

“The Agile Church” – Part 1 of preaching series: “Let’s Run the Race”

Gal. 5:13-14; 1 Cor. 9:19-22; John 8:31-36

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Last Sunday, I preached on the topic “Spiritual Athletes.” I compared a Christian to an athlete running a marathon. This picture was inspired by the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews in chapter 12: *Let us run with perseverance the race that lies before us ... Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end.* This has provided a basis for a preaching series that I will call, “Let’s Run the Race.” It is my hope and prayer that this four week series will stretch our faith as individuals and as a congregation as we continue to be Jesus’ disciples and aim to be a servant church following in Jesus’ footsteps.

Like an athlete who has trained for many months, we should encourage one another with the words of the title of our series, “Let’s run the race,” meaning “Let’s be partners with God as God’s story of God’s love for the world continues to unfold.” Believing that we have left the starting line, we should feel exhilarated; we should anticipate attaining an exciting goal ahead of us. But to get there, we should remind ourselves that individual spiritual athletes and a spiritually athletic church must possess at least these essential qualities: endurance, the full participation of God’s people, a commitment to God’s vision to be the Body of Christ, and a sustained focus on Jesus Christ, the author of our faith.

Today’s topic, “The Agile Church,” reminds us that an athlete who is agile has the ability to adapt to needed changes during the race. In order to maintain optimum efficiency as a runner, an athlete needs flexibility in style and performance. An agile athlete is swift and decisive. As I apply these athletic qualities to us as individuals and to Memorial Church today, I wish to stress the need for us as spiritual athletes to possess an agile faith and an agile vision.

There are Christians and people of other religions who have set narrow limits to their faith and vision. I say they suffer from “spiritual myopia.” Perhaps, like me, you find such people somewhat boring! We have all come across people and churches talking as if their brand of spirituality is fixed, formulated, and final. These are the people . . . these are the churches that, in my opinion, have quit training for the race. They think they have already arrived at the finishing line. May God save Memorial Church from ever adopting such a

disposition! I am proud of our flexible, diverse, and inclusive theology and practice. There is a theological freedom, not rigidity, at Memorial Church that for many people coming here for the first time is refreshing and liberating. That should not be surprising. After all, is it not Jesus who in our gospel lesson says, “If the Son makes you free, then you will be really free?” (John 8:36). When we obey Jesus’ teaching, we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. Everyone who comes through these doors, or through the doors of any United Methodist church, should find a theology that is liberating, not enslaving. Agile faith and vision are behind the United Methodist Church’s slogan: *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*. An agile faith and an agile vision are rooted in our Wesleyan tradition.

Salvation, for John Wesley, was not something that was fixed or closed. It was something dynamic, rather than static. If you stopped to ask Mr. Wesley the question, “Are you saved?” I very much suspect that he would have replied with another question: “Do you mean saved in the past, present, or future?” Wesley preached a sermon entitled *Justification by Faith* in which he explained how salvation has past, present, and future dimensions: *We have been saved; we are being saved; we will be saved to the uttermost*.

According to Wesley, if salvation is an ongoing process, if faith in Jesus is a dynamic journey, then it must always be a little experimental, flexible, and adaptable to changing times and circumstances. In 18th Century England, Wesley lived in revolutionary times. Little wonder that he called his theology an “experiment in practical divinity.” If faith was going to work at that time in history, it had to be practical and pliable.

There is little doubt in your minds, I am sure, that we are also living in revolutionary times, when our faith and our ethics are being tested in new ways every day. There are wars, acts of terrorism, inter-faith tensions, excessive unemployment, an unstable economy, uncertainty about health care reform, and so on. Our lives are changing so fast that we need a very agile faith, a faith that is up and running, a faith that is always open to correction and revision, a faith that can welcome a challenge and not be fearful of radical change. We need a faith that can be tried and can be transformed.

John Wesley never wrote a systematic theology. He never took the time to prove that he had God all sewn up. He never wrote a creed. He never etched anything in stone. He was forever revising his sermons as he went along. We need an experimental, practical, flexible

theology that does the same. That helps us to be not only an athletic church, but also an agile church.

The next point to consider is this: An agile church is flexible in its methods of evangelism in two ways; first, it is all-inclusive; second, it is open to change. Being part of a welcoming community places upon us a responsibility to share the experiences we have come to value. It has been said that evangelism is “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” By the grace of God, we have found bread here. That places upon us an obligation to share the good news with others. We are called to say with the apostle in 1 Corinthians, chapter 9: “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.”

The special character of Memorial Church as an agile church – as an open and inclusive church – puts us in a strategic place to witness to a wider community and a richly diverse American society that is being constantly disturbed by besetting bigotry and hatred, by pervasive prejudice and oppression. To be a welcoming, inclusive, agile church must mean for us that we reach out beyond our walls, reach out beyond ourselves, and reach out beyond “our kind of people.” Agile church evangelism means that we reach out beyond our self-interests to effect reconciliation and healing for all.

In addition to being inclusive in its outreach, the agile church is open to change in style, pace, strategy, and planning in the same way as an athlete running a race is alert to the need to adjust the dynamics of running at any time. This flexibility to change and adapt may be needed not only to stay in the race, it may be needed to win the race.

The agile church must keep on learning and growing throughout life. It must be flexible, adaptable, ready and willing to change its methods and strategies as it presents the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people. A rigid church, a church that is unwilling to change, is in danger of being swept away by a changing culture.

There was a North Carolinian structure that stood immovable for almost 130 years! 48,000 tons of granite, brick, and steel! Its foundation was solid; it stood the test of time. It had weathered countless storms, existing in an atmosphere of sand and salt that would reduce an automobile to rust in a few years! All the while, its piercing light had led countless sailors safely home. It is the Cape Hatteras lighthouse – the most famous lighthouse in America! It is a lone sentinel, providing a safe haven for all those who fall within the shadow of its mighty

searchlight. In spite of sturdy construction, unless something changed, the lighthouse was doomed to destruction! How could that have happened? What could have threatened the mighty Cape Hatteras lighthouse with the possibility of crumbling and falling?

When the lighthouse was built it was 1600 feet (1/4 mile) from the seashore on Hatteras Island. During a period of 130 years, the ocean currents and shifting sands eroded the shoreline and changed the shape of the island. Until a few years ago, the lighthouse stood less than 160 feet from the ocean. In 1994, during a storm, the waves reached and battered the foundation of the lighthouse. The sands of time had shifted, and the ocean threatened to wash the lighthouse away. Lighthouse keepers had two choices:

1. Leave the lighthouse where it was and allow nature to destroy it; or.....
2. Move the lighthouse to a safe location where it could safely continue to perform its purpose.

Wisely, the second decision was made. The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was lifted five feet in the air, placed on rollers, and moved on rails 1/4 mile inland over a period of 12 weeks. Lighthouse keepers realized that, in order for the Lighthouse to survive and thrive, it had to move. To stay put would have invited destruction and disaster!

Now don't get me wrong . . . I'm not for one minute suggesting the relocation of Memorial Church! What I am saying is that, like Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, if Memorial Church – or any church – is unwilling to move with the times, it may be in danger of being swept away by a changing culture. In order to survive, the church of Jesus Christ must be willing to move! The agile church is willing to move to meet the demands of a changing world.

How loudly this speaks to Memorial Church! Since its doors opened, this church in the past sixty years has seen unexpected and most challenging change in this Thomasville location! And thank God, that Memorial Church is running the race; thank God we are partners with Jesus Christ in God's mission; thank God that Memorial is an athletic and an agile church, ever seeking new ways, new methods, and new programs to penetrate the changing structures around us with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many precious people are to be found behind the mighty thick walls and secure doors of our American society . . . some have already found their way into this fellowship of Christian believers, and over that we rejoice . . . others are waiting for this agile church to move and change so that its light may penetrate their lives with good news about Jesus Christ.

With the emphasis on flexibility – on openness to inclusiveness, to change, and to move swiftly with the times – there is something that stands in stark contrast to all this . . . something about which we are to remain rigid, dogged, determined . . . something that we will never quit, never relax, never give up. What is this? I find the answer in the apostle’s words, quoted earlier: *I become all things to all people that I may win some of them by any means possible.* Let’s never forget that we’re running the race. The aim is to win. The race, as I mentioned before, is God’s mission in God’s world. Running the race has to do with winning people to Christ, making people Jesus’ disciples, evangelizing, sharing the Gospel . . . say it however you like . . . it all means the same thing. The methods of persuading people to follow Christ may change, but persuasion is what it is all about – quiet and subtle, loud and aggressive – whatever works . . . it’s all about persuasion.

*I am Sam, Sam I am
That Sam-I-am, that Sam-I-am!
I do not like that Sam-I-am!*

*Do you like green eggs and ham?
I do not like them Sam-I-am.
I would not like them here or there,
I would not like them anywhere,
I do not like green eggs and ham
I do not like them Sam-I-Am.*

Do you know the story? I bet you do. It’s one of Dr. Suess’s greatest works, *Green Eggs and Ham*. Sam keeps trying to get his friend to try green eggs and ham. Would you eat them in a box? Would you eat them with a fox? And at every rejection he tries something new. And his friend keeps saying, “No, no, no! I don’t like them,” until finally it would seem that Sam has tried everything because his friend says:

*I will not eat them in a house.
I do not like them with a mouse.
I do not like them here or there.
I do not like them anywhere!
I do not like green eggs and ham!
I do not like them Sam I am.*

Pretty definite, you’d think that Sam would get the hint, but no he’s up for one more try, and try he does as he says:

*You do not like them, so you say.
Try them! Try them!
Sam! If you will let me be, I will try them. You will see.
Say! I like green eggs and ham!
I do! I like them, Sam-I-Am!
And I will eat them in a house.
And I will eat them with a mouse.
And I will eat them here and there.
Say! I will eat them anywhere!
I do so like green eggs and ham!
Thank you!
Thank you, Sam-I-Am.*

We are deeply committed to a flexibility that reflects an open theology, an inclusive spirit, a willingness to change, and to move with the times. Paradoxically, when it comes to persuading others to follow Christ, the athletic church needs to be rigidly committed to flexibility. As I read *Green Eggs and Ham* I thought: “Hey, this guy just doesn’t give up.” Sam I Am must have figured that eventually something would click even if his friend ate them just to get him off his back. I want Memorial Church to be rigidly committed to flexibility in the task of persuasion – to do whatever it takes to reach people with the word of God.

We must commit ourselves with the apostle Paul to become all things to all people – to be an agile, flexible church that is open to include all people, to change, and to move with the times – and we do this in order that we may win some of the people around us. We will achieve this goal ...we will win this race ...when we persuade people with our words, with our actions, with our deeds of mercy, with our stand for justice, with exemplary behavior, with compassion for the poor and needy, and with the love of Christ for all people. It is when we become all things to all people that will persuade our neighbors to find their way inside these doors and fill this sacred space to overflowing. This athletic task will take endurance, full participation, a constant focus on Jesus Christ, and an athletic, agile church. Let’s run the race!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.