

“Carried Away with Enthusiasm”

Psalm 9:1-8; John 21:20-22, 24-25

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 7, 2015 – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

In the 13th century when Marco Polo came back from the Orient, he told stories of wonders he had seen | and marvelous cities he had visited. Because these things were far beyond the practical imagination of people they began to accuse him of lying. Finally, they ridiculed everything he tried to say. When he was dying at the age of 70 they encouraged him to confess his lies since he was about to face God. Marco Polo's last answer was anything but an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. He said, "I never told you the half of it."

John is saying something similar at the end of his Gospel. In the last verse of the 20th chapter he writes: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book " And again in the last verse of the next, and final chapter—part of our scripture for today—"But there are also many other things which Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

Exaggeration? Overstatement? Of course. The Gospels are gloriously exaggerated. All four Gospel writers get carried away with their enthusiasm. But then Jesus was an exaggerator himself. The Gospel writers learned well from their source. What outrageous claims he made: The meek shall inherit the earth. Love your enemies. Move mountains. Ask and you shall receive. It's no wonder some laughed at him and some religious folk were threatened by it. Yet, Jesus was not one to back off. He said what he meant and meant what he said.

Others down through the years have learned that the world is not always ready for the new, the bold, the innovative. Benjamin Franklin had the exaggerated idea that lightning was a form of electricity. He sent a paper on the subject to be read by a friend before the Royal Society in London. This friend reported back to him that it was laughed at by the members.

In 1837 Rowland Hill proposed the exaggerated idea of a postage stamp for England. This would replace the usual practice of cash payments made by the recipient upon delivery of the letter. The then Postmaster General of Great Britain declared the idea absurd and entirely contrary to reason.

Rachel Carson warned against the disastrous effects of DDT and other pesticides in her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*. She was derided by many for her exaggerated alarm and was called a prophet of doom.

When the Surgeon General first announced a warning against cigarette smoking, the tobacco industry called the claims exaggerated. They spent lots of money on studies with hand-picked scientists to supposedly prove that their products weren't all that harmful.

Anyone who dares to put forth a new idea takes the chance of being met by strong opposition, especially when it challenges prevailing thought. The forces of the status quo are not easily persuaded nor moved. And so it often takes exaggerated effort by those with faith

in something new to overcome that natural opposition. This applies to almost any aspect of life.

In a recent workshop I attended the topic was evangelism and church growth. We looked at some of the factors which promote expansion and those which tend to block it. It seems that one of the most positive things a church can do on Sunday mornings is very simple and to the point. This is to sincerely welcome its visitors. We're called to be openly hospitable to those who are our guests.

Mere friendliness alone, however, will not be enough to bring others to discover Christ in this place. Our meeting leaders also told us that we need to be bold in our approach; that is, we need to have something important to say to people and to do it in such a way that it makes some impact.

At several places during the day we had individuals share what they found in the church where they now attend. All those who spoke had been members only a relatively short time. They all underscored that the personal interest shown to them and the overall spirit of the congregation were important factors in their decision to join.

Later a workshop leader spoke about the decline in church membership on a national level. Most mature denominations such as Methodists and Presbyterians and United Church of Christ all show similar patterns. While there are a number of reasons that have contributed to this trend, a major one has to do with our common history.

Mainline American churches go back to the 18th century, and in some cases, even before that. During great periods of growth the source of new members came largely from European migration, the movement of rural people to the cities, and the rise of the suburbs starting in the 1950's. We didn't have to work much on evangelism in the past; people just showed up on their own, and we benefitted. Churches grew pretty much whether efforts were made or not. It was a sellers' market.

Migration is no longer a source of new members, and nationally more people are moving from cities rather than coming to them. Even the immediate neighborhoods surrounding us are becoming more mature and their residents are beginning to age in place. Attracting members has changed drastically in the last 25 years.

At the same time, we've witnessed the rise and growth of new denominations and independent congregations. Our speakers suggested that their success may be less a factor of conservative theology, which many of them preach, than the fact that they have been organized for recruitment from the start. They had to learn to tell their story, and operate differently, just to survive. Consequently, many have become very good at growing.

For the most part it's not our theology which is the problem. That isn't broken and doesn't need fixing. We don't have to become more fundamental than the fundamentalists. What we really need to do is to learn how to be good communicators of what it is we do believe. We have to become bolder in proclaiming the good things we experience in our congregations and be willing to share this with others. When it comes to attracting younger people, we have to grow more adept at utilizing modern technology and understanding the emerging trends of social networking.

Faith can still be expressed in a humble way. It need not, and should not point to us, but to the One who brings full meaning to everyone and everything. Evangelism today doesn't have to mean shouting at passerbys on the street corner, but it does mean learning how to speak up at the right times, and with an enthusiasm that is born out of conviction.

What we say and show can be done exuberantly in the same way John the Gospel writer tells his story of what has been a life-changing experience for him. A faith that lives and moves has to break the bonds of containment. It is bold in the telling because there simply is no other choice, no other way to do it, when you're excited about what is happening in you and around you.

A pastor tells of receiving a letter from a young man from his congregation who was in the Marines. In it he told how he had met the girl of his dreams and that he was bringing her home on his next furlough. They wanted to be married.

It was a long letter for the soldier spent five pages simply describing this girl. The minister said that after reading it, she sounded like all the movie stars rolled up into one. The long description of her was flattering in every aspect.

A month later the soldier and his bride-to-be arrived in town and soon the couple came by the church. The pastor said that he could hardly believe what he saw. Though a very nice person, the young lady proved to be exceedingly plain. The words in the soldier's letter appeared to have but little correlation with reality.

Had the Marine lied? A skeptic would say yes, but I think a romantic would answer *no*. The letter was certainly exaggeration, yet not intended to deceive; for the fellow undoubtedly saw this very special girl as he had described her. In his love for her she was beautiful beyond compare. The way she walked, the way she held his hand, the drape of her hair, the perfume she wore, her ready smile-- all were perfect in his sight. But then lovers always exaggerate. They can't do otherwise, because that is what all their senses tell them.

The emotion of love colors everything it sees. It paints the ordinary with vivid hues. There's an exuberance which just overflows. It can't be helped and usually can't even be controlled. It takes on a life and dimension of its own. It is reality, even when you're the only one that can see it.

John was bold enough to say that the world couldn't contain all the books that might be written of the many things Jesus did. Surely that's an exaggeration, but it wouldn't be wrong for all of us to be carried away with such enthusiasm, to believe and convey the central place of faith within our own lives.

Today's message says to get in touch with what excites you about your faith and make it come alive for others. After all if it doesn't make a difference in your life, why should someone think it could make a difference in their life. Then be ready to share this passion with others in a way that they can understand. That's how Christianity is spread. That's the way the church grows best.

A person once said to me, "In our tradition we were taught not to wear religion on our sleeves. It was something personal and private." If that ever made sense it surely doesn't now; moreover, it isn't in keeping with the Gospels. The churches of tomorrow speak of the Good News today... so let's make sure we're one of them!