

Mission Study as Community
a sermon given at Palisades Presbyterian Church
Bill Menke, December 10, 2006

Reading 1: The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into [Israel's] hands ... Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place." Judges 7: 2, 4-7.

Reading 2: So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles. Acts 1: 23-26.

My plan today is to present a brief meditation, next to read our congregation's new Mission Statement, abridged somewhat so that *it runs in the allotted time*, and then finish up with a few closing words.

The story of Matthias has always provoked a smile from me. I wonder who rolled the dice. Was it St. Peter?

I grew up in the Holiness Movement, a small group of protestant denominations that date back to the early twentieth century and that stress the transformative power of God in our lives. Gambling was anathema, because by gambling you were suggesting that God did not have a plan for you.

I smile also because, as a scientist, I've thought a lot about Einstein's often-quoted declaration, "God does not play dice with the universe". Einstein was criticizing the role that chance plays in the then-new theory of quantum mechanics. He turned out to be wrong in that criticism. But his words remind us how strongly we associate the notion of absolute certainty with God.

But it's right there in Acts. The fate of the apostles of Christ was left up to chance. And God went along with it.

The story of Gideon provokes a smile from me from me, too. I take childlike delight in the imagery of grown men lapping like dogs.

I don't want to trivialize this behavior, though. I've taken long summer hikes in the mountains, and sometimes run out of water. Believe me, when I finally reach a spring, I'm lapping like a dog, too.

Gideon's war was serious business. The army of Midian was said to be as numerous as locusts. The possibility of a military defeat was very real and might well have been a

fatal blow to the nation of Israel. Yet the soldiers are not selected on the basis of military prowess but rather on the way they drink water.

I doubt drinking style correlates with fighting ability, so the selection methodology seems random to me. And in this story, God chooses the method.

Now the glib lesson to be learned here is that the rather tedious process that we Presbyterians follow in choosing a minister couldn't really be any worse than these two.

But there is a deeper lesson, which comes out when we realize that these selection methods were only end-games.

Matthias was one of the seventy disciples who were with Jesus from the beginning, from when he was baptized by John. So he had some credentials. And the church in Acts was able to reduce that number down to two, Matthias and Joseph, before rolling the dice.

We don't know how well this new apostle Matthias worked out. According to one bible encyclopedia I consulted, "All further information concerning the life and death of Matthias is vague and contradictory".

Gideon's three hundred water-lapping soldiers were subject to some pre-screening, too. Earlier in the book of Judges, we find that at the start, Israel's army numbered twenty-two thousand. That was reduced to ten thousand by Gideon announcing that anyone who trembled and feared could go home. So at least the three hundred were drawn from among the most courageous.

Now I want you to consider God's rationale for ordering Gideon to pair down the size of his army: God says, "In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her".

The reader of Judges may readily think that it was a forgone conclusion that Gideon's twenty-two thousand would have been victorious. God is reducing the size of the army so as to have a chance to work a miracle and so let the people know there is a God out there.

But then why were twelve thousand men – more than half of Gideon's army – trembling and afraid? My own spin on these verses is that it would have been a miracle if Gideon won, even if he had gone into battle with the twenty-two thousand. So God's directions are not to ensure that there be an opportunity to *perform* a miracle. Rather, the intent here is that the people *perceive* the miracle that had to happen, regardless.

But on now to our mission study, which as you know is the first step in the process of calling a new pastor.

Our Beliefs

We are a congregation who strives to provide a safe place for everyone. Some of our friends and members have a clear sense of their own mission in life; others are struggling to find a sense of spirituality; and still others would not speak of their relationship with a church in those terms, but would instead emphasize their love for the community. All are equally welcome. We try to listen to each other, uncritically and with patience and openness, believing that everyone brings gifts that can be shared. We realize that we do not always succeed in this ideal, but know that when we do, we ourselves grow and God's purposes are served.

The Joys and Concerns portion of our Sunday church service is a particularly vivid expression of our way of being a community of faith. It's a time when we keep in touch with each other's deepest feelings. An incoherent sob commands the same respect as an eloquent speech. Concern over a lost pet is taken as seriously as concern over a raging war. The joy of seeing a rainbow is held up as high as the joy over a long-sought cure. All our joys and concerns matter to each of us. Or so we hope.

Our having declared ourselves a More Light congregation - one that dissents from the national church's efforts to restrict the participation of lesbian and gay people in church life - follows from our belief. We recall that Jesus was not at all averse to making disciples of the social outcasts of his day, and so encourage everyone to participate in whatever way they are suited. Looking back at our experiences, we can unequivocally affirm the tremendous contributions that lesbian and gay people have made by being leaders in our congregation.

The way we welcome children into the life of our congregation is another expression of our belief. We afford children a central place in almost all of our activities, including part of our Sunday church service. Foremost among what we teach them is that they need never feel alone, for both God and we love them and are there for them. We listen to them, ignoring occasional fidgeting and noise, and are often rewarded by startling insights. And once again we recall Jesus, this time surrounded by the children of his day.

Another of our beliefs is that the contemplation of beauty, and especially the kind of beauty that can be communicated through the arts, is an essential element of the spirituality to which many of us aspire. Some of us find justification of this notion in the psalms, where beauty epitomizes God's presence. Then again, it may be that our church building, inspired by the simple elegance of an alpine chapel, has had the greater influence over our thinking. Music, flowers, poetry and pageantry are all especially important to us.

Finally, we have a great urge to contribute to the betterment of the world. We know that it's not all about us; God's love embraces the world and every person within it. Of

course, we realize that the problems of the world are very great and not easily solved, and furthermore, that all of us share some of the responsibility for their presence. But we also have a fervent hope for the future. We do what we can to help the disadvantaged, both in our own neighborhoods and worldwide.

Who We Are

Our religious backgrounds are very diverse. Some of us, but only a minority, have attended a Presbyterian church since childhood. For some of us, too, but again only a minority, Palisades Presbyterian is the first church that we have ever attended, begun well after adulthood. The rest of us have been members of other protestant or catholic churches earlier in life. Most of us are comfortable with the general style of Presbyterian church services and government, which are, after all similar to those of many other protestant churches. But few of us are strongly invested in specifically Presbyterian traditions. We could be correctly called theologically liberal, but such a designation would fail to capture our focus on individual healing and spirituality. Many of us have stories, poignant and only occasionally told, of God's transformative power in our lives.

[*A few of us are of African and Asian ethnicity; the rest of us are white. Like many other churches, a majority of us are in the more senior age categories. A few of us are in high school or college, especially those of us with parents among the congregation. A significant number of us are younger adults, with a broad set of life circumstances: working and not working; just starting a career and well-established in it; with a spouse or partner and without; gay, lesbian and straight. Quite a few of us are parents of young children, some of whom are adopted.]

We are, for the most part, highly educated. The large majority of us have attended college, and a substantial number of us have had graduate training. A surprisingly large number of us work - or have worked - in professions connected with the arts, such as actor, architect, designer, filmmaker, photographer, musician and novelist. The rest of us include business people, doctors, homemakers, scientists, teachers and trades people. We like sermons, books, films and discussions that are intellectually, spiritually and emotionally challenging.

[Some of us live in Palisades, the upscale New York village in which our church facilities are located, and more in nearby Sparkill and Tappan. But many of us live in more distant parts of Bergen and Rockland counties, or in Manhattan (which is about a half hour drive away, when the traffic is light). These are, generally-speaking, all affluent areas, but we ourselves represent a broad economic range. Many of us, and especially those of us who are retired, feel the pinch of residing in an area with an extremely high cost-of-living.]

Volunteering is a very important aspect of our lifestyle. Our church's activities are very participatory. We organize, lead and take part in church services, Sunday School, recreational and educational activities and fundraising events on an ongoing basis.

Almost all of us have helped to govern the church, by serving on a board or committee. Our service is not limited to church. Many of us are also very active members of community organizations that foster athletics, education, the environment, health, historic preservation, hunger relief, low-income housing and the performing arts.

Four of us in the last decade have decided to pursue formal religious training and become pastors. These are just a few, for sure, but still more than might be usual for a church with only a hundred or so members. It must mean something.

Past and Future

Our previous Mission Study, conducted in 1998, identified numerous first-year and three-year initiatives. [We successfully implemented many of them. We undertook and saw through to completion several major building repairs and renovations, which greatly enhance our ability to conduct our Sunday school and the coffee hour that follows our Sunday church service. We put a variety of new, ongoing social activities into place, which many of us still find appealing. And we began several new outreach programs, targeted at disadvantaged people in economically less well-off parts of the metropolitan area, which we generally regard to be modest, but important, successes. On the other hand, some of our other 1998 initiatives faltered. Perhaps most important were educational programs targeted at teenagers and adults. Our teenager program, once vibrant, seemed to fizzle with a critical mass problem - not enough teenagers to create the right group dynamic. And our adult education program sagged, too, mostly because we did not afford it sufficient priority.]

Some of our initiatives succeeded and some of them failed. But we have subsequently noticed that few of them addressed what we later have come to understand were the real issues of the last eight years. This is not to say that they did no good; quite to the contrary, even those that failed helped us along our path in some small way. But initiatives are, by their very nature, extremely specific, yet the future seldom can be predicted with precision. We must always be reassessing our plans and programs in light of the new opportunities and new challenges that God sends our way.

So rather than enumerate another list of initiatives, we identify only a few broad issues that currently seem important, and whose solution would seem to require both inspiration and hard work.

[Three] Challenges that We Face

We are a church with a declining membership. Yet the news is by no means all bad. Each year, new people join our congregation. Each brings new talents and insights that enlarge both us and our vision. However, for the past decade, losses have exceeded gains, and our size has shrunk by about a third. There is no single explanation for this decline, but rather it is the consequence of a variety of factors. Economic reasons,

common to all metropolitan area residents, have been important. Many of those who have left have done so to follow jobs or to retire to regions with lower cost-of-living. Personal stresses, including divorce and unemployment, so common in our culture, have taken their toll. Some of us have died. Some of us have lost interest. And, to our shame, we have sometimes let disagreements among ourselves grow to the point of alienation. Yet we have the sense that many people, even in our increasingly secular culture, feel a need for developing and expressing spirituality in their lives. We live dispersed among more than a million other people, so the number of people who potentially might be interested in us is probably far greater than we could imagine, even while their percentage in the population may be small. Our first challenge is to connect with these people, many of whom may well have had poor experiences with, or been ignored by, the religious institutions they hitherto have encountered.

We are very demanding of our pastors. Furthermore, the most critical of our expectations are not the sort that gets written down in yearly agreements. They are more subtle, arising out of particular combination of gifts and limitations that make us who we are. As a result, they can be hard for both us and our pastor to see: We expect pastors to be extremely accessible and approachable, to be able to quickly put at ease, understand and comfort, not only us, but visitors in our midst; We expect pastors to have a depth of wisdom and intellect sufficient to prod us forward in our individual faith journeys; and we expect pastors to be able to organize us, so that we get done the many things that we see as pressing. Our second challenge is to focus and express our expectations in ways that foster growth, as contrasted to stress, in our relationship with our pastor, and furthermore, to accept and appreciate gifts that aren't expected.

[Our role in the local community is changing. For many years, ours was a community church. A large percentage of us lived in Palisades and the adjoining towns. Our pastors lived right across the street from our church building, in a residence that we provided, so our pastor and his or her family were a part of the Palisades community. And many of the other residents of Palisades, even those who were not themselves members of our congregation, nevertheless thought of us as their church, and supported us in various ways. This situation has significantly changed. Escalating real estate prices, with homes now costing in the millions of dollars, have changed the character of Palisades. Fewer of us live in Palisades or nearby it. And our current pastor no longer lives across the street, but rather a half-hour drive away. While we are still nostalgic over the old days, we have to admit that our congregation still works. Our third challenge is one of reinvention; developing for ourselves a new way of interacting with society, including Palisades, and an updated self-image that corresponds to it.]

Some Advice to Ourselves

We are a congregation that is focused on connecting with the spirit. We strive to be as open as possible to accepting the gifts that God has given to each of us, for in addition to benefiting ourselves, they are a validation of God's acceptance of the giver. That is our

center, and it must come through in the things that we do. We must work against the fear of non-acceptance that many first-time visitors to a church experience by rapidly getting to know them and communicating the sense that we care. We must continually ask newcomers to join our committees, to participate in our projects and to lead our church services, and if they decline, we must ask them again when another opportunity arises. We must adapt as our younger children grow to become teenagers and then adults, both in the kinds of programs that we offer them and the relationship that we have with them. We must be sensitive to the needs of those of us who are disabled by disease or age, and not let them be cut off from our community. We must work to end exclusionary practices wherever we find them, in culture, law and church government. We must direct a good portion of our efforts outward, toward the disadvantaged of the world, both because of the good that it does them and the spiritual growth that we derive from our efforts.

As we select a new pastor, we must acknowledge that we have specific needs. We do need a pastor who is accessible, who gives challenging sermons and who is administratively able. And, moreover, we especially need someone whose approach to community is compatible with our own. Yet we need to recognize that these needs create challenges for us as much as they do for any prospective pastor. We have the sense that our needs require a pastor's full-time attention; that no part-time arrangement could really work for long. Consequently, we must develop a financial plan that provides a full-time salary. We have the sense that the proximity of the pastor matters, even while conceding that our across-the-street residence might not be the best place for our pastor to live. Consequently, we must find new ways to address the issue of pastoral housing. We understand the role of the pastor to be more that of a leader than of a friend. Consequently, we must exercise discipline in the way that our relationships with the pastor develop. And, finally, we acknowledge that no person is equally gifted in all the areas of our needs. Consequently, we must put in place a system that supports the pastor's efforts at appropriate times and in well thought through ways.

That ends the mission study. Now to conclude my meditation.

Israel's challenge was to perceive God's miracle in spite of preconceptions about armies.

Our challenge is similar. We need to perceive God working in our midst, in spite of preconceptions about our own abilities. Our very success-oriented twenty-first century culture makes such perception tough. We tend to ascribe too much to our own excellence or our own incompetence. Only when we have personally reached some crisis point are these preconceptions shattered.

Yet God is working in our midst, always.

Our community of faith here provides counterpoint to our culture. By loving one another irrespective of our successfulness, we act out God's unconditional love for us all. We

individually become better able to perceive God's love for us. And by listening to each other's stories, we begin to perceive God's possibilities in our own individual lives, too.

Both Gideon and the church in Acts were able to loosen up a bit, at the end. They let go of some *angst* and trusted that God would be there for them.

That's good news for us.

** Sections of the Mission Study set off by square brackets were omitted from the sermon.*