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Recently I ran across a list by Pastor Grant MacDonald of what he calls the “**Top Ten Ways to Promote Growth in Your Church.**” These suggestions are offered with tongue firmly planted in cheek, but I thought you might enjoy some of them. These are ways one might grow a church:

1. Offer free frequent flyer miles with every visit!
2. Use “**Big Gulp**” communion cups!
3. Issue “**Get Out of Hell Free**” cards!
4. Or how about this one? **Reclining Pews!**
5. Every 4th week raffle off the offering!
6. Open a Starbucks franchise in our church lobby! (some churches have already tried something similar to this.)
7. Become a hosting member of the WWFWE (World Wide Federation of Wrestling Elders)! ¹ 😊

How can Calvin grow herself out of this pandemic? What will it take to fill this sanctuary (and the offering plates) like we used to? How can Calvin recapture the joy and enthusiasm that once gripped our fellowship?

Might I suggest that God is doing something new? Might I suggest that Noah and the flood was not about destruction, it was about new life? Might I suggest that Pharoah and the plagues were not about death, they were about God’s saving grace? Might I suggest that Jesus is not about him hanging on a cross, He is about the abundant life in God’s love? Jesus had returned to his hometown in Nazareth. That Sabbath day, he went to the synagogue, as any observant Jew would. The synagogues of Jesus' day didn't usually have paid or appointed preachers and teachers. Any adult male might be called upon to preach or teach on any particular Sabbath.

Can you imagine if we ran our churches that way? If any adult could be called upon at any time to preach or teach on the Scriptures each Sunday? That's a huge responsibility. One of two things would happen if we followed that practice: Calvin would have an explosion of Spiritual Growth 😊 or there would be a stampede of members leaving.

Can you feel the tension? Does anyone want to go back to Egypt? Let’s dig in!

Jesus was handed a scroll from the book of Isaiah. He didn't have to flip around for a while to find what he wanted. He went straight to Isaiah 61, a Messianic passage of great importance to the Hebrew people:

¹⁸ ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”***

And then, when Jesus was sure he had everyone's attention, he closed the scroll, sat down, and announced very simply, ***“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”***

MIC DROP!

The prophet Isaiah had been inspired to write those words more than 700 years earlier. For 7 centuries, preachers and teachers of the holy word had preached on a soon-coming Messiah who would turn the world's systems upside-down.



He would lift up the hurting, the oppressed, the blind. The Hebrew people knew only too well what it was to suffer, to be held captive. They had waited hundreds of years for the fulfillment of this prophecy, and were prepared to wait hundreds more if necessary.

Jesus didn't explain, argue, pontificate he just announced this Mic Dropping truth about who He is and let the worshipers make up their own minds. As Dr. Paul S. Rees says, ***"The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement!"***² And that's exactly how Jesus treated it.

If we treated it that way, if we took this passage seriously, if we took the Gospel to heart it has the potential to do be infinitely more than a Mic Drop it has the potential to transform us to transform us individually to transform us collectively.

A few years ago, in the midst of arguably unparalleled political division, Will Jones new President of Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, a small, racially diverse school in red rural America, washed the feet of a black student at his first opening convocation, and encouraged the student body and faculty to go outside and wash each other's feet in the nearby fountain. As you can imagine this created quite an uprising including vandalism and death threats against Wills and his family. But the campus and surrounding community came together. The city council passed a unanimous resolution supporting the values of diversity and inclusion. And Will rallied the community in a widely shared social media post which read in part:

"Hurtful... actions are not 'activism.' Hate language is not blunt talk. Think about what you post and share online or the jokes you tolerate. Use your imagination to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, kicks or sandals. Do the simple thing and treat all people the way you want to be treated."³

The foot washing has happened each year since and the college's enrollment has increased by 24%.

Some years ago, Richard Halverson, then Chaplain of the United States Senate, in an address to the General Assembly of the PC(USA), described the evolution of the church:

"In the beginning," he said, ***"the church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives in the living Christ. They had a personal and vital relationship with the Lord and it transformed their lives and the world around them. But then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. And then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. And then it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And now it has moved to America, where it has become an enterprise."***⁴

What an indictment – the Church as a philosophy, as an institution, as a culture, as an enterprise – To say it simply, the Church is not a club for the wealthy and healthy, no, the Church is a hospital for the poor and broken.

Maybe this text is saying that we are poorer than we think? Mother Teresa thinks so. She said, ***"The more you have, the more you are occupied,"*** she contends. ***"But the less you have the more free you are. Poverty for us is a freedom. It is a joyful freedom. There is no television here, no this, no that. This is the only fan in the whole house...and it is for the guests. But we are happy. "I find the rich poorer,"*** she continues. ***"Sometimes they are more lonely inside...The hunger for love is much more difficult to fill than the hunger for bread...The real poor know what is joy."*** When asked about her plans for the future, she replied, ***"I just take one day. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not come. We have only today to love Jesus."***

Is there anyone in this room as rich as Mother Teresa?



You see, Christ's message is for us, for in a very real sense we are the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed. We are those for whom Christ gave his life. Deep in our hearts some of us have imagined that he must have died for someone else, the scum of the earth, perhaps, but not us. We do not really we need a Savior. We're good folks. We or our education or our affluence, or our (fill in the blank) got this.

The truth for us, my beloved is that we don't. The truth is we need him more than any of us will ever know. **Mic Drop?**

Friends, remember those three questions I asked about Calvin upfront? How can Calvin grow herself out of this pandemic? What will it take to fill this sanctuary (and the offering plates) like we used to? How can Calvin recapture the joy and enthusiasm that once gripped our fellowship?

Might I suggest that this scripture is the answer to each of them. Might I suggest that Jesus never concerns himself with growing the church, filling the pews, or offering plates or recapturing the glory days? Might I suggest that Jesus is unquestionably, inarguably, irrefutably telling us we're poor in spirit because we don't use how richly blessed we are to preach good news to the poor to proclaim freedom for prisoners to recover the sight of the blind and to release the oppressed

AMEN?!

¹ Quoted in David J. Ernsberger, *Reviving the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, (IL: Victor Books, 1987), p. 9.

³ Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis*. (Harper One 2019). p.120-122.

⁴ Maxie Dunnam. *A Church for the 21st Century*

