

August 29, 2010
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 18:1-11

(Slide #1 – Jeremiah 18:1-11)

Made into what!

I was in St Petersburg Florida a couple of weeks ago for a New Church Development Conference. This conference is for those who dream of, who are, and who have already – helped give birth to new communities of faith. They have a heart for those who do not know Jesus Christ – and those whose experience with the institutional church – has left them not wanting any part of the church.

These are people often on the edges of the church – taking risk – trying new things – often failing – but always seeming to get back up – dust themselves off – and have another go at it.

It is inspiring and encouraging to be in their presence.

The keynote speaker was the pastor of a new church development in Cummings, GA - Rev. Shawn Lovejoy. Shawn planted Mountain Lake Church (a non-denominational church with a more evangelical flavor than most main-line denominations). Since 1999 it has grown to over 2000 in worship.

(Slide # 2 picture – Shawn Lovejoy)

Shawn wasn't there to talk about all the how to's to start or to grow a church – he was there to talk to us personally – to share his own struggles and to remind us that healthy and vibrant churches begin with healthy and vibrant church leaders.

Shawn told us the story of growing up in the south and of dreaming of following in his father's footsteps selling real estate. After college, that is what he did, sold real estate – he was good at it – successful doing it. Shawn talked about God's unsettling – God's pushing him away from his dream – calling him to plant a new church. Shawn talked about the challenging and difficult work of developing a new church. He talked about moving his family – starting with nothing – a roller coaster of successes and failures.

And then Shawn talked about his relationship with wife and how it suffered – and how all the time he was spending at church – all the energy he was expending there – was killing their relationship. He shared with us when they reached a crises point – and how he found himself dropping everything – taking his family away for a week of vacation – so that he and his wife could talk.

Shawn went on to tell us how he spent the next week 'repenting'. 'Repenting' to his wife for neglecting her and their relationship – 'repenting' to his God – for the sin of his selfishness.

(Slide #3 – Shawn's picture 'Repent')

I am not sure how us mainliners did – as Shawn spoke – going on and on about 'repenting' – his need to 'repent' – our need to 'repent'.

‘Repent’ is a word that we don’t seem to use much. It is a word that we aren’t very comfortable with. It refers to disobedience – to not following the rules – to being in the wrong – to sin. We don’t seem to use the word much – so why don’t we try saying it together this morning – ‘repent’.

The fact of the matter is the foundation of Jesus’ ministry was to call people to “‘repent’ for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17)

(Slide #4 – Repent – U turn sign)

Shawn was calling us to repent! Can we say the word again. ‘Repent!’

To repent is to turn away from – and in turning away from one thing – to turn toward something else. Repentance is more than ‘sorrow’ – that inward feeling of remorse for that wrong we have done – that wrong we are a part of. Repentance is more than sorrow that gives way to confession – confession the saying – the speaking of that wrongdoing doing – that sin we have committed.

‘I am sorry for the hurtful way that I spoke to you.’

To repent is to do more than feel – it is to do more than say – it is to act – to physically turn away from that wrong – that sin – and to turn toward that which is right.

And that was what Shawn was calling us to – ‘repent.’

I thought about what Shawn had said to us that morning – throughout the day and long into the night. I remembered a conversation that Donna was having with a friend last winter. She was talking about our move to Cedar Rapids – and she was sharing about how lonely she had become. I was up at church most nights – and when I was home I was exhausted – I would lay on the couch – unable and unwilling to engage in any meaningful conversation.

I found that I was needing to (encourage congregation to say) ‘repent’.

I was needing to tell my wife I was sorry for neglecting our relationship. I was needing to share with her ways I was going to change my behavior – so that she could hold me accountable. I needed to repent.

But there was more than coming clean with Donna that I realized needed to take place – see –

It wasn't Donna's fault she was lonely for her husband.

It wasn't your fault from keeping her from me.

It was my fault – thinking that things couldn't and wouldn't happen without me – that somehow what I did (or didn't do) – was more important than what God had already done for us in Jesus Christ.

What I discovered – was in my own way – I had fallen into the sin of idolatry – the sin of serving something other than the God who gives us life in Jesus Christ. My sin of idolatry was about trusting in my own ability – instead of the power of God.

(Proverbs 3:5-6 – *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.*)

I needed to – (to congregation) – ‘repent’.

This is exactly what God is telling Israel – through the prophet Jeremiah – they are to ‘repent’— to turn away from the bad and turn toward the good.

“Thus says the Lord, turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.”

(Slide #5 – Jeremiah)

What had happened?

These people – God’s people – people who call themselves Hebrew – this nation that calls itself Israel – has been chosen by God – to be a witness – to God – the living God - to all the nations of the world.

These people – this nation – Israel – they are to be a witness to the nations – a witness to God’s creative power – to God’s compassion – to God’s fidelity (faithfulness) – to God’s love. They are to be a witness – in what they say – and in what they do. They are to act rightly – especially toward those who have little power. They are to act as people who trust God – to guide – to provide. In what they say and what they do – all the nations will know the power of the God who saves – redeems – gives life – with a mighty hand.

The truth of the matter is, though, they have turned away from God. They have given themselves to other gods – gods who seem to fit the niches of their needs – gods who are convenient – gods who are popular – the ‘god’s of our own making’ (as Donald McCullough calls them).

The truth of the matter is – they have turned away from God. They haven’t acted rightly toward one another – stealing, murdering, committing adultery, swearing falsely. They have abused the helpless – taken advantage of the poor – the widow – the orphan – the powerless people of the world.

The truth of the matter is – that they have turned away from God – and this is not an individual problem but this is a communal problem – it is not one or two – but it is the whole – religiously – politically – economically – they have turned away.

“Look” – God says to Jeremiah – “see the potter at work. See how she fashions the pot – the clay in her fingers – pressing – sometimes lightly – sometimes aggressively – pushing – pulling – making.”

(Slide #6 – Potter)

“Look” – God says to Jeremiah – “see how the clay collapses – is smashed down – and a new work begun?” “Can I not do to you – O house of Israel – the same?” “Are you not clay in the hands of this potter?”

“Turn now from your evil way – repent.”

We have been talking a lot about the vision – how we understand that God is calling us to be and to do.

(Slide #7 – Echo Hill Pres...)

Echo Hill Presbyterian Church is a diverse and welcoming family of engaged Christians who willingly accept you where you are while encouraging you to use your God-given gifts in growth and service to God and humanity.

Together we create and support opportunities for personal and spiritual growth in a safe environment. We explore what we believe to be the inspired Word of God as we search for understanding of its relevance in today’s world.



We have talked about our shared core beliefs that God is calling us in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a community of faith – build on our relationships with the Triune God – and our relationships with one another – to be welcoming, caring, growing, and generous.

But I guess my question is what is that we as a community of faith – what is it that we need to turn away from in order to become this community – to become this witness to the person of Jesus Christ in this part of the world.

We have this great facility – and we have made commitments to others in order for it to be built. Commitments we have to keep. The question for us is – is it serving the mission and ministry that we have been called to – or are we serving it. Because when we begin to serve it – when all we do is move from this fundraiser to that fundraiser – when all we do is allow ourselves to find refuge in its safety and security – then it has become an idol and we need to ‘repent’.

(Slide #8 – Turn now....)

When we become more interested in ourselves – making sure that ‘our church’ provides for us what we need. When we become more interested in being comfortable than being people sent to witness to the nations of the compassion – the mercy - the care - of God – for all people – in Jesus Christ – we need to ‘repent.’

When we get all caught up in our own rightness – our own moral superiority – when we build walls to keep others out – instead of bridges that let others in – we need to ‘repent’.

When we think that keeping our traditions – is more important – than following the way of Jesus Christ – we need to ‘repent’.

When we ignore the plight of the poor – the disenfranchised – the oppressed – the abused – looking to our own comfort instead – we need to ‘repent.’

When we find ourselves thinking that without our program – our ministry endeavor – our project – our way of working or of worship – this community of faith will not thrive - instead of thinking that without Jesus Christ all we do is nothing – we need to ‘repent’.

When we begin to trust ourselves – in our own wisdom – our own ability – to do the right thing – to do it in the right way – When we think it all about what this or that person has done – or is doing – or hasn’t done – or won’t do – instead of what God has called us in Jesus Christ to do – to love God – to love one another - we need to ‘repent’.

(Slide #9 – Shaped into What?)

I am not praying today that God would finish the vessel that he has started in this community. – I am praying that as we – seriously – begin to repent – of our idolatry – of our selfishness – of our lack of trust – of our fears – that as we turn to back to God – that our God will smash down and then take this lump of clay back up into his hands – and fashion us into the vessel that will be a witness – to his love – his welcoming – caring – growing – and generous – love – out there – in the world – to the nations – to Cedar Rapids.

Amen.