

THROWING OFF THE CLOAK

Sermon October 28, 2018 by Stated Clerk Larry Beasley

I expect that my wife Carol and I are like many of you that have lived in one place for a long time. We've got a lot of "stuff."

Sometimes I walk around the house and ask myself "Where did all of this stuff come from?"

Our daughters all deny it, but I know that there are substantial remnants of three college dorm rooms in our basement. I ask them "When are you gonna come get your stuff out of my basement?" "I don't have any stuff in your basement," they all say. Then I point to a plastic bin, or a box that's overflowing . . . if I'm talking with Sarah, she will claim "That's not mine; that's Taylor's. . . or Anna's . . ." and if I'm talking with Taylor or Anna, the same thing happens . . .

I was thinking about some of the old "stuff" we have this week.

We have an exercise area in our basement. It has nice mats on the floor, free weights, stability ball, weight bench, Pilates machine. Our grandson Liam likes to say "Let's go work out, Papa!" and we'll go downstairs. He just likes to mess around with the stability ball, but it's a workout to him. There is also an old DVD player and a television for the exercise videos my wife and I use. They sit on an old desk that I had in my bedroom as a teenager; I was looking at a folding table this week, thinking I should replace it, but, hey . . . it works.

We have a microwave oven in our kitchen that we brought with us when we moved here from Nashville 25 years ago. We've replaced all the other appliances in the kitchen more than once, and the microwave really doesn't match anything else. Carol and I have thought we should get a new one . . . but hey, it works . . .

I have a pair of Asics tennis shoes I bought probably ten years ago. They sit in the bottom of a closet and I forget that I have them. Got them out this week and put them on. One of the soles is loose; I wondered if I could glue them or something. They still look pretty good though, so I wore them this week.

I was on my way back from a meeting, driving along the arterial in Utica. Wasn't really thinking about much of anything, kind of doing that drifting thing we all sometimes do when we're driving . . . and I realized that a car had stopped in front of me and I needed to brake right away. Moved my foot off the accelerator and went for the brake . . . and the loose sole of the shoe caught the brake pedal, so I couldn't quite make the brake work. I got my foot loose just in time, hit the brakes and stopped with only inches to spare.

And I realized that those shoes that are broken, that I didn't want to throw out, had almost gotten me in an accident. My determination to hold on to an old, worn out pair of shoes came very close to hurting me, or worse, someone else.

That made me think about the microwave. One of our sons-in-law who works in technology has been telling us for a long time that our old oven has quite likely lost its ability to

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seal properly and we may well be in the path of harmful microwaves if we're standing close to it when we use it. Our determination not to replace it may well be killing us.

And that desk in the basement. Every time I look at it, I remember sitting at it alone in my room as my parents were having a violent argument in another room. And it was also where I was sitting when my mother told me that my dad was leaving us. My determination not to replace it causes me grief and heartache every time I set eyes on it. In a very real way, it is toxic to me.

All of these things . . . and more besides . . . are doing harm to me. Why do I persist in keeping them?

Now they came to Jericho. As He went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Then many warned him to be quiet; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called.

Then they called the blind man, saying to him, "Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you." And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus.¹

Bartimaeus knew that the Christ was in close proximity; and, like the woman with the issue of blood, Bartimaeus knew that if he could get to Him, he would be healed. He cries out . . . and is told to be silent, but he persists, and then is called Jesus' presence.

What is the first thing he does?

He throws off the garment he is wearing. How curious.

Matthew Henry, in his commentary on this text, says ". . . he cast away everything that might be in danger of throwing him down, or might hinder him in coming to Christ, or retard his motion."²

None of the other commentaries I have make any mention of Bartimaeus' action.

But I believe it to be most significant. Clearly he didn't need it when he met Jesus; it was not necessary for him to receive the thing he wanted most--his sight. Indeed, as Matthew Henry observes, it may well have been an impediment to getting there, and Bartimaeus was swift

¹ Mark 10:46-50. *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982. N. pag. Biblegateway.com. Gospel.com. Web. 27 October 2018. <www.biblegateway.com>. Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are from the New King James version.

² "Mark 10." *Matthew Henry's Commentary: Matthew to John*, by Matthew Henry, vol. 5, Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, p. 424.

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to jettison it when he realized it did not serve his purpose; in fact it might hinder him from his encounter with the Christ.

And that was unacceptable. Hold on to this thought.

Over the past year, I've had at least a half-dozen people tell me that I need to read Tod Bolsinger's book *Canoeing the Mountains*. And every time I heard it, I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah . . ." I saw a *New Yorker* cartoon recently; a woman is sitting on a bed, talking on the telephone. There is a large pile of books on the bed next to her. The caption is "Hello, 911? That pile of books he's been meaning to read finally fell over on him." The table next to our bed looks something like that.

So I was reticent to go out and get a copy of *Canoeing the Mountains*, just to have it wind up in that pile.

But then a friend who is a church consultant and clergy coach posted a link to an interview with Tod Bolsinger³ on his blog. Because I trust my friend, I took time to read the article, and . . . oh, my goodness . . . I realized I really did need to read the book. So I did.

It has been a revelation. I understand clearly why our congregations and our denomination struggle so. And maybe, just maybe . . . what we need to do about it.

Central to Bolsinger's thesis is that ". . . the seventeen-hundred-year-long era with Christianity at the privileged center of Western culture"⁴ has ended. When I talk with congregations in transition, it is clear that most are longing for the church of the 1950s and 1960s, when the pews were full . . . and nobody had to do anything to make that happen. But we recognize that those days are gone, and unless something radical and unforeseen and beyond our control happens in our area--like maybe Amazon is really planning to put their new headquarters in the Mohawk Valley--they are not coming back. At the May Presbytery meeting, the theme was "Our Love for our Gospel Communities." We celebrated the church communities that have been and those that are now . . . and we also took a moment to lament the church communities that will never be again.

We have to come to terms with the hard, cold fact that the place of predominance we enjoyed for decades is no longer ours. Further, the seminaries our clergy attended did not take into consideration that such a moment would ever come to pass. Our clergy were trained for a world that is disappearing.⁵ I was in a meeting in Chicago a few weeks ago and sat with a group of clergy that are instructors in the schools of interim ministry where we send pastors to train them for interim work . . . and I came away from that meeting questioning whether the instructors themselves are aware of this. It sounded to me like they were teaching a transitional skill set that was still modeled on the old perspectives, that our churches are still the privileged

³ "Tod Bolsinger: What Does It Mean to Stop 'Canoeing the Mountains'?" *Faith and Leadership*, Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, 24 July 2018, www.faithandleadership.com/tod-bolsinger-what-does-it-mean-stop-canoeing-mountains.

⁴ "Seminary Didn't Prepare Me for This." *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, by Tod Bolsinger, Intervarsity Press, 2018, p. 12.

⁵ *Ibid*, page 18.

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centers.

Bolsinger's metaphor for where we are today is that of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery. The charter that Lewis and Clark received from President Thomas Jefferson was to find the headwaters of the Missouri River. The thinking in that day was that, if those headwaters were to be discovered, a similar waterway that led to the Pacific Ocean would also be found. After months of hard traveling, the Corps did indeed discover those headwaters.

But as they stood at the Continental Divide and looked westward, all they saw were mountains, and more mountains . . . and more mountains. There was no waterway beyond where they stood. The territory they had just traversed was nothing like the territory that lay before them. The maps they had to guide them were useless.

Not only were their maps useless . . . so were the canoes that had safely and effectively transported them to the place where they stood. In fact, those same canoes upon which they had relied to get them there were suddenly a tremendous liability. To retain them would be costly, would even be a hindrance . . . would even be potentially harmful.

Like my old tennis shoes . . . like my old desk . . . like our microwave oven . . . and like Bartimaeus' cloak.

Like our notion that we, in our 21st century churches are still the privileged center of our culture . . . and the way we continue to go about conducting ourselves when everything around us has shifted and changed.

Tod Bolsinger says that the maps Lewis and Clark were given were nothing like the territory they now faced . . . and we are in very much the same place. The maps that brought us to this time and to this place are nothing like the territory that is before us. There weren't any maps for Lewis and Clark, and there aren't any maps for us. The team that Lewis and Clark led had to learn new skills to take them forward, and in doing so became the Corps of Discovery; Bolsinger says that it now the task before us, to for our congregations to become "learning communities."

It means looking at the things we're holding on to that no longer serve us, that are hindrances to us . . . indeed, may even be toxic for us . . . and having the courage to discard them, as Lewis and Clark shed their canoes.

It's probably a good idea to make a couple of things clear at this point. Has the truth of the Gospel changed? Not at all. Has the Gospel lost its importance. Not at all.

And am I recommending some full scale upheaval of everything we trust and know and love? Not for one moment.

We do need to acknowledge that the territory around us has changed; the way forward is not clear. And the knowledge and skills we have, in all likelihood, are not sufficient to carry us

on.

I once worked for a technology company whose founder was something of a legend in our community. I wanted to come to work for him to find out what he knew--and he knew a great deal. It was a very formative experience in my professional career, and he and I are still good friends. He had a saying: whatever it is that got you here, it's not enough to keep you here. He understood that we needed to keep learning and adapting to changing circumstances if we wanted the company to survive and continue to provide services and employment for the people that worked there.

In light of this, what are we to do?

I think we can begin by asking ourselves some good questions. Great leadership, it seems to me, is largely about asking the right questions, doing so in such a way as to get people to face up to and embrace the true reality that is before them.

A good starting point is this one: what is it about us that makes us essentially *us*? Who are we at our core? What is it about us that makes us who we really are, and “If we stop being about this, we stop being?”⁶

I submit to you that, as you begin with your new interim pastor, this is probably the most important question for all of you to discuss.

Who are we at the very center of our collective being? And what about this is simply not negotiable . . . because if we stop being about this, we simply stop being. What do we consider to be our “code?”

I think this is the optimal place to start because management consultant Ron Heifetz--who Tod Bolsinger quotes liberally--says in his one of his books “You know the old adage ‘people resist change.’ It is not really true . . . What people resist is not change per se, but loss. When change involves a real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change.”⁷

So one of the things we need to do is reassure ourselves of the fact that, when it comes down to those things that make us *us*, we are not going to lose them. When it comes down to the things that we believe at our core, those things that form our foundation as a community, they will remain our core and our foundation.

If we start with that premise, and in that confidence, it makes it easier to ask the next question: what and where are our canoes?

What are those things that are like Bartimaeus’ cloak . . . things that we can safely and

⁶ Ibid, page 94

⁷ “Introduction: Purpose and Possibility.” *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, by Ronald Heifetz et al., Harvard Business Press, 2009, p. 22.

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confidently throw off because we know that, even if we do, we're still going to be "us" . . . but we'll also possibly free up energy and resources for something new and exciting.

Finding these things and deciding to cast them off--knowing also that we're not going to lose what is important at our core, that we're not going to violate our "code"--puts us in a place where we can give ourselves permission to take other steps, to do things and take actions, innovating "at the edges," experimenting with ministry, learning new adaptive skills that will help us better communicate the Gospel and fulfill the mission to which God calls us.

There is a pastor at a church in a neighboring presbytery who, whether by choice or by chance, is doing this. There was an annual event that the church hosted, and had done so for years. Enthusiasm and energy for that event had waned, and reached a point where there weren't enough people to make it happen. The committee responsible for the event went to the pastor and told her "You have to find people to help us!" The pastor listened, and asked the committee a question: "What would happen if we simply didn't do this event this year?" The committee claimed people would miss it, people would complain. The pastor said "Maybe. But let's just try it this year and see what happens."

So they (nervously) abandoned their plans for the event. And what did happen? No one complained; no one missed it. No one said anything about it.

The church had also at one time had a clothing shop. They had obtained hanging racks from a department store that went out of business to use for the clothes. The church had decided some years ago to close the clothing shop, as another church in the community had started one, and had more energy for the task. They were doing a brisk business and approached the first church about using their old clothing racks. By this time, the unused racks were stored in a room of the church, and took up the entire room. At first the session said "NO! You can't have them. They're OUR racks." But the pastor asked the question "What if we just 'loaned' the racks to the clothing shop, with the understanding that, if we ever want them back, they have to give them to us?" The session agreed . . . it has been several years, and the church has never seen a need for their cherished racks, never asked for their return. But what did happen is that the room where the racks were stored and taking up space has been made a classroom and now serves a useful purpose.

This church is finding new and exciting ways to minister to their community largely because they're finding their canoes and casting them aside. In many ways they are no longer wrapped up in a cloak that hinders and distracts them from the mission to which they are called. They're freeing up energy and resources and finding new and unique ways to answer God's call, and, as Bolsinger puts it, ". . . to participate in Christ's mission to establish the kingdom of God 'on earth as it is in heaven.'"⁸

Bolsinger also quotes Darrell Guder, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, that ". . . the very purpose of the ecclesia, the apostolate . . . is, 'the formation of the witnessing

⁸ Bolsinger, op. cit., page 39

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communities whose purpose was to continue the witness that brought them into existence.”⁹

And now you, as a people, as a “beloved community,” as the church, the apostolate, the ecclesia, as a missionary outpost,¹⁰ a witnessing community¹¹ in Oneida, New York, mark this transition in your history . . . I encourage you to have the conversations with yourself and with your interim. Who are you? What is the witness that brought you into existence? Who are you at the very center of your being? What is your “code?” What are the things about you that are not negotiable, the things that if you stop being those things, you stop being?

Discuss them. Mark them. Articulate them . . . and well. Put them somewhere where everyone can see them . . . on your walls, in your newsletter and bulletin, so that everyone knows and remembers who you are and why you exist.

And reassure yourselves that, no matter what happens next, you’re not going to lose those things.

And with that done, in that confidence and comfort and courage . . . ask yourselves “What and where are our canoes?” What cloak are we wearing that may be hindering us from the next place to which we are called? What are we doing that doesn’t need to be done any more?”

It may well be in that casting off that new vision can happen, that new energy and resources can be found, new mission imagined. Tod Bolsinger says “The answer is not to try harder but to start a new adventure.”¹²

What new adventures await you? To what new places might God be calling you?

You don’t have to become a people that you are not in order to answer that call. But now is a good time to remember who you truly are, to identify that “stuff” you’re carrying or storing that no longer serves you, that is a drag and a drain on your energy and your resources. Now is a good time to free yourselves for new vision, to find new excitement about the journey ahead . . . even though none of us is entirely sure where we’re headed or how we’ll get there.

I’m not sure that’s the most important thing anyway. I think the most important thing is who we become along the way. While place is important, and the story of the promised land is proof of that, far more important, I believe, is that we are continually molded in the image of God and that we show that forth in our communities.

That’s the purpose of the journey.

And thanks be to God for His indescribable gift. **AMEN.**

⁹ Page 18

¹⁰ “The New Apostolic Denomination.” *Reclaiming the Great Commission: a Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations*, by Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, Jossey-Bass, 2001, p. 45.

¹¹ Bolsinger, page 29

¹² Ibid, page 33.