

**Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church**

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Laity Notes

by
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CHURCH VISITORS AND ATTENDANCE

Last Sunday forty-five regular attendees at Oak Meadow UMC were joined by sixteen guests. Everyone was impressed by the number of children in our congregation, and it will be a long time before we forget the scene of so many children lining our church altar for communion. We want to make a special effort to thank our guests for coming, and to make our church inviting so that they might return. Part of that invitational effort is being made with the addition of new chairs, the painting of our sanctuary and perhaps adding carpet to the floor. That is the physical part of our structure, and these improvements surely will make it more inviting.

But there is also the matter of church members attending worship service each Sunday. I made mention in the last issue of *Laity Notes* of three big neighbors, University UMC, Alamo Heights UMC and Coker UMC. Together they have a total membership of 12,905. On any given Sunday, about 5,342 (41.49%) of those members attend church, which means that about 7,563 (58.61%) do not attend church. Those figures hold about the same for our entire conference, the Southwest Texas Conference, which includes the Districts of Austin, Corpus Christi, Kerrville, McAllen, San Angelo, San Antonio and Victoria. Total membership in our conference is 120,543 out of which on average 51,009 (42.35%) attend church and 69,444 (57.65%) do not attend church on any given Sunday. McAllen has the

highest average attendance at 51.78% and Victoria the lowest with 33.91%.

In a conference area which probably includes over 3,500,000 people, Methodists comprise only 120,453 or a little over 3%. And of those 120,453 Methodists only 51,009 on average attend Sunday worship. If we are looking for a field of mission, we have to go no further than our back door. If we are looking to increase church attendance, we do not have to go out of our own door to make a beginning. As I wrote in the last issue, we are not attempting to compete with our big brothers in terms of programs, but we do have pretensions of competing with them in quality of worship. One important manner by which we could show the vitality of our church would be for all of our members to worship together each Sunday. One thing I learned long ago is that if there is a Sunday morning debate about whether or not to attend worship service, many Sundays will be missed. This one made the top ten: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8) And aside from the fact that we should worship each Sunday because we are so commanded, each Sunday we never know who in the congregation needed to see us just that day. Our presence does make a difference, to ourselves and to others. It is a sign of our vitality and it is contagious.

As Kathleen Norris wrote in *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and "Woman's Work,"* "It is a paradox of human life that in worship, as in human love, it is in the routine and the everyday that we find the possibilities for the greatest transformation." (82) By making Sunday worship part of our weekly routine rather than a decision to be made each Sunday morning, we open ourselves to such possibilities.

CHURCH SEASONS...LENT

Lent is a forty-day period which begins with Ash Wednesday and ends on the Saturday before Easter. Look at your calendar. Begin with February 25, which was Ash Wednesday this year, and count forty days, excluding Sundays. You must exclude the Sundays, because they are not counted in the forty days of Lent. By so counting, the fortieth day will be April 10, the Saturday before Easter Sunday.

While there are no specific scriptural references to Lent, it seems to have been quite firmly established as a tradition by the fourth century.

The original word came from Spring and meant “the lengthening of days,” and the period of forty days most likely came about from Biblical echoes of the number forty. At the time of the flood it rained forty days and forty nights. Forty days were required for the Egyptians to embalm Jacob. Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, during which he neither drank water nor ate bread. The Israelite scouts gathered intelligence about the Promised Land for forty days, and when their courage failed they were sentenced to wander in the desert for forty years, one year for each of those days. Forty lashes were the maximum punishment commanded by law in Deuteronomy. King David reigned for forty years. Elijah spent forty days and nights on Mount Horeb (Sinai). Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights after his baptism, and during that entire period he fasted. And Lent came to be a period of forty days leading to Easter and the resurrection.

Palm Sunday begins Holy Week, which is included in Lent, and there follow Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and finally Easter Sunday. Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after the resurrection, and it was during this forty-day period that he made his appearances to the disciples and to others.

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. When we look about our sanctuary we will see the colors purple or blue, which are royal colors to prepare for the coming of a king. Traditionally Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. We are to prepare ourselves for the coming of Easter, in some sense by imitating Jesus’ withdrawal after his baptism for forty days in the wilderness.

MATTERS OF THE HEART

In the book of Deuteronomy, we find Moses speaking to the assembly of all Israel on the eve of their conquest of the Promised Land. He speaks to a second generation; the first having died during the desert wanderings. This is a generation who has known nothing but desert life in all its harshness. Fruitful Egypt is but a memory learned from their parents. Yet they are the generation of hope, the generation to conquer the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Desert wanderers, they are on the verge of becoming conquerors of the Promised Land. In this there are dangers to their faith, and Moses cautions them sharply to be aware.

Moses delivers three major sermons to the people in this setting and the second, from 4:44 through chapter 28, is by far the longest. The legal corpus appears in chapters 12-26. As part of his prelude to the legal corpus, Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments in chapter 5, and offers a commentary on the first commandment in chapter 6. He then launches into his warnings about dangers to their faith which they will find in the Promised Land, and in these warnings he appeals directly to their hearts.

“If you say in your heart, ‘These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?’”(7:17) At that time Canaan was settled by seven small nations, each more numerous than the Israelites. The gift of the land had to be taken from those who wanted it to remain their own. God had told the Israelites that he would deliver this land to them, but that deliverance involved fighting, and fighting involved fear. Moses is warning them about the effect of fear in their hearts, and its threat to their faith.

“Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’”(8:17) The Promised Land was, unlike the desert, a land of milk and honey. There they would settle down and prosper, and in that very prosperity lay a threat to their faith. It is all too easy to forget God when success is at hand.

“Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land.’”(9:4) Success could easily lead to a sense of self-righteousness, and Moses warns against this by reminding them in many ways how many times they had rebelled in the desert. This is emphasized in the verse, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”(10:16).

In each instance, Moses speaks to their heart, and reminds them that what lies within their heart is what they will act upon. How far today are we from Moses and Israelites gathered on the other side of the Jordan River?

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Please email comments or suggestions to cjhall_45@yahoo.com or leave a telephone message at 404-1894.