

Read also Luke 6:43-49. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Four weeks ago twelve leaders from this church attended a seminar led by Dr. Jim Singleton. The seminar was called “Through the Looking Glass: Being the Church in a Crazy New World.” Jim talked about church as we have known it. He called it Christendom because, as he explained, the church and the culture have for many years been closely intertwined. Take a look at these pictures.

These are parades of school children that have taken place each year on a school day in NYC. They began in the 1800s in Brooklyn and Queens. Do you know what they are parading for?

Sunday School. In 1946 there were 90,000 school children in the parade and it was attended by the Governor of New York, the Brooklyn Mayor, and a Supreme Court Justice. The Sunday schools not only taught children the Bible, but also used the Bible to teach English reading, speaking and writing to many immigrants. In fact, The South Third Presbyterian Church of Williamsburg established Throop Avenue Mission Sunday School in a poor neighborhood of Brooklyn. It birthed a church, housed the German YMCA, and congregations of African Americans, Germans, Romanians, and other immigrants.¹

It took a great deal of passion and commitment to make this happen.

But now the holiday is called Anniversary Day and for teachers it is a staff development day. Celebrating Sunday School is a distant memory.

Many churches have lost members over the past few years. Hartford Institute estimates there are roughly 350,000 congregations in the United States. Eighty percent of citizens say they are sure there is a God and belong to a faith group. Seventy-five percent identify as “Christian” with forty percent telling surveys they attend church weekly. However, only twenty percent actually attend church. Fewer still are involved leading and serving.²

The importance of spiritual life is waning in 2016, just as it was waning in Israel at the time of Isaiah.

At that time Israel had divided into two kingdoms. The kingdoms struggled with survival against neighboring, stronger nations. It was a post-war time and tension was high. Some wanted to break away from Assyria. Some people thought they should align with Egypt for help. But the prophets said they needed to trust God; to pray and obey.

In the northern kingdom, few people worshipped God because the temple was in the southern territory of Judah. The people of the northern kingdom syncretized their faith with the pagan

¹ Tony Carnes, “Thursday, June 9, 2016 will be Anniversary Day, a celebration of the Sunday Schools of NYC”, May 4, 2016, at <http://www.nycreligion.info/today-brooklynqueens-anniversary-day/>, accessed September 14, 2016.

² “Fast Facts about American Religion,” at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html, accessed September 14, 2016.

beliefs around them. They lost sight of God; their faith became weak, when they lost the regularity of worship life.

Perhaps the faith of America has suffered in the same way. Many things crowd out a lifestyle of worship on Sunday—sports, kids’ activities, going for coffee, getting away for the weekend.

Lack of worship in Israel also gave rise to social injustices. People stopped giving to help the needy. The poor were not paid a fair wage. The margin between rich and poor grew. Some were building summer palaces. Some had no home at all.

So there was pressure from without—worry over wars and threats of wars. And there was pressure within—people not doing right toward their neighbors. This is how it was at the time of Isaiah. And the prophets were warning the people.

When faith becomes unimportant or a low priority, there are ramifications for the culture. Faith has an amazingly positive influence. But when it is lacking, people lose vision.

Rev. Singleton and leaders like him try to figure out how we can restore that influence, like sixty years ago in America. The problem is, we are not going to go back to the culture of the 1950s. The days of Christendom are gone. It is foreign to the culture. Prayer and biblical understanding are no longer in the mainstream of public life.

We’ve also tried what is called the “attractional church”—you know; the megachurches with professional bands, flashing lights, and a winsome, commanding preacher. While those churches have successfully drawn numbers, they are weak at making disciples. The foundation of these churches is now discovered to be mere sand. Listen to the words of Bill Hybels, lead pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago:

We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, [was]. . . teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become ‘self feeders.’ We should have . . . taught people how to read their bible.³

If you look at the early church in the Bible, it is high on discipleship, high on caring for one another, and high on risking faith. The early church did not have buildings or the internet or even a written New Testament.

Now theologians are realizing that the church must be missional. It must be about disciple making. The church must get out of its building and go to people; not expect people to come to us because they are not going to come into our buildings.

But that’s a challenge! One theologian describes it as like canoeing over a mountain.

³ Bob Burney, “A Shocking “Confession” from Willow Creek Community Church,” Christian Headlines.com, October 30, 2007, accessed September 14, 2016.

Yes, as we go about our public events, it is daunting—getting churches together, getting a large choir together, telling Bible stories in the park, talking to people, calling on people to contribute, taking posters around. It is like canoeing over a mountain.

Here are the values of the Missional Church: It is like a missionary encounter with the culture:

- We don't assume people know the faith
- They will likely not wander in to church
- We will meet them on their territory

What a Missional Church looks like:

- Discipleship Happens on Mission – we learn as we go out
- Strong Communities – we have strong relationships with each other as we go out
- Not Expected to be Mega-Churches – this model works with smaller church where all of us are on mission

How do we go out to our culture? How do we begin? Isaiah helps us. READ Isaiah 51:1-6

Let us grasp the vision of faith. “The rock from which you are hewn” is Abraham, who had “rock solid” faith. This is what Jesus meant, “the wise man builds his house upon a rock.”

Hear Jesus' words: *It is all good for you.* Jesus tells us how:

So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against the house, *it stands firm because it is well built* (Lk 6:46-48).

Do you need help? Do you long for some spiritual revival? Do you have a desire for God to act? God, gives you the opportunity through faith, not just life as usual.

People of faith believe God's promises are solid. They trust them. They care about those who don't know God. People of faith long to draw other people in.

Isaiah says, “Think about the rock from which you were hewn.” We are Abraham and Sarah's grandchildren.

What is the missional church? It is the church where growing in faith matters.

We talk about Abraham. He said “yes” to God's call and moved to a place just like Southwest Dallas County. He believed God could do anything. He believed this God was on his side! Many were blessed because he had hope in God.

Do you have his vision? That's what faith is – believing God is on your side; and having the desire for God to act on your behalf; on behalf of your town.

The founders of FPCD heard a call. They organized a church. They met in a school, then built a small building. They invited you. In recent years, you began to share Bible stories and music

with the community. You reached out to local leaders, schools, and businesses to talk about the Bible in community conversations. You raised money for the poor (DOM). One event led to another and now you have engaged ten other churches to join you. When we met this week for a luncheon to cast a vision for Community in Unity, all those churches stood up, pointing to FPCD's leadership.

This is your work. This is faith. It's a call of God. It is a gift with stunning promises, though at times it just seems like work. It is exactly what Isaiah was calling people to do.

The people in the Bible looked for things God Himself planned and built. They sought God's interests. They had a burning desire for this God and were willing to be partners with God.

That's the rock from which YOU are hewn.

But living into it is sort of like canoeing over a mountain. It takes real passion and commitment.

Isaiah had to inspire a discouraged culture. Our culture is equally discouraged about faith. But God continues to call us to hope. It happens through faith that matters. Look to the Rock of faith. Let your faith matter.

AMEN