

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

**Our Remembered History and Our Anticipated Hope**

**I Samuel 2.18-20, 26 and Luke 2.41-52**

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**Amy Jacks Dean**



A modern-day parable about The Church: *On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, housing one small boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost. With time some members began to shift their focus from rescuing the perishing to social enjoyment. Gradually a movement arose within the membership to put an end to the club's life-saving activities which had become too unpleasant, a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. This movement prevailed, and the life-saving station that once had saved those lost at sea became a social club serving those safe at home.* (Adapted from Theodore Otto Wedel, "The Life-Saving Station," in Theodore Otto Wedel: An Anthology, William S. Lea, ed., page 129 – found in Weavings, Volume V, Number 4, July/August 1990, page 34)

It's told as a modern day parable – or perhaps more accurately put – a modern day indictment on The Church. When Russ and I arrived at PRBC in October of 2000, a Master Plan Committee was finishing up its work. Their work called for more work, so we spent a year with a Vision Team. Their work called for more work, so we spent a year with a Capital Campaign Committee. Their work called for more work, so we spent a year with a Building Committee. (And they are really at work now!!!! Isn't it exciting?!) And in the midst of all of this, the Family Issues Task Force put forth a year long study of

the family. I'm tired. What about you? But now is not the time to wear out. We're just now really getting started. A retired pastor and mentor to me told me just last week that only after you have been somewhere for about 5 or 6 years can you really start to work. Great! So where do we go from here and what do we do?

Today's texts give us some direction, I think, if we read it closely. First, the boy Samuel: *The boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.* Sounds like someone else I've heard about. We catch a glimpse of Jesus as a boy of about 12 years of age – lost from his parents for 3 days. I can't even begin to imagine the trauma his parents must have known. After what I hope was at least a good tongue lashing by Mary and Joseph, Jesus went home with them and *was obedient to them . . . and Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.* Samuel and Jesus grew up. It's the only logical progression for any person or any organization or any institution. We must grow.

So on the eve of a brand new year, we'll let you be the first to hear about it. We've enacted a Master Plan, and we are living the Vision. We've pledged the money needed and the ground is finally broken. We should not be afraid to say the obvious – it's the elephant in the room: **We need to grow!** We've added many new members, but many have moved, and too many have died – making our net growth fairly flat. This is not just about numbers, but we shouldn't be afraid of the numbers either. Let's be willing, as a congregation, to talk about this. Let's state the facts: There are too many empty pews in this sanctuary. There are too many empty chairs on Wednesday nights. Whenever Russ and I are asked about PRBC, we always say, "It's a church and it's full of people – what more is there to say?" And then we always follow that up with, "but it's the best church

full of people that we know.” You were that before we came, and you will always remain that as long as you are intentional about being who you are.

We believe that the time has come for us to be intentional about growth. It’s time for somebody to say it, and so now we’ve said it. There’s something about naming a situation – out loud – that frees us up to talk about it. There is something right and good here. I know we all feel it – at least most of the time. And there are people in Charlotte and the Charlotte area who desperately need this particular community of faith. And let’s be honest – we need them. Wouldn’t it be great to say that PRBC grew in wisdom and in numbers, and in divine and human favor? It struck me that when Jesus was in the temple, he was welcomed there by his elders. They didn’t know him from Adam (pun intended!), but he sat there with them *listening to them and asking them questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.* I wonder how much we have to learn from those who come new into our midst. It’s important that they hear how we’ve “always done it before,” and it is equally important for us to hear how they have “always done it” in other places. In this vignette from Luke’s gospel, we witness a lot of talking and a lot of listening; a lot of questions and a lot of answers; a lot of welcome and a lot of affirmation. In short, we witness The Church at its best. But The Church doesn’t become community by accident. It will take many hours of worship and much sweat equity in service. It will take talking and listening, visiting and phone calling, meetings and prayer.

Jean Vanier, founder of a community for the mentally and emotionally handicapped, says of building community, that there are basically three essentials for healthy communities: 1) “Recognition of a purpose beyond that of simply being a community. When such a purpose is acknowledged, members tend to unite around that

superior cause. When the goal is the community itself, however, the focus easily becomes self-preservation and security. Preoccupation with securing the future of the community almost surely guarantees the future dissolution of that community . . .” [So let us take heed: We need to be intentional about growth not so that we don’t have to worry about the budget or so that we don’t have to close our doors or so that we can simply fill up the pews. We need to be intentional about growth because we have a purpose beyond ourselves. We are followers of Jesus. That is purpose enough for this gathered community.] 2) “People who come to serve the needy only stay if they have discovered that they themselves are needy, and that the good news is announced by Jesus to the poor, not to those who serve the poor . . .” [So let us take heed: We have to be willing to be vulnerable with one another. We all bring a certain amount of health to the table, and we each bring a piece or two of brokenness as well. We need to be on the lookout to use the best parts of who we are to bring healing to the broken places of people’s lives. And we will have to learn to accept the help we need when we need it. And we will have to constantly remember that the poor have always been and will always be a focus for those who follow Jesus. We can never forget that.] 3) “Communities need to be related to other communities – a community that isolates itself will wither and die; a community in communion with others will receive and give life . . .” [So let us take heed: We are not alone. There are other communities that need us, and we need them. Our community reaches far beyond our little corner of the world, and we need to be open to a more global perspective. We are not all there is. The Kingdom of God is broad, and our vision needs to be wider.]

Vanier goes on to say that “communities can flourish only when there are strong relationships, and these require much thought and deliberation on the part of the community members [I think, for the most part, we would receive an A+ in this department - ]. . . The community’s growth is inseparable from the growth of the individuals who make up that community. The health of the community therefore requires that there be enough solitude to make reflection possible and enough activity to draw people out of unhealthy introspection.” (Weavings, Volume 5, Number 4, July/August 1990, book review of Community and Growth, by Jean Vanier, pages 44-45) [To use our mission statement: I think we need a balance of worship and service and some in our community are getting the right balance here, while others are quite off kilter.]

After Jesus had washed his disciples’ feet, he said to them, “*Do as I have done to you.*” (John 13.15) “This suggests that serving after the manner of Christ is guided and sustained by knowing where we come from (our remembered history) and where we are going (our anticipated hope). Where, for the Christian, do memory and hope come together . . . Gathering for worship is the principal setting in the church’s common life where shared memory and common hope converge.” (Weavings, Volume 5, Number 4, July/August 1990, “When We Gather, We Are Called,” Paul Escamilla, pages 35-36)

Church growth is an interesting conversation. It tends to make folks a little uncomfortable - especially if we consider that the faithful have always been known as a small remnant. We know that if we really seek to follow Jesus that it is such a radical way of life that it tends not to draw people to us, but rather repels people. You see the Good News is not the same thing as Happy News. The Good News is difficult. You will

be misunderstood and maybe mistreated. You will live counter to the culture and may even pay for it with your life. At least that's how it was for Jesus, and none of that really leads to a good slogan for a church growth campaign: "Join Us – It Might Just Be the End of You!" I don't think that's going to bring them in.

Long-time pastor of PRBC, Charlie Milford, liked to say, "The Church is called to die!" That would make me so mad – partly because I know in theory that he was right. I would always reply to him, "But not under our watch!" That made him mad right back. But his point is well taken. Just read the gospels sometime, or the Acts of the Apostles. If we truly followed Jesus not many folks would join us. But what we have in this place is worth people knowing about. I believe that all people need to gather on a regular basis to worship together. We need that sense of renewal that comes through silence and song, prayer and praise, confession and commitment. Martin Buber recalls a rabbi's story of his grandfather: *"My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness.* The Christian story rehearsed in worship has the power to transform us into the very community of faith, witness, and service that we enact in our worship. Herein lies the basis for understanding Christian vocation: we begin to live in the world as we live in worship, to live in the service of others even as we live for the praise of God's glory." (Weavings, Volume 5, Number 4, July/August 1990, "When We Gather, We Are Called," Paul Escamilla, pages 36-37)

This sermon has been what our friend Dr. Bill Hull calls “strategic preaching” – to look at the text through the lens of where a church is and what a church needs to do. We should also apply the young Samuel and the young Jesus stories to our own individual lives: are we growing in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people? But for today this has been a word for this particular church. You’ll be hearing more about the fact that we need to grow in the weeks and months to come. We hope you’ll find your place in this conversation. In the meantime, let us remember well our history. And let us anticipate with great hope our future. May it be so.