

Chapel MWBTS
Jan. 25, 1996
Gary Farley
Matt. 4:12-17
JESUS WAS A COUNTRY PREACHER

Introduction

Pleased and honored to have this opportunity to lead your time of worship this morning, in part because much of what I have become is the consequences of the mission of this seminary. I am in my 12th year of working with the rural church program of our denomination. I must confess that almost 40 years ago when I was a member of the founding class at Midwestern, the idea that I would serve in this role was not even remotely a part of my vision. I had grown up in the suburbs of KC. I had been licensed and ordained by the Raytown BC, and would later be married there. I had served a village church and an open country church before, during and after my seminary here, but believed my future lay either with a dynamic growing suburban church or in the seminary classroom.

My parents were a part of that great hoard of young adults who had moved from the farm to the city in the 1930s and 40s. And while they looked back nostalgically at their rural raising, they decried much of the lack of modernity which characterized their kinspersons who continued to dwell on the farms and in the villages of rural Missouri. I must confess that I came to share a prejudiced attitude toward rural people for their pre-modern or traditionalist beliefs and practices.

Let me cite but two brief illustrations. In our first year at the chapel prior to our first test in O T Intro, we had as our speaker John Freeman, who by then was retired from the position that I now hold. Early in his message he declared, "Take all of that Higher Criticism bunk and throw it out the window." Then he continued by telling a story about an illiterate mountain pastor who took as his text "Whomever does not gather with me scratches a board." He regaled us in laughter about how the mountain pastor waxed eloquently concerning the sins and errors of board scratching. I believe that what Dr. Freeman was attempting to do was to encourage us to find a mid-course between ignorance and arrogance. Frankly, I have had to struggle with this ever since then.

The second example comes from an experience of being in revival less than 100 miles from here in the Spring of 1960. I recall having supper with an elderly widow woman prior to the evening service. In our conversation she shared with me her belief that the world is indeed flat and that all the stuff about space flights was just a great scam being played upon us by Hollywood and the Federal Government. I must confess that I sinned the sin of arrogance that evening. How stupid, I thought. But mature reflection suggest to me that my role as a minister of the Gospel was not to modernize her world picture. No, it was to affirm her faith in the God of creation,

to support her trust in the redemptive work of God's son, and to agree with her concerning the purposes of God in his world. The error in her world picture did not negate the truth of her faith.

The flip side of this, of course, was and is those who finding the world picture of the Scriptures to be pre-modern, have "thrown out the baby with the bath wash." My seminary experience equipped me to deal apologetically with the modernists. And I did this with some success for two decades on college campuses. I believe that the task of my generation of seminarians has been to deal on the one hand with traditionalist, pre-modern persons, and on the other with modernized persons. And in the middle with hoards of folk who uncritically have mixed the two perspective. This has not been easy, and we, at least myself, have made mistakes and committed sins along the way. It is so easy to confuse the cultural world picture with the Gospel.

What has helped me greatly is to come to the realization, finally, that Jesus did not argue with the world picture of his hearers. He accommodated to their understanding that the causes of events lie in the spirit world. His focus was to stress the Sovereignty of God over all events. The issue for those who proclaimed the Gospel to pre-modern folk, and this would include most Southern Baptist pastors through the years, was to free people from the belief that their lives and fortunes were controlled by evil spirits, haints, ghosts, witches, warlocks, or magic. They declared the good news that the great and good God is in charge of this world and its events. Those spirit being that are in rebellion against God will be punished. Christ has won the victory. And at the end of time God's just reign will be established.

Modernity offered an alternative explanation of causation. Events could be explained by natural causes. The spirit world was denied. Bad things happen because of bad choices. Good things happen because of good choices. In its extreme expression God was pushed out of the loop. Many of us saw our task as declaring that while much of what happens in everyday life can be explained in terms of the operation of natural laws, this is a penultimate, not the ultimate explanation. We found the great and good God as author of the laws of nature. And further, we continued, God can and does enter into the stream of history to perform miracles, to bring good out of evil, to provide surprises, and to bend the course of the stream.

Sociologists, historians, philosophers, novelists and many others told my generation that we would fail, that modernity would win, that the churches would close, that Christianity would die. When revival came, these pundits told us that this was but the dying gasp of a failed system. Some times we doubted, but mostly we kept the faith and stayed the course. I am glad we did.

For today we are hearing and reading about the end of modernity and the coming of post-modernity. Its shape is still not clear. For some it issues in a nihilism

which denies the possibility of finding any meaning, any adequate theory of causation. For others it has issues in looking to eastern religions, to native American spirituality and to all of those other spiritualities that are lumped together under the title of the New Age. But most significantly in Christianity we are finding expanding interest in spiritual exercises and spiritual explanations of events.

The post-modern age will be your context of ministry. Coming as you do at its beginning, you will have exciting times of great discovery and creativity. You will make some bad mistakes. But our God looks at the whole picture, he looks at your total journey. Just stay open to his correction. Trust in his forgiveness. While the ministry period of my generation was mostly one of defense, yours can be one of advance and victory. I am excited about your prospects. I hope that you will allow folks like myself to offer some equipping to you, even while we both understand that our understanding is tainted by our historical context. Stated differently, here is my legacy for you. It contains my most honest understandings. I offer it to you not in the hope of controlling your ministry, but as bits and pieces that you can use to inform your work. My baggage keeps me from seeing the post-modern world as well as you will. But I believe that I have some wisdom to share that will help you not to error on the side of arrogance. Because of my work with the rural church, it will focus on that aspect of our work.

1. Any world view, while useful, is distorted. This was true of the pre-modern. It was true of the modern, and it may be true of the post-modern.
2. The biblical revelation comes to us in a pre-modern form. Its truth transcends the pre-modern world picture in which it comes. I have prepared a set of handouts which identify truths about persons and about churches which must inform both today as they did in the first century. I hope that you will begin with these lists and improve upon them. (They will be distributed.)
3. Among the advantages your generation has over mine is that because there are three current world pictures available, you may be less tempted to the arrogance of believing that in rejecting the former you have now found absolute truth. You can see better than we did that the Gospel transcends and can transform any world picture. World pictures are always errant. Only the truth of God is without error.
4. Some of you are pastoring churches comprised of pre-modern people. Typically, they are in the country-side. I suspect that there are some "flat worlders" out there still. Certainly, you will find "survivalist" in many rural places in the Midwest. Love them. Don't fight with them about their world picture. Many of them have a clearer understanding of the Gospel than you do. They live with the world picture most like the one to whom Christ delivered the Gospel.

5. In studying Matthew's Gospel I have come to realize that Jesus devoted most of his work to country people. Consider the possibility that God wants you to do likewise. Jesus centered his ministry out of Capernaum, a town of 1,500. He grew up in Nazareth, a town of 200. Pray about it.

6. Increasingly, rural places have become modernized. I am constantly amazed by the diversity of persons that I am finding in rural places today. So, do not stereotype rural congregations.

You may find, as I have, exciting and stimulating opportunities for ministry.

7. While the great challenge of the generation before me was to create "country" churches in cities like KC, and many of mine worked to urbanize these, not of few of your generation will need to plant and grow "urban" churches in rural settings. A most obvious setting for this is in the lake communities of the Ozarks.

8. Often when we hear of the growth of the cities and of the declining percent of Americans who live in rural or non-metropolitan places, we assume that the work of rural churches is about over. Not true. The fact is that as many folk live in rural places as ever. And as I suggested earlier, it is a changing and diversifying population.

9. Throughout much of the Cornbelt, Hogbelt, and Great Plains areas which President Coppinger is staking out for the ministry field of this seminary, there are church fields that are losing population. Often the problem is that the church is still thinking in terms of its township or the circle three miles in each direction from its front door. That is old time thinking. People do not live in six mile worlds any more. We are 30 or 60 mile people. The greatest ministry you can have for many of these churches is to help them find a special or niche ministry that they can do well, and seek to reach persons 15 to 20 miles in each direction that need or who can provide that ministry.

10. I see the development of mini-mega churches in the Wal-mart towns of the area. First Sedalia, First Springdale, and First Cassville are but three I know of personally. I hope some of you will ask God if it is in such places that He would have you serve, and prepare yourself accordingly.

11. The secret of the Baptist movement's success, from a sociological perspective, is that we have utilized bivocational persons for pastoral leadership in places and among peoples where the resources to provide full-support, financially, for a pastor has not been available. Many of you experienced a call to another profession or vocation prior to the one for ministry. Maybe you did not make a mistake then either. You are a multi-talented persons. Consider the possibility that God wants you to pastor of a church and do your other vocation as well.

12. One of the tensions I hear voiced often is that we Southern Baptists put so much emphasis on church growth that we frustrate many of our churches and pastors in

rural areas where population is declining and/or changing. It seems to me that this illustrates the primary theme of this message. From the perspective of modernity, one can understand that many churches will not grow, or may not grow, but from the other two perspectives--the pre-modern and the post-modern--God can work a miracle in very unlikely places. We need to somehow optimistically pray for and work for these miracles, but also understand that the timing is up to God. And the form that the miracle takes is up to God. Often our most basic problem is the narrowness of our vision concerning how God can work in the life of a church. Specifically, we tend to define church growth in significantly increasing numbers. When this does not happen we are tempted to want to change the name of the church to Little Hope. I think that we need to work where God plants us, expecting God to bless our work, but in ways that he wants. You can think this on out more fully.

13. Often people ask me to tell them what is the difference between a rural and a city church. For a long time I gave the obvious answers concerning the tendencies to be smaller, more relational, and more multi-bonded. But recently, I have been involved in a study of the churching of the Kansas City area from 1945 to the present. Among my learnings is that the life expectance of a rural church is much longer than that of a city church. This is to say that many if not most of the churches that I knew of in the Kansas City of 1945 are now gone. There is no place where stories about pastors Pitney, Brown, and Coulter, the men who pastored Garfield Avenue in the early 1940s, are told. There has not been for 20 years now. That church lived only about 50 years. The same is true of Trinity, Lin-Wayne, Linwood, William Jewell, and many others. Conversely, country and village churches tend to keep on and on, and the stories are told and retold. Consider, if perhaps God wants you to plant your life in a place where its impact will continue in church and in community long after you pass from the scene.

God knew that Jerusalem and its church would not last much beyond a generation after the death of Christ. This was not a good place to plant the story. So Jesus spent his life as a country preacher, in the backwater of the world. But there the story could find lodgement. It would be told and retold for many generations. It would be safe in a place like Capernaum until it could be transplanted into Europe and Africa. God was far too wise to trust the Gospel to a place where change might uproot and destroy it. Can it not be that today, as then, the deep stock roots of the Gospel must be in the stable rural places, so that it can be transplanted again and again to the cities? I will argue thiswise. My point is that the call to the rural was, is and shall be an important one. Please do not let the temptation to arrogance blind you to a call from God to pastor in the country, tending the root stock of the Gospel.

The story of my generation and its predecessor was that God used the good stock of the Gospel as tended by rural Baptists, black and white, to evangelize the cities in this century. I believe that he has more for the rural church to do in the coming century. This is not quite what John Freeman, my predecessor, said in 1958. But it is the message God gave to me for this day. God bless.

JESUS WAS A COUNTRY PREACHER

MATTHEW 4:12-17

Gary Farley

January 18, 1996

The Town and Country Office will celebrate its 50th anniversary of service to rural people. Because of this, I have been doing some reflecting upon the relationship of biblical faith and rural places. Central in my musings has been the question of why God directed Jesus to spend most of his ministry in Galilee among the farmers and shepherds, rather than in Jerusalem among the rulers, merchants, and power brokers of his day. Why did he focus on a rural place rather than on an urban place where the masses and the masters dwelt? I believe that I found the answer in Matthew 4:12-17. Listen;

This scripture says to me that God realized that Jerusalem would be destroyed in less than 40 years after Jesus declared the good news of the Gospel. The Gospel was too precious and too fragile in that early day to be lodged in such a place. So, Jesus centered his ministry in the small town of Capernaum, a place of 1,500 persons. There it took root, or as our text suggests, there the fire was tended. In that stable and secure environment, the root stock would be safe. The core beliefs could be shaped. The light would be protected from the winds of war and erroneous ideologies.

It proved to be a good plan. The book of Acts reveals that in Jerusalem the Gospel was bent in wrong ways by those who were unwilling to break away from older, erroneous traditions. Likewise, as Paul and others carried cuttings of the Gospel to transplant in the cities of Asia Minor, Europe and Africa, its purity was threatened by syncretism. But we can assume that back in the countryside of Galilee, the root stock remained true, the light burned brightly. There the stories and teachings were told and retold. Eye witnesses shared with their children, their relatives, and their neighbors. The story continued in pure form for generations. So when false doctrines, or persecution, or war damaged the church in the great urban areas, believers could find the root stock; they could find the old light still burning bright in the countryside. They had a base from which to start again. The point is, a good metropolitan strategy needs to have a good rural strategy for the long haul.

Most of us are products of efforts to transplant the Gospel from Europe to the Americas in more recent times. The story of Christian mission efforts and the story of community building across our continent are closely intertwined. Some came to find religious freedom in the New World. One the frontier, they created farmsteads and villages and placed within them churches. Some came to recreate on the prairies communities much like what they had known in the place from which they came. I have come to call the latter communities and their churches colonies and the former conquestors crusaders.

These communities tended to be organized in terms of the Jeffersonian model which called for a settlement to grow up about every six miles except in the West where short rainfall and rugged terrains mandated a sparser settlement pattern. Here the artisans, merchants, and professionals who were needed to service the wants of the yeoman farmers would dwell. Even before the continent was fully settled in this pattern, changes were set in motion that would alter it. Industrialization demanded large cities. And after a time, public policy encouraged that population to be drawn from the farms. For a while, the high fertility rates of the rural communities held many of them stable despite the loss of so many of its sons and daughters. But following World War II, many began first to grow older and then to dry up.

The young adults who streamed from the countryside to the cities in this century carried with them the understanding of the Gospel that they had learned in the country and village churches. Often they became

part of a great revival and extension of church life in the 1950s. Cuttings from the root stock were carried from the villages of rural America to the cities and the suburbs. Villages, like churches, sprang up everywhere in the urban soil.

Meanwhile, the generation that was growing to adulthood back in country places then can remember well a time when each little six mile community was at war with its neighbors. Growing up in Raytown, it was perfectly obvious to me that we were both superior and more blessed than those who had the misfortune of living in or near the inferior towns of Lee's Summit, Blue Springs, Harrisonville, Grandview, and Pleasant Hill. God, we believed, demonstrated this each fall Friday night at the football stadium. And on those very rare occasions when a team from another town might defeat us, it was always abundantly clear that the officials of the game had succumbed to the temptations of our adversaries and thwarted the will of God by making foolish calls.

When I visit these towns today, I find them much changed. A township, 36 square miles, a three-mile radius from a village, will no longer sustain a community, particularly one whose economic basis is agriculture. Modern technology, changing patterns of transportation and communication, and the growth of agricultural operations, among many other changes, have taken this option from us. It seems almost ironic to me, just now, that next weekend, I will help our younger daughter move into an apartment in the town where I grew up. In the process, I realize again that no matter how much we might want to, we cannot do 1946 or 1953 again.

As we celebrate 50 years, the Jubilee of the Rural Church Program among Southern Baptists during 1996, I hope that we will find this to be an opportunity to redream the founding dream. The purposes of Evangelism, Church Planting, Growth, Discipling, and Ministry, along with community development, will remain constant as will the methods of grassroots involvement, I hope. But some of the methods and some of the images of a good rural church life will need to change. Certainly one of these is the sustainability of the old township villages in the fashion of 1953. What I see happening in much of rural America is the creation of 30-mile rural communities, often serving a whole county, centered in the town with the Wal-Mart or K-Mart. As this happens, 5, 10, or even 15 of the old six-mile township villages will become neighborhoods within this emerging, larger community. This will mean that old rivalries will need to end. It will mean that old conflicts must be put aside. Likewise, we will not do 1953 in church again. In the papers and research data collected in this volume, you will find some of the story of the past, some of the reasons for this being a Jubilee year indeed, and some of the dream for the future. I hope that you will also interpret this as an invitation to join the movement.

There is much in the Gospel that will apply to this mission. The basic problem that it addresses is estrangement from God and from one's neighbors.

- Remember that Jesus summed up the expectations of God for us all in terms of us loving him and loving our neighbors.
- Remember how in his most popular parable, the Good Samaritan, he demands that we broaden our definition of who our neighbor is.
- Remember that in his most famous sermon, he instructed us to treat others as we would like to be treated.
- Remember that in the shadow of the cross he told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them.
- And remember that his half-brother, James, wrote that the essence of true religion is caring for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers.

In conclusion, I hope that as you work with your rural and village churches this year to celebrate our Jubilee, you will come to share the dream. May God bless your efforts. Certainly, it is my prayer that 50 years from now our successors will be able to look back at this time and see the early signs of the emergence of a new and better paradigm for mission and ministry across rural America.