

“Pigeons and Other Nesting Birds”  
Isaiah 43: 15-21 & Luke 5: 36-39  
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We just finished with our Methodist Annual Conference in Southern California, It's held every year the third week of June at the university of Redlands. Why? Because it is a tradition. Like the June wedding. Do you know why June was the most popular month for weddings until recently? Because folks used to take a bath once a year in the spring when the river unfroze, so they figured they would still smell pretty good by June. Just in case the body odor was starting to creep back the bride could carry a bouquet of flowers to mask the body odor. That's where that tradition came from.

June was when the old Methodist circuit riders of two hundred years ago used to meet and swap circuits; why mess with tradition? Never mind that everything else in the church is based on the calendar year, still we start pastorates on July one. Tradition! And, why at Redlands? Redlands is the hottest, smoggiest most unpleasant city in southern California in June. Why not San Diego, or Santa Monica, or Santa Barbara? Tradition! You probably thought that Redlands was a Methodist school – no, Baptist. Or that they give us a special price to go there – no. We go there because we have been doing it for fifty years and nobody has the will to fight tradition.

And every year we do the same thing; we measure our losses. We close a few churches and try to figure ways to reduce our forty year decline – without surrendering our traditions of course. To do so would be a surrender of our identity. And what is that identity? Garrison Keillor said that it is easy to make fun of the Methodists because of “their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their lack of speed, and also for their secret fondness for macaroni and cheese.” But on the other hand they have undeniable offsetting qualities. “They are the sort of people you can call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying they will comfort you. If you are lonely, they'll talk to you. If you're hungry they'll give you tuna casserole. Methodists believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud. Methodists like to sing, except when confronted by a new hymn or one with more than four stanzas. Methodists believe that their pastors will visit them in the hospital, even if they don't notify them that they are there. Methodists follow the official liturgy and feel it is their way of suffering for their sins. Methodists expect miracles, especially during their stewardship campaigns. Methodists think that the Bible forbids them from crossing the aisle while passing the peace. Methodists drink coffee as if it were the third sacrament. Methodists are willing to pay up to a dollar for a meal at the church. Methodists serve Jell-O in the proper liturgical color. When Methodists hear something funny in a sermon they will smile as loudly as they can. When you are watching 'Star Wars' and they say 'the force be with you,' the Methodists say, 'And also with you.' Don't laugh, these are traditions we are willing to die for.

Imagine the boldness of Isaiah. Israel was a tradition based nation. Every time they turned around they were being reminded how they had been delivered from Egyptian slavery and how they were given the Promised Land. They had prescribed prayers and prescribed menus for traditional meals and festivals and rituals. They had laws that made no sense at all except they were traditional. In the midst of all that, Isaiah claims the voice of God is saying, “Forget your

traditions. The heck with the past. I am doing a new thing. To say a thing like that in the church will shorten your career, even though everyone knows it's true and the church's days are numbered.

Jesus knew that. That's why he didn't recruit his disciples from the religious establishment. If you want to do a new thing, you have to do it with new people, people not so steeped in tradition and committed to the status quo. They criticized Jesus – said, “What kind of rabbi are you? Your disciples don't even fast. That's one of our most treasured traditions.” And Jesus told them a parable, the one about new wine and old wine skins. The best part of that story in Luke is that last line. People familiar with the old and faced with the new will say, “The old is better.” And Jesus never says they aren't right. The old is better. Old wine. Old music. Old cars. They don't build 'em like they used to. It's such a ubiquitous truth that nobody even bothers to say it anymore. One of the great things about a church like mine where people have been around for 40 or 50 years is that everybody knows what won't work and why. Sometimes I start longing for a place where people are to new and green to know why an idea won't work and foolishly go out and try it. Like fishing on the other side of the boat. I have done a little fishing in my time and one thing I know, if they aren't biting on one side of the boat, they ain't biting on the other side. The disciples were seasoned fishermen, but when Jesus said to cast the net on the other side, they didn't hesitate. Of course it was contrary to logic and their years of experience, but they did it – because their Lord said too. Behold, God is always doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it? Do you not perceive that God isn't looking for guardians of tradition but risk takers who will try a new thing – not because it's logical but because it is the new thing that God's blessing is likely to fall on. Jesus did a new thing with new people because the old people knew too much about why the old stuff was better.

So, what does any of this have to do with pigeons, I hear you cry. Well, here it is. In 1992 I went to Russia for the first free Easter in that country in 70 years. I celebrated Easter in a packed Orthodox cathedral and afterward decided to walk back to the hotel. My route led past Red Square. The time before when I was there, during the Brezhnev years, there had been a line blocks long to get into Lenin's tomb. But today there was hardly anyone there. So I went in to have a look at old waxy Lenin in his Plexi-glass sarcophagus. It occurred to me that the reason there was no one there was because old Lenin is still there and Christ is risen. And as I came out of Lenin's tomb, it was noon and the church bells began to ring. All over Moscow, a cacophony of sound from all directions – even in the Kremlin that contains several decommissioned cathedrals. The church bells had not been heard in that city for seventy years. It was a moment to be savored.

The younger generations had forgotten the bells; they had never heard them ring. But the old-timers would tell stories, especially about the big one – big as a Volkswagen and heavy as a Hummer – how the sound would bounce off the surrounding hills and the vibrations could be felt in the feet of the people on the street below. The young ones could hardly believe it, so they decided to ring them again after seventy years of silence.

But, I got to thinking about the pigeons in Moscow, many of which lived in those bell towers and had for generations. Some had nested on top of the Volkswagen-sized bell, had hatched their children there and had perched there for a life-time. I don't know what the life span of a pigeon

is but it had probably been about 50 generations since that bell had been rung. There was no pigeon alive with actual memory of that happening. It had become part of the legend that becomes pigeon folk-lore. It had become nothing more than a story old pigeons tell young ones to watch their eyes get big. “Yes,” Grandpa Pigeon would assure his young audience, “These bells used to move, even that great big one, when a big human down below would pull on a rope. And then it would make a really loud noise that would echo off the mountain sides and you could feel the vibrations in you pigeon feet while you were picking up bread crumbs down below.”

Just then a mother pigeon would interrupt and scold Grandpa Pigeon for filling the young heads with nonsense – “Going to give them bad dreams.” Then she would debunk the fanciful story with logic. In all the years our family has perched on this bell it has never moved, not even a little bit – not even that year the wind blew so hard it tore off most of Uncle Waldo’s feathers. The bell didn’t move. It can’t move! It’s as big as a Volkswagen Beetle and weighs as much as a Hummer. What nonsense, the notion that it could be moved by some guy pulling on a rope down below, even if he was the size of Hulk Hogan. And this business about it making a noise; that’s absurd, it’s made of cast iron for Pete’s sake. So get it straight, these bells don’t move. They have never moved and they never will. Then one of the young ones interrupts and says, “Yes, but Momma, There is a man down below – a really big man like Hulk Hogan – and he’s pulling on the rope.”

Christians are people who, even if they never heard the bells or even believe in bells will still help pull on the rope. Christians consider that maybe it’s possible that Horton heard a Who – that the most likely way for the church to attract the attention of the Spirit and the blessing on its ministry, is by trying something new, something absurd, something the old-timers know won’t work, even if it isn’t as good as the old days. Because Christ commands us to, not only fish on the other side of the boat but to get out of the boat all together. Because God’s blessing is likely to fall on the risk-takers who pursue foolish ideas. In the old days they used to call that faith, now they call it irresponsible and wreck less. Today we cherish our traditions. Me too. I love and value the traditions of the church. It is my goal to have the last sanctuary in Southern California without video screens. But, most of what we claim as traditions are just bad habits. It’s more comfortable to repeat the past then launch out into an unknown future. The problem is, it’s out there in that frightening unknown where God is, and where we are likely to encounter him. The past is just that - past. Being old doesn’t make it sacred. Forget it. God is doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?