

Chairman Mao, Billy Graham, and 69,381 Presbyterians

A Sermon by David Barker

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Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

On October 1, 1949, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were four years in the past...the Cold War was growing ever-colder...and Mao Zedong had won the war for the hearts and minds of the Chinese people

- the Peoples Republic of China was officially established that day, the Communists having pushed Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists to Taiwan
- the mainland Chinese were firmly in the iron grip of now *Chairman* Mao, and the process of purifying the nation began
- among the first to feel the iron in the grip were people of religious faith... especially though certainly not exclusively Christians, then estimated to be about two million in number
 - churches were closed...priests, pastors, and missionaries arrested
 - to profess faith in anything other than the state let alone in Jesus Christ was to risk disappearing in the middle of the night, likely never to be heard from again
- in the blink of the proverbial eye, therefore, the church in China disappeared, and anyone who dared speak of the church did so only to bid it good riddance

That very same October 1, half a world away, a 31-year-old Baptist preacher by the name of Billy Graham was standing under a circus tent in a parking lot in Los Angeles

- Graham had actually been raised a Presbyterian but, at the age of 16, he'd attended a revival where he came under the spell of an evangelist named Mordecai Ham
 - Graham gave his life to Jesus Christ and became a Baptist
- eventually he received a degree in anthropology, but not before he'd married Ruth Bell, daughter of Christian missionaries to China, and heard the call to preach
- he briefly pastored a church, briefly served as a chaplain, but in his heart, all he wanted to do was preach the Gospel
- and so it was that October 1, 1949 Billy Graham was a week into a revival that he'd begun in hopes he could sustain it three weeks
 - but by the time he *was* done, that three weeks had ballooned to eight, and 350,000 people had crowded under that tent to hear him preach

Fast-forward thirty years: 1976...Chairman Mao dies...then, in the early '80s, what had become known as the Bamboo curtain begins to lift

- foreign missionaries and church officials, slowly, are allowed back into China, but only under strict supervision
- they arrive expecting to find nothing of the church left...they knew what had happened 30 years before: the vast majority of Christians killed, persecuted, or forced to leave, and any who remained no doubt had long since given up on their faith
- and, true enough, those first missionaries and officials back into China found exactly what they expected: virtually nothing remained of the church
 - in terms of buildings, of bricks and stone and mortar, all external, concrete manifestations of the church were gone
- but of the people themselves...the church as the body of Christ...these first missionaries and officials were stunned: while the church buildings and administrative structures were gone, the number of Christians had grown thirty-fold: *60 million* Christians in China
 - 60 million who had no church buildings other than the houses they lived in, no clergy, no denominational officials, frequently not even Bibles...a single page of Scripture would be passed in secret from house church to house church
- and, today, the estimate is that the number of Chinese Christians has grown to over 80 million

Fast-forward thirty years more...2004: Billy Graham is easing into retirement, suffering from ill health and, frankly, getting old...within several years, Ruth is gone and Graham has passed the mantle to his son Franklin

- and what happened beneath that circus tent in that Los Angeles parking lot, the very first Billy Graham Crusade, had eventually taken Graham to every continent on earth...
 - crusades that, thanks to radio and television, resulted over the years in countless millions of people hearing about Jesus Christ
- throughout it all, Graham's message remained doggedly the same—you need to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior
- and while Graham never again pastored a church, he was instrumental in bringing the better part of 3 million people to accept Christ

Fast-forward to several weeks ago: log-in on to pcusa.org, the website, the world-wide voice, of the Presbyterian Church USA, and on the home page you'd have found two stories

- the most prominent by far, with photographs and eye-catching graphics, was about a committee...
- a committee of the PCUSA tasked with exploring the impact of agribusiness on pig farming
- the second story you had to scroll down to find...no photographs, no eye-catching graphics...just small black type: the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly announces that in 2008 the denomination lost more members than in any year in its history: 69,381

And fast-forward one final time to this morning and the passages of Scripture we read

- David, with the best of intentions, wants to build God a church, a temple, to which God replies, when have I ever asked you to build me a building?
 - keep your priorities straight, God, in effect, tells David: shepherd the flock I've given you, tend to the needs of the Kingdom and I, God...I will build the church
- Jesus and his disciples are met at every turn by people lost and in need of being made whole—the Greek word here translated “heal” equally means “save”
 - and Jesus, exhausted as he is, is moved with compassion...again, the Greek: the word here translated “compassion” is the Greek word for “bowel,” meaning what Jesus feels for these people he feels as deeply as he can feel anything, feeling it in the innermost part of his being
 - and Jesus' response—to teach these people and heal them—actualizes the words of God to David: keep your priorities straight...shepherd the flock...tend to the needs of the Kingdom and I, God, will build the church

What Chairman Mao, Billy Graham, 69,381 Presbyterians and our Scripture passages for this morning tell us is this: the work of the church and the work of the Kingdom are not necessarily the same

- for much of my adult life, I dismissed Billy Graham as a fundamentalist bible thumper
- for much of the time I've been a pastor, I, along with so many of my brothers and sisters in the church, have smugly looked down our collective noses at the Graham crusades as rather embarrassing...the kind of behavior that gives Christians a bad name
 - the simplistic version of the Gospel, the altar calls, the people streaming forward like so many sheep to give their lives to Jesus...
- it isn't Reformed...it isn't Presbyterian...and it can't be for real because who can really believe for one minute that those on-the-spot conversions stick

Well, this much is true:

- Graham's theology is *not* Reformed...
- he *isn't* Presbyterian...not any more, anyway...
- and I can't say from personal experience if those on-the-spot conversions stick, though fairly extensive independent research indicates that about 80% of them do

But if that much is true, so, too, is this:

- Jesus Christ calls us to shepherd the flock, to tend to the needs of the Kingdom
- and without church buildings, without professional clergy, without denominational structures, without doctrine that was dutifully Reformed or delivered decently and in order, the Kingdom in China grew from 2 to 60 million
- and Billy Graham has single-handedly played a role in bringing more people to Jesus Christ than the entire PCUSA has had in its total membership in 30 years

I find I'm not quite so smug anymore...

- that I spend a lot of time thinking about the church in places like China...
- a lot of time thinking about Billy Graham and the pastors and churches around the world who've embraced the message of our Scripture passages this morning that the world still is full of people desperate to hear the good news of Jesus Christ...
- and a lot of time thinking about the PCUSA

- as a consequence, I've come to realize in new ways...
 - our *first* responsibility as Christians, our first priority, is not growth and maintenance of a church structure...our first responsibility is sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- we can say what we will: America is not China under communist rule...Billy Graham may not be Reformed in his theology or understanding of Scripture
 - but their experience tells the same story as the Scripture we read a moment ago: we are to shepherd the flock and tend to the Kingdom, and God will take care of the church
- God, I believe, is not nearly so interested as we in theological purity and precisely-prescribed church governance
- God is interested in people knowing Jesus and the fact is that people can gain such knowledge and the Kingdom can grow—and grow in astonishing ways—not because of the church but, frequently, in spite of it

Once again, do not hear what I'm not saying...

- I'm not saying we don't need the church, nor am I suggesting we dismantle what we've known as church all our lives and start over
- what I *am* saying is that, far too often, church is no longer what God intended it to be—a means to an end—but is an end in itself
 - despite our good intentions and best efforts, we have made *church* an idol
- we need only ask ourselves, how often when we think *be a member of a church* do we think *join a committee...plug in to a ministry at or for the church*
- and to the extent that's the case, in a world full of sheep without a shepherd, should we be surprised that 69,381 Presbyterians left the church in 2008?
 - or that 63,027 left in 2009?
 - or 61,047 left in 2010?

If, my brothers and sisters in Christ, as we've explored these past few weeks in laying-out elements of a new understanding of who we are and what God may be calling us to do...

- if, indeed, we are called not to be served but to serve...
- if we should mark success not by church growth but Kingdom growth, by community impact and transformation...
- if we consider a melding of attractional church for where we are and missional church for where we're going a good idea...
- if all these things, then, I think, we need to be willing to consider carefully and sensitively the very structure of church itself...
 - that *how* we do church enhances rather than distracts from our primary purpose for being: *help people know Jesus Christ*

The great irony here is that this is precisely what our polity in the PCUSA calls us to do

- included in the bulletin this morning is a sheet that has excerpts from the *Book of Order* which address this very issue
 - a missional understanding of what it means to *be* church and the implications that has for how we *do* church is explicit in our polity
- and it's no coincidence that the PCUSA has just implemented the most sweeping changes in 40 years to our form of government...
 - simplifying it and giving individual congregations far more leeway in creating a structure for their work as lean and efficient as they want it to be

But even if, together, we ultimately discern that becoming a more missional church is not what God is calling us to do, the issues I've raised this morning are issues with which we still must wrestle

- we cannot ignore the fact that in the lifetimes of many of us in this sanctuary, the likelihood is high that the PCUSA as we know it right now will cease to exist
- the denomination will split, and when it does, Central, like every PCUSA congregation, will have some very difficult decisions to make

And so, a fourth element in a vision of what it means to be church, what it means to be the Lord's heart and hands right here, right now...

- openness to a new way of doing and being church
- a way that frees us to tend to the needs of the Kingdom, confident that God will be faithful in keeping God's promise to build the church