

Jon Hauerwas – September 11, 2016 – “Awakened from Complacency”
Romans 13:11-12 and Matthew 28:16-20

I have long enjoyed working on projects around the home. And about two years ago, while we were living in Washington State, I decided to wake up early one morning before my wife went to work and accomplish something in the yard. Weeks earlier, I had purchased an electric chainsaw which attached to a ten-foot pole. This allowed me to cut a number of smaller limbs, as well as some scraggly trees and bushes that were growing around our property. And like a child with a new toy I was out in the yard with it several times each week.

But, this particular morning was different. Because, on this occasion, the limb was wider than the rest – about 8 inches wide. It was also longer – probably about forty feet long. And to make things more complicated, the base of this limb was just out of reach for my pole saw. So with two weeks of tree trimming experience under my belt, I wisely went and got a ladder and then climbed up the side of the tree and began cutting this limb.

The only problem is that I didn't do it properly. I failed to notch a spot on the underside of this limb. And when I had cut about 3/4ths of this large branch, it broke near the trunk and it basically just attacked me. The limb slammed into the side of my stomach, easily knocking me off of the ten-foot ladder.

Thankfully, I landed on my feet, but I was in pain. My stunned wife was looking on from the deck above. So I tried to stumble back into the house, knowing that I would need her to take me to the doctor. But, I kept falling back down on my knees, curling up in a ball, and blacking out in short bursts. Kara wasn't taking any chances with my help. She immediately called for an ambulance. The paramedics soon arrived, checked my blood pressure, and sought to determine if I needed to be admitted to the hospital.

In the end, I was very fortunate. That's really all that I can say. I was stiff and sore for about a week. But somehow, the branch missed my ribs and my internal organs. The paramedics said that everything checked out just fine and that I could just stay home and rest.

But, that event made me realize that there are certain things in our lives that change us. These are transformative moments when we realize what fully vulnerable and mortal creatures we really are. And in their throws, we are reminded of our need to appreciate each day and to care for ourselves because life in this world does not last forever. We only have one chance. And this realization helps to stir us from our complacency.

On September 11, 2001, our nation too was stirred from its collective complacency. For many citizens like myself – those of us who had not lived through the horrors of Pearl Harbor – the occasion was unprecedented. It was also a chilling reminder that there are no guarantees in this world – that our lives can change in an instant.

I want to pivot here for a moment and speak about the church. Because in the last generation, the church has faced ample cause for awakening. After all, for much of the twentieth century, the church was humming along at an impressive clip. Worship attendance was increasing. New churches were springing up. And mainline Christianity, of which Presbyterianism is a part, was synonymous with mainstream American values.

But soon, all of that began to change, and churches of every size started to incorporate strategies for vibrancy, and renewal, and transformation. Well, for sixteen years, Jennifer Copeland served as the United Methodist chaplain at Duke University. She now serves as the Executive Director of the North Carolina Council of Churches. In an article in the *Christian Century*, she once considered the same scripture that we have before us today. And reflecting on it, she writes, “the basic church growth plan Jesus offers is refreshingly simple: ‘Go and make disciples.’”

And yet,” she continues, “this strategy stands in stark contrast to the way that most churches operate. “Over the years our (favorite) model has become instead ‘wait and welcome converts.’”¹

Christian friends, do you see the difference here? Because the gulf is huge. “Wait and welcome converts” versus “Go and make disciples.” The first option is incredibly passive. “Wait.” While the second implies motion, “Go.” The first expects others to take the initiative. As in, when *they* come, then *we* will welcome. But, the second option makes no such assumptions. One who is going, one who is on the move, is ready to meet other people wherever they are.

“Wait and welcome converts.” I imagine that this well-worn approach is barely recognizable to the one who instructed us to “go.” And with this in mind, is it any wonder that the church has struggled for a generation? Is it any wonder that our current model is unsustainable? “Alas,” Copeland reminds us, “the converts are not showing up for us to make disciples of them.”

I’m often asked about the mega-church phenomenon. And if I could offer just one reason why these churches have been so successful in recent years, it is this:

¹ Jennifer Copeland, “Living by the Word,” *The Christian Century*, June 15, 2014.

these churches understand their purpose differently. For them, evangelism is not a dirty word. They do not feel uncomfortable about the idea of sharing their faith and they are not ambivalent to the importance of doing so.

In these churches, the concept of spreading the gospel is embraced and encouraged. They believe that they have a life transforming message to share, and they willingly communicate that message with courage, passion, and conviction. It is in this way that mega-churches appeal to the “unchurched” masses of every age.

At one point, our friends and neighbors felt a sense of duty to join us in worship. But, that time has long since passed. Duty has been replaced with skepticism and ambivalence. The reality is that we simply need to be more compelling. We need to be able to give an account of why the church is meaningful to us.

At my previous congregation, I once entered the fellowship hall at dinner time. Alcoholics Anonymous were meeting. Many in the group were familiar with me and knew that I served as the pastor. One young woman approached me and extended her hand. She was a mixture of nervous confidence. “I’m one of the leaders here now,” she told me, “and I just want to thank you because this place has changed my

life.” That evening, one of the leaders of an AA meeting was serving as an evangelist. She wasn’t saying anything threatening or misleading. Instead, her witness was as sincere as it was compelling. And I realized how much the church would benefit if we were bold enough to do the same.

Many of our friends, our family members, and are neighbors have grown complacent about the church. This is a cause of great sadness for those of us who find great meaning in our relationship with Jesus Christ through the church. And we often hope that they might be awakened from this complacency. But, it seems to me that this awakening is in two parts, and that it first begins with us. For now, we are the vessels for this life-transforming message - this notion that God is real, and present, and active in pursuit of the common good. And it is us, then, who are called to first awaken from our own complacency, by finding the courage to “Go and make disciples,” in order that we might encourage others in the faith and finally awaken them in their own spiritual complacency.

May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.