

SLD10.15.06 28th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 28:16-20
Jill Oglesby Evans

“The Hidden Depths of Many a Heart”

Before we were so delightfully interrupted these last two Sundays by World Communion and a special music service, we were trekking along together through a sermon series about the eight quality characteristics of healthy, flourishing churches, as defined by Christian Schwarz, author and organizer of a body, really a movement, of knowledge, and now experience, called Natural Church Development.¹

Remember that to gather the information that supports the principles of Natural Church Development, Schwarz and his team executed a monumental international study of over a thousand different kinds of churches of all denominations located on all five continents. The aim of the study was to discover whether or not there existed scientifically verifiable and universal principles of church growth that applied to all churches regardless of culture or theological persuasion.

And what Schwarz’s study revealed is that, regardless of size, location denomination or theology, there are, indeed, eight of what are called “Quality Characteristics” evident in all growing, flourishing churches. In fact, there wasn’t a single flourishing church in all thousand that Schwarz studied in which all eight characteristics were not evident. Those eight characteristics are listed in the back of your bulletin. Also pictured is a by now familiar cartoon of what life is like in a church in which any of the eight characteristics is flagging or missing – pushing a cart on square

¹ Natural Church Development, a Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, Christian A. Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, 2003 and 2006.

wheels. Lots of worthy human effort but not much holy result, plus a whole lot of handy resources (like round wheels) just sitting there unused in the cart.

Beneath that cartoon is now another one that depicts life in a church in which all eight quality characteristics are flourishing, or at least improving – the ride now seems almost effortless – indeed, it's not the just the change of the wheels that's made the difference, but the Holy Spirit blowing in the wagon's sail!

Several weeks ago we addressed the first quality characteristic – Empowering Leadership – talking about how leaders of growing churches don't just decide on a vision and get everybody else to buy into it, but rather equip and motivate and support individual Christians in attaining the spiritual potential that God has for them. The Apostle Paul says the same thing, of course, when he writes in I Cor. 12:7 that “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

After addressing what Schwarz means by the quality characteristic, Empowering Leadership, we moved on the following week to Gift-Oriented Ministry, the principle that when we serve in the area of our God-given giftedness, we generally function less in our own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit. Makes it worth figuring out what are our gifts are, doesn't it? And letting go of whatever activities are not in harmony with them?

Following Gift-Oriented Ministry, we looked together at the characteristic of Passionate Spirituality, the quality that received the lowest marks in this church. As in most mainline Protestant churches, Passionate Spirituality is, or at least, was, our “minimum factor.” Yet Passionate Spirituality is the quality Schwarz names as the most *important* characteristic of a flourishing church. Many of us have felt prompted to ask just what the heck *is* Passionate Spirituality, and how do we go about cultivating it?

Schwarz defines passionate spirituality as “faith lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm.” In case that definition makes you feel a little tired, others describe it simply as a “genuine, intimate, lively relationship with God.” Whether or not folks in this church are ready and willing to invest the time and effort it takes to develop such a relationship is an open question, but at least the question, and the challenge, is defined for us.

The characteristic that we were going to look at next was “Inspiring Worship,” only instead of talking about it, Elise and I decided just to *do* it. I hope you found our World Communion and Music worship services as inspiring as we did. When Schwarz talks about Inspiring Worship as a quality characteristic, he’s not referring to any particular style of worship so much as to whether or not a service is an inspiring experience for the participant. During worship, does the Holy Spirit feel present to you? Do worship fill you, challenge you, reach you, open you to the presence of God?

In this church you ranked our worship with moderate enthusiasm – neither as our highest nor our lowest characteristic. Perhaps there are things we in worship leadership could do differently. If you have ideas about this, let us know – me, or Elise, or other members of the Worship Ministry – Libba, Mike, and Alice. Perhaps, too, as you deepen your own relationships with God, your hearts will be more open to the presence of the Spirit in worship. For months now we’ve been talking about examples and models and ways of deepening our relationship with God. Hopefully we’ll all continue to be open to new ideas and experiences.

Given that review of where we’ve been so far during this sermon series on Natural Church Development, where we’re headed today is toward the topic of Need-Oriented Evangelism, the seventh characteristic of growing churches (we’re skipping

around a little.) In truth, I've pussy-footed around a bit to get to this part of the sermon because not only is evangelism *not* my favorite topic, it doesn't appear to be Schwarz's, either. That is, the material he offers regarding need-oriented evangelism strikes me as the least informative or compelling. Which is too bad because according to you, after passionate spirituality, need-oriented evangelism is our second lowest minimum factor here at Emory Church, and we can use all the help we can get.

In Schwarz's idiom, "need-oriented evangelism" is evangelism that is based more on what others want from *us* than on what we want *them* to become. In other words, need-oriented evangelism doesn't take what *we* value and insist someone else value it equally if they want to be a part of "us." Rather, it asks who *they* are, what *they* value, what *they* need, and then invites them to join us so that together we can find it. A subtle shift of attention, perhaps, designed to get us church folks thinking outside the box of our sanctuary.

And indeed, it's primarily outside the box of the sanctuary that Schwarz's evangelism is aimed. Go for the "pre-Christians," he advises, for people not raised in the church. "The key to church growth," says Schwarz, "is for the local congregation to focus its evangelistic efforts on the questions and needs of non-Christians." Though I have a hunch that more than pre-Christians or non-Christians, we at Emory Church are primarily surrounded in our community by *ex*-Christians, people who *were* raised in the church, or at least in culturally Christian families, but who have drifted, wandered or intentionally stomped away for one reason or another. But it's that "one reason or another" that Schwarz recommends we make it our business to understand. For who of us does not know that there is often an enormous gap between the organizational

culture of the church and the lifestyle of the unchurched.² What do the unchurched want? What do they need? That, according to Schwarz, is the task of need-oriented evangelism to discover.

It's a conversation that often goes on in our Mission and Outreach ministry – how do we connect with our community, how do we serve it, or them, what are our gifts and how do we share them? This is how our ministry to the chaplains at Eggleston arose, and our ministry to Safe Haven. It's at least one of the reasons we have a Taize service, and an outdoor labyrinth; why we keep looking for ways to grow and deepen our relationship with the Emory Campus ministry; why we keep supporting Parents' Night Out, the Stephen's Food Pantry, and Intown Community Assistance; why we make sandwiches for The Open Door.

But are we primarily reaching the “unchurched” through these efforts? Or the “pre-churched” or the “ex-churched?” Or simply the community to which we feel called? Should we make a distinction between our mission and our outreach efforts? Between service and evangelism? Between reaching out to help and reaching out to bring people in? Or do the lines between these two responses to perceived needs often blend.

Then there's what we think of as traditional evangelism, wherein individuals of faith approach others with their witness and testimony. Contrary to much teaching in the field, Schwarz believes that not every Christian is a natural evangelist; in fact, that the gift of evangelism applies to no more than 10 percent of all Christians.³ I reckon this

² Releasing Your Church's Potential, Robert E. Logan & Thomas T. Clegg, ChurchSmart Resources, 1998. p.8-3.

³NCD. p. 36.

figure may be lower for Presbyterians. But Schwarz says it's important to figure out who your natural evangelists are in order to position them effectively for the task.

We do a pretty good job of this here at Emory – our resident evangelists tend to surface pretty quickly and set about what they do best. Eba, was, of course, the matriarch of evangelism here at Emory Church and we all miss her. But few can beat Scott in his natural and warm manner of greeting visitors, nor Debbie for her systematic, behind-the-scenes tracking of those visitors. But visitors are people who come to us; who of us are good at going out to the people?

Well, some of us are: Glenna, for example, is forever inviting her neighbors to connect with the church. Ann and Jan are not shy about bringing friends. Bennett has been doing a terrific job here of late making personal contact with folks who live nearby the church. And the newest additions to our community, soon to join the church, Nathan and John, have probably hauled in more friends in the last three months than anyone in the history of the church! How great it'd be if we all followed their example!

But not everyone is comfortable directly and personally “evangelizing” our neighbors and friends. Again, as Schwarz points out, only about 10% of us are. But all of us can, and most of us have, contributed to the larger efforts and activities of our various ministries to reach out to our community with both a presence and an invitation. The ways everyone pitched in to support our recent Fall Festival is wonderful example of this. Likewise our Easter Egg Hunt, our Palm Sunday Easter caroling through the neighborhood (if we dare to do that again), our wonderful new signage, and banners, and brochures.

And of course there's more, there's always more, we could do to let our neighbors know we're alive and kicking and pleased to have them wander in. Fun

things like having a church service on the lawn, or movies or volley ball on the grounds. Or installing outdoor lights around some of the magnolias close to the church so it doesn't look so like a mausoleum at night. Or screen a controversial movie and invite the neighbors. Maybe you can think of other ways to open the doors of this church and of the heart of our community to the world outside.

For that's the sense I have these days of Emory Church, the image that resonates the most for me in the realm of evangelism – not zip code demographic studies, or pages of marketing strategies, or even tips for sharing one's faith in a cogent and convincing manner – but the image of a great, big, radiant heart, opening, opening, and then opening some more to embrace and hold and encourage and heal every single person that it touches, or who feels its warmth, or who even just witnesses it from a distance.

Until this image came to me, I really struggled with these chapters in Schwarz's books, and with this sermon. But in the light of that expanding heart, which of course is the very heart of God, I read back over Schwarz's work and realized that's all he's really saying anyway. Evangelism isn't really our work at all – except to the extent that we're instruments and reflections, mirrors and prisms of God's own expanding heart. Says Schwarz, a church's evangelism, its efforts to reach its community and pre- or non-, or ex-, believers, **MUST** (he capitalizes and bolds "must") **MUST** flow out of the church's *own vision and values*. Not out of some program or strategy or technique to achieve but out of the church's own self, its identity, its essence, the perfume of its being.

And then, hear this: Says Schwarz, “Need-oriented evangelism works best if a church ranks high in loving relationships.”⁴ Well, loving relationships happens to be our *maximum* factor here at Emory Church, a fact that I personally cherish, and personally test from time to time, finding it invariably to be true.

And when this is the case, when loving relationships feature in a church’s community, then, says Schwarz, “people experience evangelistic activities as expressions of God’s love.” Which pretty much says what we’re about here at Emory Church, does it not? Sharing the wealth of God’s love with one another and our communities?

Whether we’re making disciples of one another, or of the un- or ex- or non-churched around us, whether we are inviting a friend to church, making a personal witness of our faith to a stranger, or baking cookies in support of the Stephen’s Pantry, what else are we really doing except adding a portion of our hearts to the ever-expanding heart of God? Whatever you want to call it – evangelism, mission, outreach, church life, congregational care, worship - this is who we are at Emory Church, and what we have to offer: the love of God in Christ Jesus, God’s gift through us to the hidden depths of many a heart.

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁴ Color Your World With natural Church Development, Christian A. Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, St. Charles, Il. 2005, p. 118.