

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

On Putting Out to Sea (Again)

Psalm 139.7-10; Acts 27

Russ Dean, September 6, 2009



389 years ago, today¹, they put out to sea on a voyage which was rocky from the start. A group of religious dissidents known as Separatists, seeking to break with the English Church, had sought refuge in Leiden, Holland in the early 1600s. When the tentacles of the Church found their way to Leiden, the Separatists chartered a boat called the Speedwell, determined to put enough miles between themselves and London to keep the church's hands, finally, off of their souls. Together with a band of investors and adventurers the Speedwell and a 100-foot merchant ship (180-tons by nautical measure) called the Mayflower set out from Delfshaven on August 5.

There was a slight problem. There was a hole in the Speedwell! Returning to port in Dartmouth for a plug, the ships set out again, only to be forced by another leak to make port a second time. In Plymouth, England, it was determined that the Speedwell could not proceed. If you have seen the reproduction of the Mayflower, docked at the State Pier in Plymouth, Massachusetts, you know how difficult it is to fathom 102 passengers and nearly 30 crew members, the number intended for two boats, combined on such a small vessel. Used primarily to ferry wine and other goods between England and the continent, the Mayflower was hardly a luxury cruise liner, and to my knowledge the 66-day voyage across the Atlantic was her first trip to the New World.

But... with Christopher Jones at the helm, the cramped but determined pilgrims, who were hardly a seafaring lot, put out to sea – where they were buffeted by storms, one after the

¹ Given a discrepancy in “old style” and “new style” notation for dates, the date is either September 6 (old style) or September 16 (new style). This discrepancy is due to the difference in the Julian and Gregorian calendars, the latter of which began to be used in the 18th century, and is now in standard usage.

other, until the ship finally set anchor, just off what is now Cape Cod, on November 11. Miles from their intended destination near our present New York City, and months behind schedule, our Pilgrim forebears, some of whom would become Baptists, who had lost one baby to sickness on the sea, had endured a tumultuous journey that would be just the first of many to be endured in the pilgrimage to freedom.

Of the perilous crossing, William Bradford, who would become governor of the colony wrote, "The dangers were great, but not desperate; the difficulties were many, but not invincible... their ends were good & honorable... and therefore they might expect the blessing of God."² The story of the Pilgrims, who expected and found that blessing, is fascinating to read. It is even more fascinating to live – for their faith is our inheritance, their challenge our inspiration, their story – our story – if we dare to Put Out to Sea (Again).

The Deans told you last week that our journeys took us nearly 18,000 miles. It was an amazing summer of travel, but nothing to compare to the journeys of our ancestors. Comfort and convenience were nearly constant companions. Not so of the Pilgrims whose names we borrowed in our travels. And of his journeys in faith (which include today's story of shipwreck), the original Christian missionary, Paul, responsible for first taking the message of Christ to *the uttermost parts of the earth* (Acts 1.8) says:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked ... (2 Corinthians 24-28)

² For information on the Mayflower and other historical data concerning the Pilgrims, see the website of the Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, MA: <http://www.pilgrimhall.org>.

We are here today not because our ancestors embarked on enviable grant-funded travels of a lifetime – but because our forebears, human, and American, and Christian were willing to give all they had, to risk, and in many case to give their lives, to go, as the Star Trekkies say, “where no man [had] gone before.”

Are we?

There are no more physical frontiers on planet earth to be discovered, explored, tamed, claimed. Even the frontier of space, though there is infinitely more to learn, is now our playground. But there are frontiers. And they may prove even more arduous and costly than the horizons of our human past.

There is the frontier of homelessness. You don't have to cross the Atlantic... you don't even have to cross Park Road to find this frontier. On a weekly basis, it finds us. Right at our front door. We have all the tools to conquer this frontier, to put it in the history books as another conquered territory. All the tools, that is, but one. We haven't yet the conviction. That's all it would take for the richest nation on the earth, the nation with the most accomplishments, the most conquests, the most victories of all nations. Instead of a frontier conquered, it looms, still, as a failure of moral character.

There is the frontier of hunger. With more bread than the world can eat, molding on the shelves, rotting in the landfills, surely the failure to pioneer this territory grieves the heart of God. Again, all the tools... save the conviction.

There is the frontier of poverty – which is the root of nearly every ill that plagues America and the nations of this world. With money to go around, and resources beyond measure,

that so many of the world's children are raised in poverty indicates the many frontiers, within us, yet to be conquered: greed, fear, apathy, cynicism.

Dare I even mention health care! I have been disappointed in our nation's summer of inhospitable conversation. We angrily denounce a system that would purportedly take away our choice and kill the innocent and cost me for your care – when the current system bankrupts thousands, who already have no choice at all...when the current system already kills the innocent, those without and those whose policies simply won't pay for what is needed... when in the current system (in an ironic touch of grace I might add) you and I already pay for the uninsured. Surely we can talk in a more civil manner? Surely the compassion of Christ, in a nation that largely considers itself Christian, can lead our way to a new horizon, and calm our fears... *for I was hungry, Christ said, and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink... a stranger and you took me in... naked and you clothed me... I, who am the least amount you, was sick and you took care of me...* (Matthew 25).

There's the frontier of sexual orientation – that is still in uncharted territory for far too many people – mostly well-meaning people who, out of ignorance or fear, remain unconvinced or uncommitted – even in a church which first navigated this land decades ago.

There's the always-thorny frontier of race... Odd isn't it, that even as we can celebrate the election of a man to the highest office in the land, scarcely 40 years since he couldn't even drink in one of "our" water fountains, that even as we celebrate, the presence of race as a frontier is so obvious as to make it either laughable or worthy of our greatest shame. And if you think I've blown race out of proportion, just ask yourself why it is that one of the most progressive churches in one of the largest, fastest growing, most sophisticated cities in the southeast, still has not one active African American member on its role. Race is still a frontier.

And speaking of Park Road Baptist frontiers, there's our inability to effectively sell our very marketable product to this city. Our inability to find those many pilgrims who are wandering in a wilderness of no church... who left the church because of the church... who are looking for a place where you can raise your question marks and sing your exclamation points!... where you can "reach out without dumbing down"³... where you can worship with intelligence and serve with intensity, in a community of integrity.

And then there's... "the final frontier." It's not outer space, friends. The final frontier is the financial frontier. We are schizophrenic when it comes to our finances and it wears me. (One of the best parts of sabbatical was being away from this constant source of tension and worry.) In the last four years we have given just shy of two million dollars to pay for a new community center. Unlike many churches, who go into years of debt to expand their facilities, we are in spitting distance of owning the note to our beautiful new addition. (If all our pledges were to be paid this year – by January 1, we would essentially be debt-free!) And in the half-dozen years before this project, we gave about half a million more for campus improvements – outside the budget. We've built two Habitat houses, started three endowments, funded thousands of dollars in youth mission trips – all off-budget. This community has resources in abundance. Thanks be to God! And we have even more generosity. Thanks be to God! Yet we fret every year over the most basic – and important part – which is just keeping the ship afloat. This should not still be a frontier to be conquered.

In our staff's Wednesday morning prayers this week, I read the Psalm: *Sing to the Lord a new song...* (Psalm 96), and I wrote in the margins "In many ways PRBC is singing the same old

³ *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* is the title of a book on worship by Marva Dawn.

song.” Please understand that this song is one I know by heart. As the son of a Baptist minister, I’ve been singing it all my life. I love it. And I think Park Road Baptist Church sings it very well. But Amy and I have returned from sabbatical feeling a nudge. Sensing that maybe God is calling us to sing a new song, altogether. To live into the calling and identity of a 21st century church – whatever that means!

I don’t know what that may mean. I do know that our systems are all in place. We’ve rebuilt infrastructure and facilities and staff, we’ve accomplished so much in our 59 years as a community of faith. And I know that the most important frontiers, and the most challenging, are still ahead. Paul warns would-be travelers that we may, in fact, have *to run aground on some island* – be aware – but the Psalmist’s words should allay our fear, reminding us that there is literally no where we can go that God will not already be there when we arrive.

Amy and I have said that our style is one of leading “from behind.” That is, we are willing to put in the effort, to commit our time and our money and our family, but we will not allow our own egos and personal priorities to determine the course for our journey. We must do that together. This is your church. Better yet, you are the church. We are the church. So... what are your passions? To what horizon is God calling you? It may just be that hearing from you is all we need to call us to crowd in together, again, to batten down the hatches, and to put all we’ve known at our backs – risking something good for something even better!

I believe we are ready to put out to sea again – bound for a horizon only God can show us.

May it be so!