

July 24, 2016

Church Planting
How Amish Are You?
Acts 17:1-9

Opening words: This morning we find ourselves in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. Paul and Silas are in the city of Thessalonica. That means they have traveled 100 miles from Philippi. The scripture tells us they spent a minimum of three weeks there. At that time, Thessalonica had a population of approximately 200,000 residents and was the capital of the province of Macedonia. Part of that population was a colony of Jews who had established a synagogue. It was Paul's custom to go to the synagogue to teach and tell people about Jesus. That is exactly what he did, and he ends up dividing that congregation.

This is sermon number thirty-eight in my sermon series on the book of Acts, *Church Planting*. I hope to end it someday. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 17:1-9. Let me call this message *How Amish Are You?* Leo Tolstoy once said, *"Everyone thinks of changing the world, no one thinks of changing himself."* This is a message about change. You can take this message as a warning.

Acts 17:1-9 ¹ When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. ⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. ⁵ But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." ⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

Did you know there are approximately 308,000 Amish in North America? They are located in 28 different states. Did you know Ohio has the largest Amish population in the country, 55,000? Pennsylvania has 51,000 Amish and Indiana has 38,000. An additional 5,000 Amish live in Canada. You have seen them countless times. Never forget, they are a traditionalist Christian fellowship with Swiss Anabaptist roots. They

are known for simple living, plain dress and a reluctance to adopt many conveniences of modern technology.

When I was young, my mother would host family members from the New York City area. She wanted them to experience all the sites of Northeastern Ohio. One by one, she took them to Burton, in Geauga County, to see the Amish. It was my first experience with the Amish. I remember asking my mother why they live that way. My mother simply said, "Russell, they are good people, but the Amish hate change." Can I ask you a question? How Amish are you? In other words, do you hate change? If you have an answer to that question say, "**Amen!**" With that in mind, let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

As I said earlier, we are in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. Paul and Silas are in the city of Thessalonica. On Saturday, the Sabbath, they go to the synagogue to tell those who have gathered about the Good News of Jesus Christ. To be more exact, Paul tells them about the Good News of Jesus Christ on three consecutive Sabbaths. This is one of those good news/ bad news stories. The good news is, some believed Paul. They accept Jesus and their souls are saved. In their numbers are some Jews and some God-fearing Greeks. This is the bad news: Paul's success made some of the other Jews jealous. The scene turns ugly quickly. They go to the marketplace and round up some bad characters and form a mob. These Jews look for Paul and Silas at the home of Jason, but they are not there. The mob is emotional; someone has to pay. So why not Jason? They drag him to the city officials and identify him as the source of the civil unrest. There is no other way to say it. Jason had a bad day, but Paul and Silas slipped out of town quietly. Beyond our reading, we are told they headed for Berea.

What does this story teach us? The Bible was not written to entertain us. The Bible was written for one reason, edification of our souls. So, what does this story teach us? How does this story help us to live out the faith? The answer is obvious. That ancient synagogue did what we must never do. They became inflexible. At some point, tradition became more important than anything. God had done a great thing through the ministry of Jesus Christ, but they didn't care. The only thing they cared about was their tradition. It is a form of selfishness. They were more concerned about what they liked than what was good for the rest of the world. Just like the Amish, this ancient Jewish congregation hated change. Their body was divided over change. Those who resisted change won the battle, but they lost the war. Can I ask you a question? How Amish are you? How do you feel about change?

The Mainline Protestant church has become notorious for inflexibility. Our inflexibility will be our demise. The mainline Protestant church is dying at an alarming rate. The numbers are not pretty. According to the FASICLD (Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development), 4,000 churches close their doors for good every year. That averages out to be approximately 77 churches a week. Consider this fact with me. Between 1990 and 2000, our national population grew 11%. During the same period,

the membership of the mainline Protestant church dropped 9.5%. Did you know the number of Christians in America is smaller than the number of Christians in India and China? In other words, America is an ever increasing "unreached people group."

The question that has haunted my generation of clergy is, why? There is no single simple answer. Let me say this clearly. The problem is not God or the Gospel. God is alive and well and the Gospel still speaks to all generations. There is no way the problem is God. Part of the problem is evident in our area. The Mahoning Valley has a declining population base. Did you know Mahoning County has lost 70,000 residents since the year 1980? That will have a negative influence on any organization. You can even say, part of the problem is the location of our churches. The neighborhood changed but the church remained the same. I learned long ago, if the faces in the neighborhood don't look like the faces in the pews, there is a problem. It is a sure sign of the end. However, the main reason the mainline Protestant church is shrinking is the inflexibility of our membership. It is the same theme found in our scripture lesson. The times had changed, but the people resisted the change. They hated change. You can call them first century Amish.

Some have called the contemporary mainline Protestant church the Amish of the twenty-first century. We fell in love with a certain style of worship and we refuse to let it go. The mainline Protestant church peaked in 1957, when society was extremely formal. The problem is, society changed. Our society is now extremely informal. If you don't believe me, then go to a wedding reception. Wearing your new Steelers tee shirt is now acceptable. The formal 1957 worship with organ music, hymnal and heavy deep liturgy just doesn't speak to our 2016 world. Truly traditional worship is no longer relevant. It just doesn't speak to the vast majority of our world. We have seen it here at Western Reserve. Our fastest growing worship service is not our traditional service. People are drawn to our more informal services. Yet, in spite of the facts, many refuse to change. They hate change and are proud of their irrelevance. Many are more comfortable closing the doors of their church than changing to meet a new generation with the Gospel. We are more like the congregation in the scripture lesson and more like the Amish than we care to admit. How Amish are you? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Years ago now, I was involved in a pulpit exchange with one of our local mainline Protestant churches. Some of you know the church because you came from there. It was the third Sunday in January; Ecumenical Sunday. The weather was cold and icy, which sounds nice today. The crowd was thin. I tried to talk to everyone who came. I approached four men with the average age of one hundred ☺. Without offering their names, they began to apologize for the poor attendance. They told me about their church's glorious past. Their choir was the best in the valley. The bowling team never threw a gutter ball. The pastor worked 120 hours a week and never asked for a raise. The nursery was filled with crying babies and the crowd was uncountable, standing room only! When you are the guest preacher, you can ask questions that you can't ask

as the permanent pastor. I asked, "Where did everybody go?" The four of them shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders. They said, "The problem is the younger generation. They are just not committed like us. They just don't appreciate the old ways. They just don't appreciate the old songs." One guy lit up when he looked at his bulletin and announced, "Good! We are singing the Lilies of the Valley today!" I said, "Why don't you start singing some songs younger generations may like?" They grunted and said, "Over my dead body. We are never going to sing that junk. We will close first." They were speaking in perfect English, but they might as well have been speaking in Pennsylvania Dutch. They might as well have grown beards. They were Amish! They hated change. How Amish are you?

Why do people hate change? There is no single answer. According to the *Harvard Review* there are ten reasons why people hate change:

1. Loss of control
2. Excess uncertainty
3. Surprises
4. Everything seems different
5. Loss of face
6. Insecurity
7. More work
8. Ripple Effect
9. Past Resentments
10. Fear of failure

Can I add an eleventh reason? I believe, most don't like change at church because of selfishness. They are more concerned about their likes than what is good for other people. They are more concerned about what they like than other generations. That is the story in the scripture lesson for today. The mob was created because they didn't like what was happening. They should have been happy others were coming to Jesus. They were Amish. They hated change. How Amish are you? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

However, this is the good news: You don't have to change. Without making any changes, the Amish population is growing! Between the years 2008 and 2016, the Amish population grew 30.9% Maybe we can keep our traditional, 1957, ways? However, all that growth in the Amish community was biological growth. In other words, they had babies. If you would just have more babies, than we wouldn't have to change a thing. Did you know that since 1950, only 75 people have joined the Amish community by choice? The choice is ours. Either we change or we die. The problem is not the gospel; the problem is us.

Several months ago, I had some interior painting done in my home. There a was a hallway, a stairway and a second story landing. The person I used was recommended to me. His name was Terry. He came over and gave me an estimate. I accepted the bid and he told me he would send someone over in a few days. He was good to his word.

A few days later, a guy showed up at the door at 8:00 in the morning. He did not make the best first impression. I don't know how else to describe him. He was stuck in the early 1970s. His stringy, graying hair hung down to his shoulders. His tee shirt was from some past concert. His beard was ungroomed. He introduced himself as "the painter", but I asked him, "What is your name?" He smiled a toothless smile and answered, "Just call me Squeaks." I shook his hand and said, "Nice to meet you, Squeaks!" In the next few minutes he carried his equipment in and plugged in his boom box. The first song I heard was AC DC's Highway to Hell. It took Squeaks about two days to finish the job. He did a good job. Over those hours, I talked to him as I ran in and out of my door. It didn't take long for us to grow comfortable with each other. At one point, he looked at me and asked, "What do you do for a living?" I responded, "I am a preacher!" He said, "Wow! You save souls for a living? Does that pay well?" He laughed, but I didn't respond. Then, Squeaks asked, "What kind of preacher are you?" I said, "I am a United Methodist." He fired back, "Is that anything like the Amish?" I said, "No!" He shocked me when he said, "My girlfriend used to be Amish." I thought, you have a girlfriend? What I said was, "Really? She is a lucky young woman to have you." Leading with some ugly language he said, "I am the lucky one. She is real sweet and pretty. She appreciates everything I do for her. Her name is Lydia." I had to ask, I just had to ask, "Where did you meet her?" The answer was, at a Ted Nugent concert. I asked him, "What is an Amish girl doing at a Ted Nugent concert?" Squeaks said, "Oh, she isn't Amish anymore. She walked away." He told me because she walked away, her family and the entire Amish community shunned her. He said, "Lydia has tried to reach out to them but they treat her like she is dead." I didn't know what to say, but Squeaks kept talking. Using more colorful ugly language he said, "They are the losers. They are missing out on so much. She is a wonderful, loving person." Can I ask you a question?

How Amish are you? How much do you hate change? How many wonderful, loving people aren't part of our lives because it is our way or the highway? Like it or not, many are like the Amish. The world has changed, but we refuse to change. It is not 1957 anymore. Leo Tolstoy once said, *"Everyone thinks of changing the world, no one thinks of changing himself."*

Will you pray with me?