

We Should Have Died 10 Years Ago!

Rev. Tom Hagood

Sunday, April 11

Lt. Joseph Ives, after visiting the Grand Canyon in 1861 reported that “Ours has been the first expedition, and doubtless to be the last, to visit this profitless locality.”

Five years before the Wright Brothers took to the air, the British mathematician and physicist Lord Kelvin said that “heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible.”

The New York Times reported in 1936 that “a rocket will never be able to leave the Earth’s atmosphere.”

Darryl Zanuck, a 20th Century Fox movie producer made this prediction in 1946 ... “[Television] won’t be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night.”

Ken Olson, the president and chairman of Digital Equipment Corp., a maker of big business mainframe computers, argued against the personal computer in 1977 saying, “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.”

Without a doubt, those are some of the biggest predictions that didn’t come true.

But if you think about it ... don’t we all make such predictions ... we often make the same kinds of predictions about our political leaders ... about sports teams ... even our own children ... or friends ... or the future of the church.

Ridiculing new ideas and predictions of great change are often made by closed minds that don’t see the potential that someone else sees. Even though the phrase sounds a bit overused ... Those who usually “think outside of the box” are the ones whom people often look at and say ... “they’re crazy ... that will never happen ... it can’t be done ... we’ve never done it that way before ... what makes them think that’ll ever work.”

Same thing was said about a group of rebel Jews back in the First Century who went around Jerusalem proclaiming a resurrected Christ.” And the leaders of that time ... the leaders of established church ... just crossed their arms and proclaimed it all to be just a bunch of nonsense ... and predicted that their cause would soon be forgotten.

And yet ... here we sit this morning. It seems that the prediction of those church leaders was wrong ... the message that those rebel Jews shared in Jerusalem didn’t go away. I pray that our reading from the fifth chapter of Acts this morning will catch your attention like it did mine.

Listen with your heart to verses 27-41. I will be reading from the New Revised Standard version.

²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them,

²⁸saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.

³⁰The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

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⁴But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.

³⁵Then he said to them, “Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men.

³⁶For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared.

³⁷After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered.

³⁸So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail;

³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” They were convinced by him,

⁴⁰and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged.

Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

This is the Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

That Pharisee, Gamaliel, seems to be quite wise and clever. After all, what he tells the Jewish Council makes all the sense in the world ... “Why risk upsetting the people by taking on these Jewish rebel rousers ... let them just go the way of all the other ones who’ve gone before them. All this stuff about an itinerant rabbi being raised from the dead has absolutely no merit. The dead stay dead ... like all those who claimed to be the Messiah before him. In a few weeks, either the Romans will get them or all of their followers will just get tired and go home ... they always do.”

Well ... guess what? He was wrong. And the fact that you’re sitting here this morning is a testimony to just how wrong he was. The Romans didn’t get rid of those Jewish religious rebels who proclaimed Christ risen ... their followers didn’t get tired and just go home. And now ... all these many centuries later ... we still proclaim Christ risen.

And, according to a recent article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “The world is witnessing a huge explosion of religious conversion and growth, and Christianity is growing faster than any other religion.” <http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/27536631/The-Twilight-of-Atheism-The-Global-Triumph-of-Christianity>

And yet, we mainline Protestants ... particularly we Presbyterians of the USA variety ... are ringing our hands with anxiety as story after story comes out about how we are steadily shrinking in numbers. We’re obsessed with the numbers. Get a group of two or more pastors together and the first question out of their mouths will be ... “How big is your church?”

Countless books are written revealing the magic formulas for church growth ... there are hundreds of church experts touring the country that for a fee will come in and tell you what you need to “grow your church.” Because ... as an institution deeply steeped in the capitalistic model of efficiency and growth ... if we’re not growing in numbers ... and I mean big numbers ... then we’re obviously dying.

Did you know that when I was talking with the Pastor Nominating Committee of this church way back at the turn of the century ... a pastor I knew gave me some advice ... “Stay away from that church. They’re dying. They’ll probably be dead in 10 years.” Guess what ... that pastor’s prediction was wrong.

Ten years later ... and this church ... Columbia Presbyterian Church ... is still going strong ... much stronger. Yes, it is true, however, that there are actually fewer members on the active role than when I first arrived ... that’s what happens when a larger church has lots of older members ... some of our saints have left us over the last 10 years ... but look around.

There are plenty of new saints in these pews who are just as excited as I am about the work and mission we do. You see ... playing the numbers game can be deceptive ... it can actually overwhelm our sense of reality ... In our American culture ... numbers seem to tell us the difference between success and failure ...

It’s all about the numbers ... we’re so preoccupied with numbers ... we live and die by the numbers ... corporations are all about making profits for the stockholders ... TV stations all vie

for the greatest audience ... reports come out every week on the number of cars sold ... the number of new homes purchased.

And if we think of churches in that same way, according to Tony Jones in the Book, *The New Christians*, “Church growth (then) implies numerical growth, a concept in line with capitalism, to be sure: corporate growth means more widgets sold, a larger market share, and a better return on investment for shareholders.”

So if a church doesn't have as many members as it used to have ... then it must be failing. If a church used to have 1,000 members like we used to have in 1970 and today it has less than 150 ... like we do, then it must be in throngs of death. Well guess what ... I don't buy that. Not here at Columbia.

Let me tell you why. Because being the church has nothing to do with the size of church we are. It has everything to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ and with each other. That's worth repeating ... being the church has nothing to do with the size of church we are. It has everything to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ and with each other.

Peter and his apostles weren't hung up on numbers. They were merely following the will of the Holy Spirit that Christ has sent to lead them in their mission to spread the Good News of the Gospel.

Christ didn't leave behind any guidelines or five and year goal plans ... he didn't leave Peter a master checklist ... he didn't leave his disciples quota forms to fill out ... no ... it wasn't about the numbers then and it still isn't today. The growth of Christianity is the result of God's efforts ... not ours.

We are just instructed to share the Good News of the Gospel ... through the Word and through acts of compassion and love. The Holy Spirit seals the deal ... we don't. So what does a healthy church look like if we don't count the numbers as our success marker?

Well Tony Jones shares a beautiful model for the church that I believe just might answer that question ... particularly for a church like Columbia. Listen to what he suggests to us ... “A couple might stop procreating after three children because two adults, three kids, a dog and a cat seem like a sustainable way of life; ... eighteen children and thirty-two cats does not. But of course, that family is still *growing* in various ways, many of which cannot be numerically quantified.” (Tony Jones, *The New Christians*)

Think about that ... that little family, though they don't add any more children, still continues to grow ... they share in relationships with each other ... they have both good and bad experiences to share with one another ... there is joy and laughter as well as sadness and grief ... that family continues to grow emotionally as well as spiritually ... holding each other close at times and running off into great wide world at other times ... but as long as they are a family, they are there to support and love each other ... they are there to embrace one another in times of sorrow and pain because when one suffers, they all suffer ... and they are there to jump with joy in times of celebration, because when one rejoices they all rejoice.

And the bonds of love and compassion grow stronger and stronger through the years. That family sustains itself ... and it will grow as the years go by ... and the neat thing, as Jones points out, each generation “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need.”

Do you know what I believe ... I believe that we're like that little family here at Columbia. Growth is important ... but sustainable growth is more important in the life of our church. It actually sets us apart ... it frees us ... from our cultures demands that we grow larger and larger and larger if we are to succeed as a church. That's just not the case.

We are doing what we need to be doing right now ... we are building relationships with each other ... we are growing spiritually ... we are sharing the Good News with our friends and neighbors and inviting them to worship here ... we are meeting the needs of our neighbors by sharing our resources and our time and our talents ... and that, I believe with all my heart, is precisely what God is calling us to do here in our little corner of Decatur.

There have always been all kinds of predictions made through the years ... and even now, I suspect, some people might still say that this church is dying because it's too small. Well, Peter and his apostles proved some folks wrong two centuries ago. I suspect we'll do the exact same thing ... because as long as Jesus Christ has a need for Columbia ... Columbia will follow its Lord and Savior ... one day at a time.

Let us pray:

God, bless Your church with hope!

 Despite chaotic days,

May we in chaos shine to light a pathway
 through life's maze.

May justice be our aim,

 and kindness ours to share,

In humbleness O may we walk,

 assured our God is there!

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