

SLD09.10.06 23rd Ordinary
Mark 4: 26-29
I Corinthians 12:4-11
Emory Presbyterian Church
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**“An Ocean of Possibilities”
Empowering Leadership**

For the past couple months you and I have been exploring possibilities for personal Christian discipleship by examining the lives of a crew of holy ones, past and present, whose example offer us not only proof that the gospel can be lived, but a wild variety of options for living it.

I want to start a new sermon series today, one likewise focused on Christian discipleship but with a shift of emphasis from the personal to the corporate. For the next couple months leading to the Advent season, I want us to look together at our discipleship as a church, at the ways in which we here at Emory Church act out our corporate commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

And the structure, loosely, on which I intend to build this series of sermons is on the work and wisdom of Natural Church Development, a body of information and understanding about what it takes for a church to flourish. What I’m going to do first is introduce you to Natural Church Development, and then spend a little time on the first of its eight quality characteristics called, “Empowering Leadership.”

Natural Church Development is the brain- and heart- child of one Christian Schwarz, a German man who started wondering a decade or so ago whether there might exist scientifically verifiable and universal principles of qualitative and quantitative church growth that applied to all churches regardless of culture or theological persuasion.

To find out, Schwarz constructed a monumental international study of over 1,000 very different kinds of churches (big, small, urban, rural, progressive, evangelical) in 32 countries on all 5 continents to see which, if any, characteristics were shared by all growing churches.¹ And what he discovered was that, sure enough, regardless of size, location, denomination or theology, there are, indeed, eight specific qualities evident in all growing, flourishing churches. Indeed, there were no growing churches in which all eight characteristics were not evident.

The eight qualities or characteristics of growing churches are listed in your bulletins today, as they will be every Sunday for the next couple months. Take a look at the list. As you glance over it, chances are, if you've been around a while, you may know straight away which qualities are well-developed here at Emory Church – we're past-masters at loving relationships, for example – and which could use some attention. Some of the qualities are not so self-explanatory – like, what the heck is “Needs-Oriented Evangelism?” And just how much is there to say about “Functional Structures?”

Last May, our Session asked the same questions of Ed Albright, who led us in a retreat about Natural Church Development. And one of the things we learned was not to get stuck on the terminology but to examine the nature of the qualities themselves, and how we observed their status here at Emory Church.

For what Schwarz's study concluded is first that, to be healthy, a congregation must be reasonably strong in *all eight* of these essential qualities. So, in the coming

¹ Natural Church Development, A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of healthy Churches, Christian A. Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, 2003.

weeks we'll be looking at all eight of the qualities to understand what they mean and how they are reflected in our community life here at Emory.

A second key point of the NCD study is that while *every* congregation is weaker in some qualities and stronger in others, *if* the congregation uses its strengths to remedy its weaknesses, it will improve its health.

Many of you recall being asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire back in March or so, in preparation for our Session retreat with Ed. Those questionnaires were sent directly to the Natural Church Development folks in Poughkeepsie or wherever they are for them to summarize and tell us what *you* said were the strongest and weakest qualities here at Emory Church. And *y'all* said our strengths were in Loving Relationships, Gift-Oriented Ministry, Functional Structures and our Worship. The single area most in need of attention, according to you, was Passionate Spirituality, with Need-oriented Evangelism and Holistic Small Groups following close behind.

Hence the emphasis here of late in conversations, sermons, and our Labor Day Retreat on passionate spirituality – to the point that some of you may be ready to gag if you ever hear the phrase again. But remember, *if* the congregation uses its strengths to remedy its weaknesses, it *will* improve its health.

But here's another key conclusion of the NCD study, one that especially hits home for me: a congregation is not likely to grow by focusing on growth for its own sake. This route, says Schwarz, breeds anxiety and guilt. Growth becomes an idol, a duty, a dead-end. Instead of celebrating the life God is already calling from its soil, a congregation that idolizes growth risks exhausting its energy worrying about why

attendance slumped today or asking accusingly where you were last Sunday instead of contributing to good attendance figures.

Becoming healthy is a better focus. If you plant a healthy seed in fertile soil in good weather, it can't help itself. Even if it wants not to grow, even if it dreads having its shell cracked, it can't help but open up, put down roots, and send sprouting the plant God is calling it to be. Like that seed, a healthy congregation can't help but send fresh green shoots up into God's nurturing sun and rain.²

The flip side to that truth is that no matter how hard a congregation works, no matter how much people volunteer, or bust their buns trying to keep certain programs alive, if we're only depending only on our own efforts...well, to be blunt, nothing changes.

Note the cartoon in your bulletin – you'll be seeing that a lot in the coming weeks, too. It shows a couple people moving a cart, really putting their shoulders into it, breaking out into a sweat, but despite all their effort, the cart's hardly budging. And why is that? If you asked the two hard workers, they might say, "It's because of the stiff resistance we encounter," or maybe, "We're going uphill, that's why!" Or maybe they'd say, "it's because we've had so much transition in pastoral leadership here of late." Or, "you know, this church just isn't what it used to be." Or, "we just don't have enough program." And their answers would not be altogether wrong!

But the most obvious reason in the cartoon is something else – what is it? [The carts' wheels are square!] And what's inside the cart? All the round wheels that cart could ever use to make its life easier.

² Quote from sermon on NCD by Michael King of Spring Mount Mennonite Church, 6/21/98. www.netreach.net/pandoraus/smmc/sermon/empole.htm.

What the cartoon is meant to illustrate is that God provides us with everything we'll ever need for church growth; we just don't always make proper use of it. Which, Christian Schwarz says, is the *real* problem. It's not that the workers in the picture are unspiritual, or that their goal, to get the church moving, is in any way wrong. The problem is that their methods are insufficient because they are inconsistent with God's plan.³

And God's plan for the church is hidden in the church itself, in me and you, in the particularity of our communion, in the gifts we bring, and the yearnings we share, the glue of our relationships, and the polarity of our opinions, in the impulses of our faith and visions, in the richness of our worship and service, in the reality of our limitations and dysfunction. Embedded in all that, with all that we are together, is God's plan for this church. And Natural Church Development aims, not at "making" a church grow, but at removing obstacles to growth and releasing the natural processes of flourishing within every body of Christ.

How does God do that? According to Mark's parable, the farmer does his part by casting a seed on the ground. But how the seed sprouts up and grows, the farmer does not know. The earth produces crops by itself, first the blade, then the head, and then the mature grain in the head. The farmer participates, but finally the harvest is the fruit of God's mysterious work.

But while God's part in the work of sprouting and growing an organism may be a mystery, the farmer's part in providing the conditions for growth is not. The farmer's got to turn the soil and enrich it, spread the seed and water it, and so forth. Likewise, your and my part in providing the conditions for a flourishing church are, according to

³ NCD, pp 6-7

Schwarz's study, fairly clear. The task of a healthy church that wishes to grow qualitatively and quantitatively over time is to work at strengthening all eight of the quality characteristics identified with growing churches, the first of which is, as you'll notice from your list, 'Empowering Leadership.'

Now about "Empowering Leadership," Schwarz says:

Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry. They do not use lay workers as 'helpers' in attaining their own goals and fulfilling their own visions. Rather, they invert the pyramid of authority so that the leader assists Christians to attain the spiritual potential God has for them. These pastors equip, support, motivate and mentor individuals, enabling them to become all that God wants them to be.⁴

Else Schwarz records these memorable words by Antoine de Saint-Exupery: "If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work; rather teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean." Can you feel the difference?

Listen again to Paul's text from this morning:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

And I say, we can trust that. It's not easy, at least it's not always easy for me to trust that the manifestation of the Spirit given to each one of us for the common good is enough, that it will suffice, and not only will suffice, but exceed in importance whatever the task that I or you imagine is the real goal of the moment, or the day, or the season, or the church, itself.

I mean, I'm into competence, aren't you? I'm into getting the job done, fulfilling the task, and satisfying everybody's expectations. Wears me out, but I'm into it. So if

⁴ NCD, p. 22

this church says it wants to have an all-Church Labor Day Retreat and an all-out Fall Festival and an every week Wednesday Night Supper and a monthly Newsletter and a monthly Safe Haven event and a monthly Parents Night Out and a monthly Taize service and excellence in music and excellence in preaching and excellence in cleanliness and kindness to strangers and warmth to visitors, and a heightened relationship with the Chaplains at Childrens and our Kenyan Fellowship and the Emory Campus Ministry, and any couples who happen to want to get married here why, by golly, I'll bust my butt and yours to make it happen.

But what I hear Schwarz and Saint-Exupery and Paul saying is that what comes first is not programs or tasks or things to be done. What matters first is the boundless ocean of God's Spirit. And, as one preacher put it, "the ocean matters not as a duty to be pursued or accomplished but as that toward which we yearn and from which our gifts flow."⁵

And it seems to me that in his own way, Paul is telling us that the gifts of the Spirit given to each one of us for the common good come to us not as chores but as ways we fulfill our deepest yearnings. The first task of an empowering leader, then, is to help us all explore *what of that ocean in us aches to be expressed through us.*⁶

Now, it will be news to no one in this sanctuary except perhaps our visitors that this is a church that's been through a lot of pain. There was conflict and anger and sadness in the separation with your previous pastor, and then for way too long, there was no pastor, then there was this and that temporary stated supply, and then there was me.

⁵ King, 5

⁶ Ibid.

What I observe in retrospect especially about the time during which you had no pastoral leadership is that many, many of you in this church rose to the occasion in exceptional ways, providing leadership and sweat equity to keep the ship of Emory Church afloat. It was extraordinary, really, the way all the maintenance, coordination, motivation, inspiration and execution was in the hands of lay leadership. Kinda like the early church. Some even wondered, so what the heck do we need a pastor for, anyway? Guest preachers are cheaper, and often more interesting; we can hire a moderator for Session, and the rest of the stuff we can do on our own!”

Now I’m not trying to argue myself out of a job – I’ve got my uses around the joint – but a church without hired help, without “professional Christians” at the helm, is an arguable notion. Actually, it worked just fine for centuries. Plus, there’s nothing like a crisis to stir up motivation; nothing like vacuum in leadership for producing...leaders.

The only problem in this context, however, is that the people who knocked themselves out keeping this church together really did...knock themselves out. Out of energy, out of balance, out of kilter, and some of them, just about out of the church. After a year or so of crisis management, of taking care of everybody but themselves on top of their day – and night – jobs, a lot of the folks in key positions in this church got tired and grumpy and burned out.

New ideas came out of that time, too, exciting ideas that were bottom up because there was no top to be down from. Ideas about this church reaching out beyond our sacred grove of magnolias to the community beyond; new ideas about welcoming the community inside the grove.

In fact, I believe this church learned more about itself in the absence of a pastor than it ever could have with one – especially in terms of the degree of commitment and perseverance and creativity, and call, embedded by God in this community. About that surely none of you who survived the tumult can have any question.

But we're in a new day now. The crisis is over. The push to survive is done. You survived. The time has come to move up Maslow's hierarchy past survival to flourishing, to the actualization of the Christ-self that this body is called to be. I like to think the most profoundly burned out have now had a time to rest, and that those who have not will take time. But equally importantly, I believe it is time for us to move beyond merely busting our butts to sustain time-honored programs in this church to what I view as a more faithful discernment of what our gifts are and how God is calling us to use them.

God is NOT calling us to be over-stretched and tired and burned out. God IS calling us to engage for the common good the variety of gifts that flow to each one of us from the boundless ocean of God's Spirit. God's plan for this church is hidden in you, in me, in the particularity of our communion, in the gifts we bring and the yearnings we share, including our yearning, and our commission, to be God's instruments of justice, and peace and healing in the world.

There are varieties of gifts, and varieties of services, and varieties of activities, but the same Lord, the same God who activates all of them in everyone. It's the Holy Spirit who allots gifts to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. How 'bout you and I do our best to empower one another to be true to whatever manifestation of the Spirit we've been given. And trust that it will be enough...for the common good.

To the glory of God. Amen.