



“Founding Mother”

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:36-44

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

October 26, 2008

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

I was talking to a colleague in ministry. He was wondering about his future because, as he put it, “my denomination is dying.” He’s probably right. All the old so-called “Protestant Mainline” denominations, including our own, are in decline. The loss of numbers is matched by a loss of vitality that strikes at the soul of our churches.

Years ago, John Gardner called it “institutional blight, a withering and cessation of growth that results from aging, lowered motivation, routine repetition, declining vitality.” All organizations tend to turn in on themselves and frustrate their original purpose. Institutional survival and organizational maintenance become the organizational goal, and inevitable decline sets in.

The old Protestant establishment, the so-called “mainline” denominations, are now on the sideline. This is a dramatic shift from the historic pattern. Protestants, mainline and otherwise, once were the large majority of the American population. Protestants of every type now comprise barely 51% of the population (Pew Forum). Old mainline Protestants, the traditional Protestant establishment, make up only 18% of the population. According to some reports, 80% of all Protestant churches are barely holding steady or are declining in membership.

Old American religion is in a long recession that shows no sign of ending. We live in a new religious landscape that few could imagine a generation ago. Our world is becoming quite diverse. Today there are more Mormons in America than Jews, more Muslims than Episcopalians, more Hindus and Buddhists than Congregationalists. Add to that the increasing secularization of both the east and west coasts, especially in urban centers, and it seems clear it’s not easy to be a vital Christian church in an eastern, urban environment like New York.

Americans in general, and urban residents in particular, increasingly say while they are spiritual, they certainly aren’t religious. I think what that means is that many, maybe most, Americans, prefer an individual, subjective relationship with the eternal than a relationship with any religious institution.

When I was in Boston, we did a survey among our nearest neighbors. We were attempting to determine the degree of openness they might have to participation in our congregation. We were not terribly surprised to find out that 92% of them had no interest in any organized religion of any type. The same 92% said nothing we could do or say would make them interested in our church. We live in a different world.

It is a challenging time to be a Christian congregation. I confess pastoral ministry in these days is a difficult issue for me. It’s not easy to be on the losing side. In my lifetime, I’ve experienced the shift of the church from establishment power to marginalization.

As always, in matters of the church and pastoral ministry, the Apostle Paul has been a helpful mentor to me. In fact, I find Paul so helpful, I wrote a book about it!

The Epistle Lesson, taken from Paul's first letter written to a local congregation, is one of the crucial passages in my pastoral formation. I was a very young minister in a very old congregation that was suffering from institutional blight – though I didn't know what blight was at the time. I was reading my Greek New Testament – a discipline that forces me to slow down and pay attention – when the text leaped up off the page and waved at me as if to say, "Pay attention." I did, and my life and my ministry haven't been the same since.

It may seem strange for us moderns seeking a revitalized church to seek assistance from an ancient letter by an old missionary whose reputation is severely damaged these days. But, as always, this text might surprise you if you let it. After all, the texts to which we attend shape us, and there is some good shaping material here.

And again, as usual, there's a story behind this text, a story that bears the power of eternity. I know because it transformed me.

While the world of the early church is quite different than ours, in many ways we face similar challenges in our time. The ancient world was religiously diverse and the religious options available offered powerful spiritual experiences. Greek mystery religions featured high voltage and often sensual religious experiences. Roman religion was more utilitarian – the gods often served the causes of the Empire. A large somewhat secular population knelt before the gods but seldom took religion seriously. To them, religion was as much cultural as spiritual.

Traveling philosophers and itinerate purveyors of religion traveled the roads of the Empire selling their spiritual wares. They were a common social phenomenon not unlike televangelists in some parts of America. In our text, Paul calls these traveling evangelists "hucksters and peddlers" of religion.

One of the large questions in the first generation of Christians was how to distinguish between the hucksters and genuine Christian teachers. An early Christian work, *The Didache*, suggests that if they ask for money, they are likely religious hucksters!

Perhaps, more to the point, in that kind of world it was not easy forming authentic communities of faith, vital growing communities that produce people of faith who authenticate the Christian message.

Paul, Timothy and Silas, a team of missionaries, arrived in the Greek city of Thessalonica still nursing the bruises they received from a beating in nearby Philippi. Once more they told the Christian story that was transforming men, women, and children across Asia and the Greek peninsula. They announced that the God who created the world is not a capricious, detached, self-engaged deity, but a God who is bound by covenant oath to the world and to a people. This God, out of sheer mercy and overwhelming love, sent the man Jesus Christ into God's world to reveal God's heart and will, and to invite God's wandering creation to come home to the one who made us. By the power of Easter morning, God's very life is available to any and all by faith, accepting God's invitation to return to God in love and join God's cause in the world.

For reasons no one can quite comprehend, except to say that message has self-authenticating power, people listened to Paul, Silas and Timothy, and a new community of faith, hope and love was formed in that ancient Greek city.

Unlike the religious hucksters, Paul's missionary team didn't design their message to fit the felt needs of the community in order to increase their market share. They suggested that to follow Jesus is not to escape the darkness and pain of this world, but that God

enters our world in Jesus and accompanies us through the darkness, indeed transforms and redeems our ordinary lives.

Competition for adherents in Thessalonica was intense. The religious powers-that-be didn't appreciate the competition, and Paul, Silas and Timothy got beaten up again. It's not a good way to increase market share! The little congregation helped them run for their lives. The church was left to fend for itself in a complicated and hostile world. They had no resources, no Bibles for the pews, and no seasoned leadership to help them develop the healthy congregation. All they had was faith, hope and love – and a letter from Paul, Timothy, and Silas.

Naturally, the missionary team, now working in Corinth, was worried about the church back in Thessalonica. And it appears the church was confused by their world, by some of the religious hucksters, and the threat of persecution. After all, back then being a Christian might mean getting beaten up.

Paul sat down with Timothy and Silas, and they wrote a letter – an epistle to help a congregation stay vital, continue growing, withstand cultural pressure, and in the end, avoid blight.

The letter begins with a reminder. “When we were with you, you will recall we didn't ask for money, we didn't bully you or mistreat any of you – and we asked for no sexual favors – an alternative translation of “impure motives” (vs. 3). Our appeal was the message we proclaimed itself – its self-authenticating power approves us as God's servants. Hence we never altered the message to please human ears, yours or any one else's – we are accountable to God who entrusts us with the message.”

Then comes a rather astonishing sentence with a powerful image (vss. 7-8). We, Paul, Silas and Timothy, we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. The word nurse can also be translated “wet nurse” or “nursing mother.” The idea is the tender gentleness of authentic Christian leaders and communities. They share their own milk so others can live. And in this case it's the tenderness of a nursing mother for her own child.

Paul goes on, “We gathered you in our arms and gave you ourselves. Remember? We cared so deeply for you we gave you our very selves. You are very dear to us.”

I am part of a male dominated profession in a faith run by males for centuries. That's why this text leapt up off the page and waved a flag in front of my professional consciousness. I discovered that morning there is a feminine side to Christian ministry that if missed, is perilous to the church and its ministry.

We had a toddler son and an infant daughter at the time. I began to watch Gloria and the children with different eyes. I knew all along I had much to learn about my work, but I never guessed how much. I watched other mothers, including my own, with different eyes. I began to ask women about the experience of motherhood. My new eyes and ears taught me much about life, the ministry, and the Christian church.

Mothers seem to have a wonderful tenderness and gentleness with children, especially their own. Mothers tell me about a deep, deep connection they have with their children – a sort of spiritual umbilical cord that is attached for life.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of America's premier preachers, and I were asked by an editor to participate in a book project. She submitted a sermon – on this text – and I evaluated it. Barbara's sermon was a masterpiece and a joy to analyze. It seemed to me this text cries out for a female preacher.

One of Barbara's observations was that Christian leaders belong to a family and "we cannot hear a baby cry without our breasts leaking....We walk among God's people as a tender [mother] offering the good food of the gospel mixed with the milk of our own lives."

Later, in conversation with Barbara, I told her as a man I needed to hear her perspective on the text. I'm still working on my feminine side! She told me to fear not. "I am not a mother," she said, "and I've never nursed a child. But we can both learn how!"

Years ago I took up this work in a little rural church filled with people quite unlike me. To my surprise I fell in love with them – and they loved us back. I began to discover my inner mother as those dear people shared their very lives with me and in the process laid hands on my soul. I've never been the same, and now here I am – your mother in Christ!

And like Paul, I didn't think this up by myself. He and I both know someone else, Jesus Christ, who has already been a spiritual mother, and that's how we know it works.

He stretched out his arms to the world and said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened down, and I will give you rest. For I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28ff).

He also looked at his disciples and said, "There is one thing God wants from you. Love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself."

He formed a community of people called to that great imperative, and we're called to be a special kind of community. Our lives, our life together, and our take on the world are guided by that one great command.

And in the end we become a gentle, mothering people, in love with God and each other. The church is no mere organization. We are a family with lots of moms, dads, grandparents, brothers and sisters and loads of children to love. Here in this place and through the lives and service of one another, we are fed, taught, cared for, prayed for, and most of all loved. We are surrounded by mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, children in the faith. We sit here in the embrace of God - and one another. In each other's faces we see the face of God. And that is very good news.

And there is more good news. In a world and in churches longing for vitality, here's how to avoid blight. Fall in love with God, God's world, and each other. It's the project of a lifetime!

Amen.