

"Runners"
Where Are We Headed?

Luke 15:11-32
January 11, 2008

As I began to write this message on a cold December evening about a week before Christmas, an interesting thing happened. I was reading the first chapter of a book by Ken Callahan called *The Future That Has Come*. As I was reading Callahan's book, I was reminded of a question that had been asked of me about a month earlier. A question that I honestly kinda/sorta blew past. I was interested in showing a small group of people inquiring about membership in our church a video about our denomination – its history, its beliefs, the terms we use that are unique, our government style, the things that make us unique so they would know.

The question that was asked had nothing to do with history, beliefs, governance. It was a basic question that really hit me as I read Callahan's book. The question was simply this: "Where is this church headed?" Honestly I was not prepared to answer in a clear and concise way. That's a terrible recognition for a pastor/leader.

As I went for a really brief walk on that cold night, and all of this suddenly began to hit me, I recalled a comment made to me in an email from the DS. It had to do with remarks he had been hearing at Charge Conferences. I pursued one of those remarks and he gave me a polite but rather direct answer. Probably meant to be kept mostly to myself. But I want to share with you part of the remark. He had heard more than once – "why doesn't the Conference help small churches the way it used to?"

There is one very practical answer to that. The South Indiana Conference budget is about 2/3rds of what it used to be. And giving from the churches to that budget is down to about 84%, as opposed to the high 90's that it was at one time. Simply put, there is no money.

I have to tell you I sent back a more direct answer. I challenged the idea behind those remarks. In our day we expect the federal government to send help to states, towns, communities, individuals. Where do we think that money comes from? And the attitude reflected in the remarks he had heard appalled me. We are asked to send money to the District, the Conference, and the General Church for specific purposes and ministries. Then, what? We turn around and want it back? Why don't we as local church cluster together and help one another in ministry instead of some Santa Claus from on high helping us out? Actually that is the focus of the new Indiana Conference. That churches with some commonality, such as being in a particular county like Putnam, or in a close vicinity such as the Cloverdale area, become the focus of ministry. Not the Conference. We have heard moans and complaints about "the conference" for years. Now we think the Conference is supposed to do something for us that we won't do for ourselves?

I have been reading Ken Callahan's book *The Future That Has Come*. He says a whole lot of things in this book that are very challenging. He writes that the "membership vows" of the early church, the vows of the Christian movement were:

Do you love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength?

Do you love Jesus Christ as your lord and savior?
Will you love your neighbor as generously as you love yourself?
Will you live a life of compassion, community, and hope in the Christian movement?

I am planning on using those as our vows when people join this church. Rather than promise commitment to an institution, will you give your life to a movement. That is the real question that people are interested in. I will invite people to understand that we like the approach our institution takes to the faith, and to the mission of the church in reaching out to God's children.

I wanted to tell you this stuff, because I want to end up talking for a minute about this wonderful parable that Jesus gave us. I used to think it was a great, wonderful, remembered-by-everybody-2000 years later-story. But I came to think that there is not another teaching or story that Jesus gave us that is more instructive on what we are to be about.

It is an incredibly, unbelievably radical passage, radical new understanding of God, radical teaching about grace. It is shocking in what it has to tell us. I did not catch it until I read William Barclay's comments. He pointed out that in that society any proper and sophisticated man would not be seen running in public. Jesus made a point of saying that the father in this story, this father whose son had left home – spent time worrying about the son. It didn't matter where he was or what he was doing – none of that would affect the love the father had for the child. What he was doing didn't matter in the least to the father. He just missed the boy. Not only did he miss him, but he longed for him. Watched for him. Stood out on the front porch looking for him. And sure enough one day as he stood on the porch looking down the lane, here came the boy. **And, Jesus tells us, this guy went running down the road to grab hold of the kid.**

Hearers would have been shocked by that image. Jesus was teaching them something so radical, so shocking, that they did not want to hear it. Still today a lot of Christians don't want to grab hold of these images.

A pastor out in Kansas is starting a series of sermons this week on why the world feels alienated from the church, and considers the church of having no worth or value to them. I think I understand that. We have become the modern day Pharisees that Jesus was addressing. For my whole life I have heard it. And it has become embarrassingly awful in the last few years. The attacks of "the Christian right", as they like to call it, on people who are different. People who are broken, and lost, and searching. The condemnation reeks.

Jesus would have had no part of it.

Five Practices of Effective Congregations, Bishop Schnase

- Passionate worship
- Extravagant giving
- Radical hospitality
- Risk taking mission and service
- Intentional faith development

I think these are things we really do need to talk about. Select a couple of the five things you are doing well, then maybe select one to grow in ... this year part of what we will do behind the scenes is to evaluate how we are doing in these areas.

Like the image of a God who runs after the boy who is lost – I seek that we might become runners. Runners after those who have no church. Runners after those who have no understanding of God. Runners after those who are broken, and hurting, and lost. Runners after those the church condemns. Runners – rather than condemners.

God help us.