

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Rally Day
Part 1, "Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple"

Back in July, Ross Douthat wrote an op-ed piece for the New York Times titled, "Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?" It caught my eye . . . it's a thoughtful piece . . . and it deserves our attention, especially since we are a church that would be considered more liberal in nature because we:

- Accept people for who they are and where they are on their faith journey.
- Because we are inquisitive by nature. We are not content with the same old answers to the same old questions, and we're OK with not having all the answers.
- And because we welcome young and old, singles and families, regardless of their race, nationality or sexual orientation.

By the way, those 3 bullet points that offer a snapshot of who Faith Des Peres is were developed by the session following a yearlong discernment process in which they put pen to paper to answer the questions, "Who are we" and "What are here for?" questions that 50 years ago no church would have attempted to answer because they didn't need to. Back in 1962 all a church had to do was open its doors and in came the people. Or, just like that sing-songy ditty says, "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and see all the people."

Ah, to be a minister back then in the heyday of the church. But of course, I couldn't have been b/c that door was closed to me and all other women. Which is a comment that is only slightly off-topic for today. After all, most denominations do not allow women into leadership positions, so the fact that you do puts you in the progressive stream.

But back to the article . . .

Can liberal Christianity be saved? It's a good question that deserves a thoughtful response. And so for the next 3 or 4 weeks that's what we're going to explore. Can liberal Christianity be saved? Is there any hope for churches like ours that preach and believe that in Christ we see a God who seeks the lost, and tends the broken, a God who puts mercy ahead of law, and compassion before custom, and God who forgives sinners and welcomes all people to the table.

I'll let you all know right now that I think there is hope. I wouldn't be in this profession if I didn't think there was. But I do think Douthat makes some valid points in his article that we need to take seriously, and I think liberal Christians of all stripes need to be better evangelists. We need to start talking about what we believe and what we don't believe, because if we don't speak up we're just letting others do the talking for us. And that's a real shame. So part of what I hope to do over the next 3-4 weeks is make evangelists out of all of you. Yes, you heard me correctly . . . evangelists. I can just hear some of you thinking, "We send you on sabbatical and you come back teaching us how to pray and

how to become evangelists. What happened? Do we look like Baptists?" You think the Baptists poke fun at us?

But I'm serious about this. If we don't learn how to evangelize, there won't be anything to save. Because unlike 1962, we can't just open our doors and expect people to come.

I shared with the Session in August and those assembled at the leadership day some startling statistics which prove that point. It won't come as a shock to you all that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has lost over ½ million members . . .since 1997! The median size of a Presbyterian congregation has dropped 40% since 1983, which is when the northern and southern church reunited. In 2001, the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy, our regional body, had 104 churches. Today, we have 84. Next year, we'll probably be in the 70s. And those aren't only rural country churches that are closing; those are city and county churches, too. Here at Faith Des Peres we've seen some bright spots and some areas that need work. The bright spots? 68% of you have joined the church since 2001. That's a remarkable statistic that very few churches share. Our average worship attendance has grown since that time, too . . .which is another statistic very few churches share. So there is a lot to be commended . . .and those of you who were here in 2000 know how different things look and feel. But there are areas which need improvement: while there's been a significant turnover in membership, our actual membership number has remained flat. In other words, people join, but people leave, too. Folks move, folks die, and folks become uninterested. We need to ask more questions about why people become uninterested. While our average worship attendance has increased, there's room for improvement there, too. Your presence here on Sunday morning makes a difference. It's hard to gather spiritual energy when attendance is down, and no matter how good the service is it's hard to convince a visitor to come back when the crowd is slim. So I'm going to get after you here a little, because I know there are a myriad of excuses not to come to church: it's raining, it's sunny, it's snowing, I'm sleepy, there's a ballgame at 3 or my kids have a party at 1 . . .when these reasons start floating through your head please know that your participation matters . . .and it's going to take more than just me, or more than just Gay, or more than just the W/E team or the Session to grow the church. And after meeting with the Session and the Leadership teams, I have no doubt that you do want to grow, and you want to grow for the right reason-that reason being you believe you have a compelling and important witness in this community-that a more progressive Christianity is important, and is worth saving . . .but it's going to take all of us to grow the church. And I am convinced that there are people in this community who want to grow closer to God, to the very God you believe in.

It's here that Douthat and I begin to part ways. You see, in Douthat's opinion, liberal Christians don't have much of a God to proclaim because they've been too concerned with secular social issues and have adapted themselves too much to the culture. He points to the Episcopal Church's recent decision to allow priests to bless same-sex unions to prove his point. Why else would Episcopal church attendance have dropped 23% except for that, he seems to be arguing? After all, conservative churches are growing.

But that's not quite true any more. The southern Baptists are seeing their numbers go down. The mega churches may be full, but they aren't necessarily growing. And, as Diana Butler Bass points out, the reason the Catholic Church appears to be holding its own is due in large part to the influx of Catholic immigrants in this country. In other words, everyone's pews are less full. And, as Butler Bass states in her new book, just look around at the driveways on Sunday mornings. There are more cars parked in driveways than church parking lots.

So Douthat isn't entirely correct in his premise that only liberal churches are shrinking.

However, he does make a very good point that we need to pay attention, and it is this: liberal Christians need to recover a religious reason for existing. Now, I would argue that we do have a religious reason for existing, but we're pretty lousy at proclaiming it.

In other words, which gets me back to the dreaded E word . . . we need to be better evangelists.

This latter point is one area where I happen to agree with Douthat's article. Douthat argues that liberal Christians, particularly the Episcopalians who really takes aim at, have become so flexible on what we believe that we've become indifferent to what we believe, and have downplayed theology and God so much, that we don't seem to be offering anything a person can't get from a purely secular liberalism. And I think there's some truth to that. Somewhere along the way, as the culture shifted and changed, we stopped talking about what we believe because we didn't want to offend anyone. Understandably, we don't want people who don't believe what we believe to be put off or get the impression that somehow they aren't equal to us or as good as us because they believe differently, so we stopped talking.

Now, while we may have stopped talking, we continued to be very good at doing. We are very good at doing good works. Even Douthat, who holds no love loss for liberal Christianity, makes the point that liberal Christianity has "been an immensely positive force in our national life, and no one should wish for its extinction, or for a world where Christianity becomes the exclusive property of the political right." A defining idea of Liberal Christianity is that faith should spur social reform and personal conversion.

In other words, we don't go to Food Outreach to pack food simply because it's a nice thing to do and we're nice people. We go to Food Outreach, because that's what Jesus would do and that's what Jesus told the disciples to do. "Feed the hungry," he said. But Food Outreach isn't just any food pantry, is it now? Food Outreach provides meals to people living with AIDS. So the fact that we go to Food Outreach says something about us . . . which isn't just that we're nice people who happen to help people living with AIDS. We are Christians who believe that Jesus welcomes all people to the table – even people with AIDS – and trust me, there are plenty of Christians who think he wouldn't welcome them – and that if Jesus would have sat and eaten with anyone back then, he would have eaten with someone with AIDS.

I've been to Food Outreach. Inevitably the conversation turns to, "Is this your first time here?" No, someone says. I'm here for school service hours. Or I'm here with my sorority. How about you, they then ask? I'm here with my church, I say. And just about every time I say that, there's a quizzical look on their faces, because the picture of a church group at Food Outreach does not match up with the picture they see on the news of Christians lined up at Chic-Fil-A to buy a sandwich.

But the Christians at Chic-Fil-A are very clear and very articulate as to why they are there buying a sandwich and waiting in a line a mile long. They know why they're doing what they're doing and they're not afraid to say why they're doing it.

Now folks, why should we be any different? Why can't we say, "Yeah, I'm here with my church-FDP, because we really believe in what Food Outreach is doing and think it's a great organization." There's nothing offensive about that. You aren't telling someone he or she is wrong to believe what they believe. But you are saying "I'm here because this is important to me as a Christian." That's evangelism. Evangelism, at its core, is sharing your faith with others. Not persuading others why they should share your faith, but simply sharing your faith.

As one woman said in her response to Douthat's article, we've dropped the ball. She writes,

Liberal Christians do need to put aside whatever spirit of fear it is that prevents them from in every and all instance proclaiming that their justice work is nothing less than what the mandates of Christian faith require. Liberal Christians need be unafraid to make the confession of a belief in the saving power and presence of Jesus Christ the foundation for their action in the world. And then liberal Christians need to roll up their sleeves for the harder work of not only mining the resources of Scripture and tradition to support such proclamations, but they need to do so in a way that real folks, struggling in real congregations, in the real world can understand, embrace and act upon. (Lisa Anderson, "Should Liberal Christianity Be Saved?", July 17, 2012, Huffington Post)

But in order to do that, you need to be clear about why it matters. And that, I think, is where progressive Christians begin to stammer, or Christians who have always been a Christian and gone to church begin to stammer. We don't know how to talk about our faith and worry that if we do we will either risk a friendship or come off as pushy. We may even worry that we won't come off as knowledgeable enough.

Friends, you don't need to be an expert in the faith to share your faith. Think about the story you heard me read earlier, the story about Peter and his incredible declaration of faith in Jesus as Lord. Jesus asked Peter very simply, "Who do you say that I am?" At its core it's a simple question that we've made complicated. Notice Peter answered plainly, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." He didn't go into a lengthy explanation, just stated simply who Jesus is to him.

If Jesus were here today and asked you, “Who do you say that I am?” what would you answer? You don’t need to be a deep theologian to answer that question. You don’t need to know your Bible frontwards and backwards to answer that question. After all, Jesus wants to know your opinion, not the opinions of great writers or theologians, but yours.

Who do you say that I am, he asks?

I want you to think about the answer to that question, not only because we’re going to address it head-on next week, but because it’s the precursor to sharing your faith.

After Peter makes his declaration of faith, Jesus hands over the keys to the kingdom, and tells Peter that on this rock he will build his church.

Well, what is that rock? Is the rock Peter, or is it Peter’s testimony? I’m going to argue that it’s Peter’s testimony. Which means that the foundation of the church is as resilient or as fragile as each of our testimonies are. Let me say that again: the foundation of the church is as resilient or as fragile as each of our testimonies are.

Can liberal Christianity be saved? I think it can. And I think it has a very vital role to play in society. In an increasingly fractious and divided world, its voice of moderation is needed more than ever.

But more importantly, there are countless people in this community and beyond, who have no idea how much God matters. They have never met the God Jesus introduces us too –

- a God who seeks the lost
- and tends the broken,
- a God who puts mercy ahead of law,
- and compassion before custom,
- a God who forgives sinners and
- welcomes all people to the table.

This God is who Jesus introduces us to, and this God matters. In a world that is increasingly divisive and fractious, in a world in which the church is increasingly viewed as hateful and homophobic, this God-who is none of those things- this God who Jesus introduces us to matters and needs to be known.

Who do you say that I am, Jesus said. Who do you say that I am?

The foundation of the church is as resilient or as fragile as each of our testimonies are.

Amen.