is happening in our lives with one another.

And you can ask the youth of the church...when I was the youth pastor no matter what we were doing...whether it was Sunday school or youth group or small group time....I always wanted us to share joys and concerns.

I always wanted to make sure we were engaged in one another's lives....to hear about how God was working....and to also hear about those places where one another were struggling.

But the danger is....we can go through this process of sharing our experiences....but then we stop there....we listen but we don't act....we hear one another but we forget to listen to what God has to say on the matter.

Because it's not just about listening....it's also about responding to what we hear.

When you hear someone in the congregation going through a struggle...what would it be like if you offered them some encouragement after the service...or shared what you did when you were in a similar circumstance?

What if when we realize that there are many people within our congregation going through the same kind of experience that we set up a small group around that issue...a group that carries one another through that struggle.

So if we are to be an apostolic people we must listen to and care for one another.

The second pattern of being involved in God's mission is what Mead refers to as "offering."

I prefer to call this celebrating our gifts.

In this, we take our collective experiences, training and wisdom and offer them in service to God.

And when you take a moment to think of the wealth of talent and experience we have in this room it is almost mind boggling.

Teachers, engineers, lawyers, physicians, professors, bankers, accountants, Tech folk, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, moms, dads, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles....

We have people in this room who have lived through some of the most exciting and some of the most difficult times in our nation's history.

We have people gathered here who have seen more of the world than most others can even dream of.

We have folks who have battled life-threatening diseases and ailments and have learned about the value of never taking anything for granted.

There are people among us who struggle with addiction and know exactly what it means to take it one day at a time in recovery.

We have seen new life....we have seen death...we have seen the most hope-filled moments the world has to offer and some of the darkest horrors that no one should have to go through....

All that and so much more has happened to the people that make up this church.

And so we take all of that learned experience....all the realities people live with and make them part of our conversation with one another...and offer them up to God in hopes that we can take that learned experience---whether it came through blessing or trials and utilize to fulfil God's mission in the world.

Now up to this point our first two elements of becoming apostolic people have been inwardly focused. Focused on what we are going through, our personal struggles and what we have learned and what we have to offer....but our final two elements will focus on the outward.

So this leads us to our third area of being modern day apostles....the area that Mead calls Identifying.

Specifically, he is referring to identifying with the pain of the world.

Mead says that the church must identify itself with the suffering that creeps into every life, every home, and every community.

Because we know there is no much more brokenness in our world.

It's no secret. Regular shootings and gang violence throughout many parts of the bay area.

Young adults who are now addicted to heroin because they started taking prescription pain pills when they were in High School. Hunger, Famine, disease throughout the world.....modern day slavery and abuse happening right in our back yard....

It is our job to lift these things up....to not ignore them because it makes us feel uncomfortable...or because we think there is nothing we can possibly do to stop it.

We must keep these at the center of our church...because you never know who in this room might be called and equipped to take on one of these needs in the world.

So....

- 1) Receiving and caring for another.
- 2) Offering our gifts and talents and experiences to the work and mission of God.
- 3) Identifying the brokenness and needs in the world.

The fourth and final element of being an apostolic people.... Is what we plan on doing today after our time of worship.....as we build playhouses and package food.....Service.

If we are to be an apostolic people....we have to be serious about serving.

Now, I absolutely love how much this congregation serves others.....through Haiti, through cleanup and rebuilding places that have been affected by natural disaster,

through Sierra Service Project, Gleanings for the Hungry, Trinity Center just to name a few....there is no doubt that this congregation serves.

In fact, there have been many years where the California-Nevada annual conference of the United Methodist Church had given this congregation its “pick up a hammer” award because we have done more service projects than any of our sister churches. That is something to be proud of...I feel so blessed to be part of a congregation like that!

But, even after recognizing all the great work that is being done by our congregation, don't start to think we are off completely covered on this area.....because I am still going to push us a little bit this morning....

You know it's hard to imagine what was going through the original 12 apostle's minds when Jesus sent them out into the world...

If you remember back to our reading Jesus told them to proclaim the message and to care for those in need EVERYWHERE. Not very specific instructions.

Go out everywhere.....and by the way...don't take anything with you....rely on God....rely on strangers to provide you with what you need. Some will reject you...some won't care about what you are doing...some won't say thank you for your service.....but go...head out...and go EVERYWHERE.

When you think about it...Jesus gives so few instructions...made so few arrangements...Jesus didn't call ahead and coordinate equipment to be on the mission site.....Jesus didn't utilize a service organization with paid staff to show the apostles what to do.....No, they were just sent out.

Don't get me wrong, we can accomplish so much when we serve through established organizations and projects...but if we are to be an apostolic people we must also be open to where God leads us and that might mean being sent to a place that no one has been before.

If we recognize one another as modern day apostles, then we recognize the authority that God has given each and every one of us...and the church needs to recognize that it is not its job to simply direct or organize apostles into service...but to RELEASE THEM INTO SERVICE.

If case you didn't catch that let me say it again... the church's job IS NOT to simply direct or organize apostles into service...but instead its job is to RELEASE THEM INTO SERVICE.

A believe it or not....the difference between directing and releasing is HUGE.

Because if the church is releasing us into service, that means that each of us have the responsivity to take mercy, care and good news EVERYWHERE not just where this is already an established mission project.

Because every single person in this room encounters unique individuals...unique situations...unique opportunities...and we all need to be in the mindset of mission happening there too.

I give thanks for those who go on service trips...and those who come to serve on mission Sunday.... But the service doesn't end here....it doesn't end today... it doesn't end when we get home from the week-long trip.

Service is something we are called to integrate into our daily lives.

So... Receiving one another's joy and pain

Offering Our Gifts and experiences to God and the Church

Identifying the pain and needs of the world and

Serving EVERYWHERE.....

These are the four ingredients of being an apostolic people.

In a way looking at these four elements can seem pretty overwhelming....

Thinking about the vulnerability it takes to share what is going on in one another's lives....

Trying to harness all of the collective wisdom within our congregation

Lifting up all the pain, brokenness and darkness in our community and world.

Serving not only in organized ways but also in those places that we go as individuals....

It is A Lot!

But don't forget that the apostles were given authority to go out and be successful in God's mission to the world.... and I believe that through the Holy Spirit we are given that same authority today.

Do you? Do you believe all of the talent and wisdom and experience you have gained can be used with the help of the Holy Spirit to care for the world?

It can be....we have so much more power and authority than we even realize....

When a person is ordained in the United Methodist Church...the Bishop tells them to "take authority as a minister..."

If our church is going to thrive into the 21st century it is time to recognize that this statement is not just for clergy.... It is for all of us...

So may you take the authority that God has given you to be an ambassador of God to all the world. May you know that your gifts, experiences and graces are needed in this world that has so much brokenness?

And may you fear not...because you are many parts of one body that God is going to use in powerful ways if we open ourselves up to taking our authority as an apostolic people.

Amen.