

Unreasonable Hope: Fail Trying
September, 24 2023 Montavilla United Methodist Church
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Acts 6:8-14; 7:54-1a

6:8 Stephen, who stood out among the believers for the way God's grace was at work in his life and for his exceptional endowment with divine power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Opposition arose from some who belonged to the so-called Synagogue of Former Slaves. Members from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia entered into debate with Stephen. **10** However, they couldn't resist the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. **11** Then they secretly enticed some people to claim, "We heard him insult Moses and God." **12** They stirred up the people, the elders, and the legal experts. They caught Stephen, dragged him away, and brought him before the Jerusalem Council. **13** Before the council, they presented false witnesses who testified, "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the Law. **14** In fact, we heard him say that this man Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the customary practices Moses gave us."

7:54 Once the council members heard these words, they were enraged and began to grind their teeth at Stephen. **55** But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. **56** He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One[a] standing at God's right side!" **57** At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, **58** threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. **59** As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" **60** Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

8:1 Saul was in full agreement with Stephen's murder.

At the time, The stoning of Stephen must have felt like a terrible disaster! They had just appointed Stephen to be a deacon, to help manage the daily distribution of food to the poor, so that the Apostles time would be freed up for preaching and teaching, and then Stephen went totally off script and started preaching and teaching, because sometimes Spirit writes your job description, instead of SPRC, which caught the attention of the Temple Council who became convinced that these Jesus followers were going to destroy their Church (oops I mean Temple) and change all their sacred customs and now there's this new guy, Saul who rapidly progresses from coat holder to hunting Jesus followers down and executing them!

This is way too much risk.

Way too much stress.

Just way too much.

Time to cut your losses, shut this thing down, and go back to the way things used to be right?

But God is unreasonable.

After all, the witnesses at Stephen's trial weren't wrong when they said in verse 14:

In fact, we heard him say that this man Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the customary practices Moses gave us."

Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the customary practices Moses gave us. That's actually really accurate.

Jesus said unreasonable things. That's part of why they crucified him in the first place!

You see, their fears of destruction were accurate. The Roman Empire had declared that they were in the midst of the Pax Romana, that is, the "Roman Peace." Which meant that their empire was so large that no barbarians could get past their well fortified edges of Spain and Britannia to the west, France and the Danube River to the north, Judea to the East, and Egypt to the south. They called it the Pax Romana, not because it was so very peaceful, but because they had the military might to lay the smack down on anybody who disturbed the peace. Judea had been warned, Governor Pilate, King Herod, and the High Priests of the Temple had been called into meetings and told that if Jewish people didn't stop rebelling, Rome would be more than happy to wipe their little country off the map. And in 69 AD, Emperor Vespasian did exactly that and not one stone of the Temple was left sitting upon another stone. All that is left of the Jerusalem that Jesus walked, is the wailing wall, which was an outer wall of the Temple complex, not an actual wall of the Temple.

So their fears that Jesus would annoy the Romans were actually very legitimate. Jesus was not the only Jewish "rebel" King Herod and the Priests turned over to the Romans to be crucified, because they were trying to prevent a war that there was no way that Judea would win.

And Jesus was definitely altering the customs that Moses gave them!

- I mean, how many of you keep a kosher kitchen? -- Has anyone eaten a ham and cheese sandwich this week?
- Anybody wearing clothing with more than one kind of fiber? Because that's not allowed under Moses.

- Who here is married to somebody whose ancestors are from a different part of the world than your ancestors? Because the law of Moses requires God's people to not marry outside of the Hebrew people...although, is anybody here ethnically Jewish, because, unless you are, you can only go so far into the Temple, even if you worship the God of Abraham.
- And I'm a woman... and no Rabbis taught women, except for Jesus.

So yeah, "*Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the customary practices Moses gave us.*" was a super accurate statement.

They were afraid that Jesus would destroy their Temple and change their customs and Jesus totally did.

He still is.

Religious and Civic leaders are still afraid that Jesus will destroy their places and change their customs, because God has changed things several times.

About every 500 years or so in Western Christianity, God holds a rummage sale, as the former Bishop of Canterbury put it. Here's the timeline.

- Jesus comes in the first century, and just when they think they have figured out how to do church, 500-ish years later
- The Oriental Orthodox Church splits off in the 6th century, so they figure out new systems and leadership and stuff and just when they think they have it figured out, then 500-ish years later
- The Great Schism between East and West happened in 1054, and that caused a lot of drama and two Popes and it was a whole thing, and they finally have Europe mostly settled down, then 500-ish years later
- The Protestant Reformation happens in 1517, and in the mid-twentieth-century things were really coming together with denominational mergers and so much cultural support for Christianity that Reinhold Niebuhr was on the cover of Time magazine, and then things started to unravel in the 60's and just kept unraveling and then COVID...
- And here we are 500-ish years after the Reformation,

(Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* Baker Books: 2008).

Wondering why things that worked really well for hundreds of years are no longer working!

Things that we consider basic to Christianity like:

- Sunday worship,
- Sunday School,
- Committee Based Volunteer Leadership, and
- the dominance of Christianity in Western Culture.

And when I see all of you beating yourselves, and beating your pastors up, because your church is dying, I want to tell us all:

It's not your fault! Churches didn't do anything wrong! We just kept going in the same old direction while the rest of Western Culture moved in a different direction. And now doing what we have always done, does not produce the same results that it used to, because our context has changed.

And God gets extra unreasonable when God is holding one of God's rummage sales.

Anybody who has held a rummage sale kinda understands this right? There you are trying to get rid of your kids old clothes that are 5 sizes too small and your pre-teen is in tears because they claim that their My Little Pony T-shirt still fits, it's just a crop top now. And out of the corner of your eye, you see your spouse carrying *something* off the sale table back into the garage, even though you talked about, and agreed to *everything* before the sale, and if I can be mature enough to give up my collection of gorgeous high heels that I can't wear anymore because my old knees are garbage, then why can't everyone else just deal with giving up their stuff too!

These rummage sale times get a little tense, because God is doing a new thing, and God is calling new leaders to lead this new thing and it's hard to give up things that we love, even though they're no longer working for us. It's hard to let go of the ways of doing church that used to work, especially when we don't really know what God is going to replace them with.

But I have unreasonable hope that God is not done with the people called Methodist.

And I believe that people still need Jesus and people still need the "community of love and forgiveness" that we promise in our congregational Vows to the Baptized (United Methodist Hymnal, p35)

I also believe that Church is a verb, like love. Church is not a building we go to, or a committee we join. Church is what the community of the Beloved do together to live out Jesus' prayer that God's Reign will come and God's will be done here on earth as in heaven (The Lord's Prayer).

The Reformation style of how we have done Church is being sorted through for God's rummage sale to make room for new ways of Being The Church.

My question for you. The question that I would love for us to discuss on Saturday at our All Church Retreat, is are you willing to participate in God's totally unreasonable rummage sale?

What I propose, in consultation with District Superintendent Rev Tim Overton-Harris, is that Montavilla commit Endowment funds to fully fund a full-time pastor, for 3 years, possibly me, to lead this church in a shared vision for Being The Church in a new and vital way. To be successful this would require the congregation to commit to a shared vision for following Jesus in a way that works for the twenty-first-century. This will mean change and hard work. This will mean shifting from Pastoral Care to Congregational Care. This will mean measuring success not by worship attendance and offering plate numbers, but measuring success by the number of lives changed. This will mean letting go of some things that used to work really well, that maybe we loved, so that people we haven't met yet can experience the good news of Jesus.

I know this sounds unreasonable, to risk everything we have for the sake of an uncertain outcome. And honestly, you don't have to do this. You can decide to tell DS Tim that you don't want to commit to a full time pastor, or change, or any of it. You don't have to do this.

But God is unreasonable. And what has happened every other time that God has had a rummage sale, is that the local churches who decided not to change faded away and those who embraced that God was doing a new thing, thrived.

So, this could fail.

But if you change nothing this church will die within 10 years.

So why not fail trying, on the off chance that our unreasonable hope that God can pull this off is justified?

After all, God is ridiculously, impossibly, unreasonable.

God is so unreasonable that God recruited Saul to be an apostle.

Remember Saul, the coat holder for the murder of Stephen?

Saul who moved up from coat holder to mob leader?

Saul, who probably thought he was being completely reasonable in trying to prevent a war with Rome by hunting down these Jesus rebels!

God recruited Saul, renamed him Paul, and Paul the former Pharisee, became the biggest advocate for non-Jewish believers in the early church.

Nobody saw that coming, especially not Paul!

So why not fail trying, because God is so unreasonable, that God just might surprise us with success.