

Welcoming the New Pastor
Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 4:21-30

Jesus comes back home, tells the people that he has been called to the ministry. He has spent time in study and discernment. He says that he is called to do the same things God has always promised he would do since Isaiah's vision long ago. Jesus is confident that God has put him in the great line of the prophets like Isaiah – who called God's people to faithfulness – to mercy for the weak, justice for the poor, and service for the sake of the least. In fact, Jesus says he is that long-awaited Messiah / Savior from God.

Fine and dandy! Joseph's son, the cabinet-maker, is a miracle-worker. He is their savior, come to remove the hardships, heal their diseases, meet all their needs, take away all their problems. Look what he did for Capernaum. Think what he will do – for them! They welcomed him.

But they did not welcome his word. He spoils their dreams. He reminds them that hometown boys seldom do well in their hometown, that prophets are honored everywhere except where people still see them as carpenter's sons.

“All in the synagogue were filled with rage, got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of a hill so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

So, I thought the lesson might give some opportunity to think about how you will receive your new pastor...

Granted, I doubt that the PNC has gone looking for a local carpenter who went to Austin to the seminary. But sometimes congregations think that a new pastor is the Messiah they need to solve all their problems. Here are a few things I have heard in the three months I've been with you:

...when the new minister gets here, attendance will boom.

...when the new minister comes, the money will start coming back in and our financial problems will be solved.

...when the new minister comes, the Session will be united and strong.

...when the new minister comes, all our diseases will be healed, our problems will be in the past, and everyone will be happy.

...when the new minister comes, we will be happy to do all the things that we have not been doing, we will all put aside our personal desires for the good of the congregation, we will all shake the dust of the past off our feet and step confidently into the future, we will all welcome spiritual leadership – even when it means that things won't be the same. After all, things are always changing, and the church needs to change – except for the things that I don't want to see changed.

And if the pastor doesn't solve our problems and fulfill our needs and wants, then Well, we Presbyterians would seldom show our anger and never think of throwing a pastor off a cliff. The Committee on Ministry would frown on that, and then we would have a hard time giving the next minister a hard time.

I'll admit to you, I've seen Presbyterian churches who may not have thrown a pastor over the cliff, but they have driven a few out of town. And from what I gather about your longer history, you have never shown your anger, but you have been unhappy with some ministers, and made them miserable enough to get the message and look for another church.

So before we suggest the lesson from the text about how you might approach your life with a new pastor, we do need to be honest with ourselves. We never think that pastors the Messiah or Savior, but we still expect more perfection of them than we would ever require of ourselves. The first warning from Jesus at Nazareth is for us to resist the temptation to expect miracles from her or decide to stone him when miracles don't happen.

If most of the problems that congregations have are pretty persistent and seem to reappear two or three years into each minister's service, then the congregation can't solve them by thinking the minister causes them. A minister can really help lead a congregation to better life, but a congregation has to be open and honest about its own problems. And it needs to want to live a healthier life.

Sometimes congregations get embroiled in unresolved, internal conflicts until they wake up and realize that the real issues facing the church have been ignored for too long. That is the case with lots of churches. We hesitate to talk about the problems we all know every church has, because addressing our responsibility for them is harder than petty issues or blaming someone or something.

Brenham Presbyterian is a stronger and better congregation than you sometimes think you are, and you can be that better congregation if you work to address the obvious problems you and every church have. Those problems are the problems that most every Presbyterian church is facing, and none of them are going away by themselves. None of them will be solved by hiring another bright, new minister, and none of them will be solved by refusing to talk about them.

The main problem most every church faces is the aging of congregations. All of us who have grey hair are worried about the heavy percentage of grey hair in the sanctuary. And we all have some kind of a solution about what we should do. But we are not very good at listening to the people younger than grey before we jump to some solution. And we tend to veto any suggestion that might mean we give up something from our past for the sake of the church's future. After all, how much could a 30 year old know about the Bible, or what a congregation needed to do? How many of us have children below the age of 40 who are not involved in church? How many of us have listened honestly to why they are not involved?

In the last 20 years, I have had four different surgical procedures – from a torn knee to a couple of things more serious. In every case, I have thanked God for whiz-bang technology instead of old-fashioned scalpels. I don't know anyone who wants to go to a dentist who has not upgraded equipment in the last 20 years. We are quick to recognize places where new ways are better than old ways.

But we are perfectly content to be in churches that are still working and worshiping as if we were in the '60's. The copier and the computer are no longer modern inventions. It is hard to address the needs and the world of 30 year olds if your ways of working and worshiping are

older than they are. We need to remember that Jesus was about 30 years old when he started his ministry, and his congregation did not welcome his ideas or his world.

Most of the youth in this sanctuary are here because they have to be, and they generally don't want to be. My guess from listening to lots of youth is that they don't see church connecting to the lives they live everyday, and feel like they are in some kind of time-warp on Sunday mornings. We grey-hairs think the issue is drums and screens in the sanctuary. I'm not at all sure youth care about those things. They have deeper and more important questions we are not addressing. We hesitate to do something because we might ruffle feathers or hurt feelings, so we fail to venture a new thing for the sake of the future.

The real issue is whether or not what happens here in worship equips them to be followers of Christ in their world. That should be our goal – not getting and keeping them to preserve church the way we want it. The way be a church for our youth and children is to commit ourselves to making them know we want this place to be *their* place, that Sunday School and youth group and worship that works for *them* is more important than any of the things we do for ourselves.

The other main problem for most all churches is money – and the lack of it. Church finances have become as complex as business and family finances. The church does not have an exemption from any financial pressure faced anywhere else. We all know that. Every church in every place is facing a different world of funding the ministry. There is no free worship.

The deeper church problem with money is that we Presbyterians have resisted for fifty years to talk about financial life at the church. Now we are two generations removed from teaching stewardship and offerings as a gift and a responsibility to God.

Brenham has lived on the heritage and generosity of a generation who gave sacrificially and regularly – weekly or monthly – to the church, gave their first gifts to the church, and gave more than a token of the money that God has sent their way. Last year, the \$44,000 deficit for expenses over contributions was *not* the result of recent unrest or a few people who left the church. We have lost four or five families to death or age or moving away in the last two years that account for about 20% of the annual budget. We can look around and see that the financial side of the aging problem is not going away.

Every congregation needs to address money issues in candid, honest, and open ways. You need to say out loud to each other the things that you have thought and kept to yourselves for too long. You will need to educate and encourage new patterns of commitment that include financial stewardship. Your patterns of giving and pledging need to be addressed if we are going to honor the sacrifices of the past, serve the needs of the present, and build ministry for the future. Jesus spent a lot of his time teaching about heart and treasure. We need to listen to his instructions and his commandments, and follow his lead.

If the PNC prays and listens to God's leading for the congregation's future, your new pastor will not be like any pastor you have had in the past. He or she will be as highly skilled for the calling as a lawyer, a doctor or any other professional. More importantly, he or she will be fully capable of leading you to be the kind of church that Christ wants this congregation to be – and be focused on Christ's leading.

The real warning in the lesson from Jesus and the congregation in Nazareth is the most important issue for every congregation in every church.

What was at the very heart of these people's misunderstanding? They thought Jesus was there to meet their needs, to fulfill their desires, to serve their wants. By contrast, Jesus was called to do what God wanted, to meet God's needs, to fulfill God's desires. His mission was to seek first the rule of God's love in all his living. His prayer was that not his will or their will, but God's will would be done on earth. His mission was to call people to seek God's will more than their wants.

We Presbyterians are called to seek God's will, and to do Christ's mission. In our better moments when we live to our better selves as the body of Christ, we remember that we do not come to church to have Christ or the pastor meet our needs or fulfill our desires or do our will. We understand that the reason we come to church is that we have the wrong desires and misdirected needs. We pray that Christ will change the desires of our heart to his desires, and help us focus on God's need for the world around us. We come to church to gain strength and direction to live Christ's life in our world – that his will may become our will, and our ways will follow his ways, just as he taught us to pray.

So long as you look for a pastor to lead you in Christ's way, to speak as plainly as Christ spoke about the things Christ said, and to call you to do what God is asking you to do more than what you would like to do or like him to do for you, you as Christ's body will become your better self. You won't be able to remember what you used to think was wrong with the church. You will be working toward faithfulness in your work and worship, and the test of what you do will always be to ask what Christ is calling you to do.

When that starts happening, you may or may not see attendance boom. You will surely see contributions increase. You will not wait for a Session to be united, because you will see a strong and unified people in worship every Sunday and work every week. You will have such connection to the world where you want to serve Christ that people with grey hair will even ask youth how they can help with what God wants them to be doing in the world.

When that happens, I can promise you one thing. Your problems will definitely NOT go away. But you will have problems that are worth having, because working at them will make the world around you God's place and your hearts and minds, treasure and energies will be focused in Christ's direction.

...and when that happens, the pastor Christ calls – who works to please Christ more than you – will have no reason at all to go looking for another church.