

## **The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - November 3, 2019 - Raised Luke 6:20-23 and Ephesians 1:11-12, 15-23**

In her commentary on Ephesians, Pheme Perkins asks a pointed question about how congregations become known as places of “faith in Jesus and loving service to others.”<sup>1</sup> Is it publicity or reputation, she wonders aloud. Clearly, Westminster Presbyterian of Akron, Ohio is a modern church. We have a website, a Facebook page, and accounts for Twitter and Snapchat.

We advertise in the local papers. We regularly display large banners on the front lawn so that the eyes of passing motorists will be drawn to our special events. And our attractive marquee changes often, highlighting our efforts to minister to the community that this church has served for over 80 years.

We recognize that the church should be one with others, and we understand the need to be known. So earlier this year, our Membership Committee discussed the possibility of sending postcards to every residence in the neighborhoods surrounding the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Pheme Perkins, *Ephesians, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2000), 385.

The larger conversation focused on how we ought to publicize our two Christmas Eve worship services. The first of these, featuring the Paragon Brass Quintet, will be held at 5:00 p.m. While the second service, beginning at 7:30, will make jazz vesper's accessible to the diversity of greater Akron.

In light of that discussion regarding the best way forward, we considered the story of another, local congregation that had just attempted a similar marketing strategy. Hundreds of publicity pieces were printed and mailed. Then, one month later, not a single new visitor had set foot in the church.

Which brings us back to Perkins question: how is it that visitors are encouraged to experience what Westminster has to offer? Is it through our publicity or is it a result of our reputation? I would argue that both are important. Yet, what has made congregations successful over time is that they came to be known as "places of faith and mutual love."<sup>2</sup>

As any business owner will tell you, nothing compares with word of mouth referrals. The same is true in the church. Thus, while slick marketing campaigns do matter, they are not nearly as important as a personal invitation from you.<sup>3</sup> You see,

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<sup>2</sup> Perkins, 381.

<sup>3</sup> Perkins, 285.

by nature, congregations are heavily invested in relationships. And it is here that personal touch makes all of the difference.

Yes. “When people come to our worship, our Bible study, our church school, our church suppers, and all the other things we do, they have to feel that special spirit” of welcome.<sup>4</sup> We could offer the best marketing campaign in the world, but if the spirit is missing, then the church will not succeed. A good reputation is essential for the health and well-being of the body of Christ.

Perhaps you have noticed this. It’s fascinating that, in the science-fiction genre, there is an “implicit prediction that God will not be around in 3030. Think about it. People would have said the same about the long-term chances of the emerging Christian faith in 60 CE. They would have thought that empires, gods, perhaps even Rome, would remain to 1000 CE. But this group of believers?”<sup>5</sup> Not a chance. And yet, they are the ones who survived. We, their spiritual heirs, are the ones who carry on. Even now, we are the ones who are now looking to the future.

On this Remembrance Sunday, we fondly recall those Christians who have gone before us, and we joyfully celebrate their faith which has made our faith

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<sup>4</sup> Perkins, 386.

<sup>5</sup> Perkins, 379.

possible. As the author of Hebrews writes, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Or, stated differently, “faith is about entrusting our lives to Jesus today, in the present tense.” And this present faith provides the basis of our hope.<sup>6</sup>

Friends, we know where we are going. We know that Jesus did not remain in the grave. And while his story rightly inspires awe and praise, it finally leads to our discipleship.<sup>7</sup> As Ralph Martin reminds us, “becoming and being a Christian depends on what Christ has accomplished.”<sup>8</sup> We are not, in other words, merely following a great moral example, as important as that may be. No. We are following the one who arose from the dead and who promises that we, too, might be raised to new life.

It is, then, his resurrection, which serves as the foundation of our faith and the wellspring of our hope. For Christ, the source and the sustainer of creation, is “now hailed as the destined Lord of all life,” and in him, “the entire universe will one day find its full explanation and rationale.”<sup>9</sup> So we remember the saints and all the faithful. You know who they are.

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<sup>6</sup> Perkins, 386.

<sup>7</sup> Perkins, 378.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, 17.

We recall Martha Wilson, with her kind smile, encouraging words, and sincere interest. We remember James D. Gray, a man who was devoted to his profession, his children, and his church. We reflect with appreciation for the life of Iris Keuhls, a woman who cared deeply for young people and who dedicated her life to serving them. These are just a few of the saints and the faithful whom our congregation has bid farewell over the course of this past year.

They are the ones who have strengthened our faith. They are the ones who have pointed the way to Jesus. And they are the ones who remind us that we who “come to believe in Christ find (ourselves) participating in God’s eternal plan.”<sup>10</sup> So thanks be to God for the saints of old, the saints now among us, and the saints who are yet to be born. May their faith inspire our own until we meet again. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Perkins, 373.