

February 15, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

God Matters

Exodus 31:1-11; 36: 2-7; Luke 9:1-4; Romans 16:3-5

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In our sermons recently we have been focusing on the Biblical foundations of the major themes that are found in our new National Presbyterian Church Strategic Plan adopted by our Session this past fall (<http://nationalpres.org/strategic-plan>; see addendum, p. 8). The plan that we developed and devised and our elders approved, is not just something that came out of thin air. There are Biblical principles for the life of a congregation such as ours, and we attempted to seek out some of those principles and turn them into practical steps for our congregation to take as we serve God. So in these sermons we're going back to those Biblical principles about God's passion for community, God's passion that we live out our Christian lives not alone but together in community with one another in the church – understood not just as a building, but as the people as well. In this context . . .

- We've been thinking about the Biblical basis for ***Christian growth***. God doesn't want our lives to be stagnant; or for us to say "I'm a Christian, a follower of Jesus, I've now made it!" Fact is, we're always on a journey and we should be growing in grace and faith until the moment we die. Indeed, even beyond the grave, when we see God face to face in heaven, we'll experience even greater transformation. So we've thought together about growth.
- We've also thought together about something as simple as ***hospitality and welcome***. The scriptures say that we are to "welcome one another as Christ Jesus has welcomed us" (Romans 15:7). God welcomes us, though we have sinned and disappointed God again and again, and will continue to do so. The arms of our Lord Jesus Christ are open to welcome us! And – if we know that we have that welcome from him – then we should be like that as a congregation of God's people.
- And we've thought together about ***our calling***, not just as individuals but as a congregation. Part of our Reformation heritage as a church is the belief that it's not just ministers who are called by God, but all of us have a calling from God – a sense of purpose and mission for our lives no matter what it is that we're to do. And so, too, does our church: a God-given calling to and sense of mission that we should be able to articulate.

And we come today to the last sermon in this particular series, where we want to think about the final objective in the strategic plan, an objective which has to do with ***supporting and sustaining and developing the ministry of our congregation***; supporting and sustaining the ministry of the National Presbyterian Church; supporting and sustaining and expanding the particular ministry of this congregation.

This particular objective has to do with such down to earth issues as personnel and staffing. It has to do with the way we organize our congregation and govern our church. It has to do with money, the way we raise it and the way we spend it. And it has to do with buildings like this. It has to do with the facilities within which we operate.

Now some of you may be saying to yourselves right now, “*You know, I did not get out of bed on this cold morning to come to church to hear a sermon on buildings and personnel and staffing and money and organization. I deal with that all week long and I want to hear about something else, but not that!*” I understand! But what I also understand is this, that (and this may surprise you) in scripture these are all things that are addressed. They are there in the Bible. And we don’t just involve ourselves in these organizational aspects of life because we have to, but because God calls us to! Good organization and support is Biblical! And leads to productivity for God. There are Biblical steps and principles and stories about these things in the Bible and what amazes me and I hope to some extent it will amaze you is that all kinds of organizational matters appear in Scripture – from the very first book on. In Genesis, for example, you have the story of Joseph’s administrative skill being used to mitigate the harm of famine in Egypt. And by the time we get through the second book of the Bible, the Book of Exodus, telling the story of Moses and the deliverance of God’s people from slavery in Egypt, and their heading on the way to the Promised Land – issues relating to staffing, governance, money and buildings are all touched on . . . because these issues too are of interest to God and the way we handle them or avoid them is not just a secular matter but a spiritual matter too. These things are a part of our spiritual life.

So let me take you back to the book of Exodus. Not just to the chapters we read (30, 31: we’ll come to them again in just a minute), but back first to Exodus Chapter 18.

I. PERSONNEL, AND BURN OUT.

Here we have a chapter that tells a story of what happened just after the escape from slavery and the crossing of the Red Sea. Moses has done battle with the King of Egypt. He has pleaded for the people of Israel to be set free from slavery. They have fled from Egypt. They have crossed the Red Sea and the people are now in the desert. They’re in the middle of nowhere, heading on their way to the Promised Land. *And Moses has to, somehow, control or lead or guide all these people.* And he’s the only one doing it; the burden is completely on his shoulders. To be sure, he has some assistants: he has his brother and his sister; but they’re not up to too much. And then his father-in-law, Jethro, steps in to the picture. You may have never heard of Moses’ father-in-law but in Exodus 18 Moses’ father-in-law steps into the picture and asks Moses ‘How are you handling all these people?’

Now we don’t know exactly how many people there are. The scripture speaks of thousands and thousands of them. One thing to keep in mind with Biblical numbers, the Bible says there are 600,000 (Exodus 12:37). Well the word thousand, *elef* in Hebrew can just mean a bunch. So it may be a strict thousand or it could be 600 bunches (clans, groups) of people. No matter what the detail may be, there were thousands of people; and Moses is leading them! And his father-in-law

comes along and says, ‘So, how are you handling all these people?’ And Moses replies that he’s pretty much doing it himself. And then Jethro replies Exodus 18, verse 17 and 18 like this:

“What you’re doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out . . . for the task is too heavy for you. You cannot do it alone!”

Yes! Jethro warns Moses about burnout! This is a word of advice not from last year or the year before, but from 1400 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ! Business advice on how to manage people before any how-to-business-book has been written! It’s here in our Book in the 18th Chapter of Exodus (to paraphrase): *“What you’re doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out. You’ve got to choose other people. You’ve got to share the load. You have to delegate. You have to make sure that there is a structure in place so that this newly created people God can fulfill their purpose in the sight of the living God.”* Church Strategy 101. Stress Management 101 – “How to avoid burnout 101” right here in the book.

And this is, of course, one of every Senior Pastor’s favorite passages. Certainly, one of my favorite passages because what Jethro is really saying is this: *that running the church is not just my business but it’s your business as well.* This is something that, like Moses, I, as pastor, have been commanded to share with you all. And you may turn to me and say, ‘but I have a day job and I have a family and I don’t want to run the church and that’s why we pay you, to do this.’ To which I say, ‘let’s talk about it.’

And that’s actually what the Strategic Plan says: “Let’s talk about it. Let’s talk about how we organize ourselves so that we can be effective for God through Jesus Christ so that neither pastors nor people burn out.” The issue is no different today than it was back then: organizing ourselves to glorify God and enjoy God forever as effectively as we can in the context which God has given to us.

So there it is Number 1: governance and personnel in the pages of scripture and in the story of Moses. And it’s not very long after that, that Moses has to begin to deal with another of the organizational realities of life: money.

II. MONEY.

God’s people are in the middle of nowhere, on the way to the Promised Land, but by no means close, and the subject of organization and personnel – and money – rises up. So we get to Exodus Chapter 25 where God commands the people of Israel (it’s not a suggestion), God commands the people who have been freed from slavery to use their resources, to use whatever wealth they have, to establish a center of worship right there in the middle of nowhere. It’s a command, to establish a center of worship on the way to your destination, on your way to the Promised Land. Not when you get there, when life is comfortable and predictable, but right here and now, where life is hard, a struggle, and quite unpredictable. Right here and now create and sustain a place of worship and use your resources to do this.

This command to use our resources for the glory of God is a command that goes all the way through scripture – to give our resources out of the bottom of our hearts, out of a sense of deep gratitude as a response to the grace that God has shown to us in Jesus Christ. Sharing ought to be a joyful response to grace received, but (coming back down to earth!) we're also to do it because some things just need to be done whether we feel like it or not, and without our sharing, nothing will be accomplished. The scriptures teach us to give a portion of what God has given to us back to God. It's called the principle of tithing: one tenth of what we have, give it back to God for God's work (see Malachi 3:10).

In fact when we come to the New Testament and to the teaching of Jesus we find Jesus not only advocates a tithe (Matthew 23:23) but he speaks more about money than about any other subject. Not always directly. Most of his references are indirect – themes involving resources woven into his stories – but repeated enough so we have to ask why it's there. Why does our Lord Jesus speak about money so much?

Well it's not just because the church needs money (though the church does need money). Rather, I believe it's because money, *how we get it, how we keep it, how we spend it, tells us more about what we really believe than just about any affirmation of faith.* Our money, how we get it, how we save it, how we spend it, what we think about it, tells us more about what we really believe than just about anything else.

- So do you believe that God can be trusted? Well take a look at your bank account and how you spend your money. Do you really give it away trusting God will provide? Do you really believe that God will take care of you? What story do we find when we look at how we spend our money, how we keep it, save it and give it away?
- Do we really believe that everything in the universe belongs to God and it's been entrusted to us as stewards? So it's not ours at all? Well let's have a look our bank accounts and how we keep it and spend it and use it for the glory of God.
- Do we really believe that God gives us more than enough for ourselves, and can meet every need? And, trusting him, he expects us to give away and use a specific amount for his purposes and his Glory? Let's check things out at the level of what we have in our bank accounts. If you do that you find a great deal about what we really deep down at the bottom of our hearts believe.

What we do with our money is not just a material thing, it's a spiritual thing and our Lord Jesus knows this – that matter matters to God! That stuff matters to God. Stuff and matter are always spiritual.

Back when I was 17 a long time ago someone taught me the principle of tithing. I made a commitment to Jesus Christ when I was at camp. I was 13 years of age and some years later, it was probably a camp counselor who began to teach me about tithing, taking me back to the third chapter of Malachi which says this: *“bring the full tithe into God's storehouse,” says the Lord, “put me to the test, and see if I will not open up the windows of heaven and pour down upon you an overflowing blessing.”* So when I'm 17, I really don't have any money but I tithed on what I

had then, and have done ever since. And I've been so grateful that over the years that that's something that God has taught me and led me to do.

- Grateful because I've seen God's provision. I've seen God's provision all the way through my children's college, I have seen God's provision.
- And grateful that I have been able to support the work of the churches to which God has called me as pastor. So you not only pay me but I share with you in the ministry of this congregation through my tithe.
- And beyond that, in some ways I'm most grateful for this: that tithing also functions as a God-given tool to bring limits to the consumer culture in which we live. There are so many wonderful things that we have made and shaped with the world that God has created. And they are all out there and they are good. But what we make also has the power to suck us in so that we can become consumed by the consumer culture around about us. And to commit to God's admonition to give at least one tenth away is an affirmation that we will not be consumed by all the ads and products out there, but we'll stop at a certain point and say "*No. I will not be defined by what I have. I may not be what I give, but I want to be defined more by what I give than by what I have.*" And God says to us place this giving, sharing principle within your life as a core principle and your life will be different.

Money! It's spiritual. It's not just material. It is all spiritual. Some people ask me "should do I tithe before taxes or after taxes." To which I respond "I really don't care. Once you begin thinking about giving a portion of income back to God, you're probably going to give a whole lot more away than you do at present, whether you do it before or after taxes!" On the other hand, *what I really do care about* is that we understand that the material part of life, what we have, is not separate from our spiritual lives. And that God begins to work mysteriously in and through us when we bring *not only who we are* but what we have into the spiritual realm in prayer before God. When that happens; life changes and churches change as well. Life changes when everything, the material becomes spiritual as well.

III. BUILDINGS

Of course here at National a great deal of our money happens to be used not only for mission and not only for personnel costs, but also for buildings and for this particular building. And on this cold morning I'm delighted to say that our heating system is actually working and there is heat in the building and that we have paid our bills and we can keep on doing this as far as I can tell all winter long!

In fact, and some of you know this though many of you may not know this, if we were to put together everything that it costs for our utilities all the way around for all the buildings on our campus we'd find that we spend just under half a million dollars a year for our utilities. This is a big chunk of change for the privilege of worshipping in this glorious space. And you can add about a million dollars to that, just under a million dollars, if you put together all the bits and pieces of maintenance and upkeep and insurance and the personnel dedicated just to the upkeep

and functionality of the building. If you put all of that together that is a lot of money provided through a great deal of generous giving.

And one of the questions we have to ask ourselves as Christians and as members of our congregation is this – *whether or not this is right to spend all of this money on this particular place?* Is this God’s will? Or ought we to be doing something else with what we have? Are we giving enough to do what we need to do with what we have? We spend between \$1.3 million and \$1.4 million on our facility each year; and we give about \$300,000 for mission. How does God think about all of that? Is this the right thing to do and in the right way?

Let me express the challenge of this question another way by giving you an illustration which comes from another congregation here in our city. This congregation, which shares our name “National,” has about seven campuses all over our metro area and is flourishing, with many younger people attending and contributing. One of their core convictions is a conviction to be a sharing congregation: *“that God will bless our church in proportion to how we give to missions and care for the poor in our city.”* . . . God will bless our church in proportion to how we give to missions and care for the poor in our city.

They believe it, and so do I! I’m grateful for their witness to Christ – but also understand that in time they will face some of the same issues that we do. Presently they own very little property. They rent property all over our metropolitan area. So the upkeep expense is limited. But they’ve begun to buy property (Once you, metaphorically, “leave Egypt” and “cross the Red Sea” and “go through the wilderness,” bit by bit you turn into an institution and you almost inevitably have to build) – to buy, renovate and build; and very soon their buildings will be old, like ours, too.

So every church, every church eventually has to wrestle prayerfully with how to sustain the institution and the structures which enable them to do what they do alongside generous giving for mission beyond the church.

Money, ministry, buildings, all of this, or the way we handle these things, is spiritual: it all matters to God. And this brings us back finally to our passages of scripture in Exodus 31 and 36. So we moved from Chapter 18 and burn out/delegating, to Chapter 25 and money. And now we come to Exodus 31 and Exodus 36 where the people of ancient Israel are building a structure in the middle of nowhere by the command of God. They are building a structure, a tabernacle, a glorified tent in the middle of nowhere by the command of God.

God really is interested in spaces and places and structures – in stuff and matter, not just in the spirit. God takes and uses all of these things for our spiritual welfare; and there in the wilderness God says “make a tabernacle, make a tent, make a center of worship and make it functional so you can worship me through sacrifice there; place the ark of the covenant there to hold the Ten Commandments; allow the priests and the people to go there. Make it functional! But, here’s the interesting and complicating point: God also says “Make it beautiful!” In the

middle of nowhere God says make the tabernacle beautiful. I don't want just anybody to work on this he says (in Exodus 31); I want people who by the Holy Spirit have been given gifts, skills, the ability with crafts to make something beautiful for me.

As soon as you get into the realm of beauty and realize that beauty is of interest to God you've entered a world of tension between the needs of the world out there (hunger, shelter, health and so on) and the need of every human being for beauty as well as functionality.

We experience this tension in our own congregation: as a congregation we want to be serving our nation and world. But we also rejoice in a worship space that is beautiful – and has the best acoustics for choral music in the city!

As we move on to Exodus 36 we see that the people responded generously to the summons to build. They didn't have much but they responded with what they had to God's command to create this place of worship in the desert, a place of great need. And like them, we too have been called by God in our city (which is sometimes like a spiritual desert) to build (and maintain) a space that is holy and powerful for God.

In fact the people were so generous with what they had, if you remember, that there came this glorious moment that I am longing for within our congregation where Moses had to tell all the people who were bringing their offerings forward to stop, saying, "You've given enough. We don't want any more!" So just imagine the choir are singing the offertory and the offering is being received and the plates get about half way back, and I stand up and say, "Stop. You've given enough!" What a joyful, joyful thing that would be – if the generosity that we experience in gratitude to God and our passion to sustain the organizations and structures that are part of God's plan and purpose, all came together so that that joy would overflow in ministry to others where we live and far away from where we live, in the world to which God came through Jesus Christ and for which he died.

The construction theme is there in Scripture, by the way, not only in the wilderness. It goes through all the pages of the Old Testament, with the building of the temple in Jerusalem, its destruction, then its being rebuilt along with the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem. The books of 1 Kings, Nehemiah, Ezra and Haggai, among others, point to God's interest in this. Not because God is interested in "living in" structures as such, but because he creates us as creatures of time and space, and loves beauty, and has chosen to use stuff and matter for the furtherance his purposes within this world.

Of course there are warnings along the way. God specifically says to his people that no building is to be worshipped. God is not limited to buildings (see Acts 7). Jesus was not born in a building like our church or the temple, but in a humble place. God is present in all kinds of places and spaces. And we need to keep that in mind: not to worship our building. No building is more sacred than a solitary individual and we need to keep that in mind. And if a building becomes a stumbling block to God's ministry then the God of scripture is not adverse to crushing the whole thing and saying start again, start again (as he did with the temple in Jerusalem). We

are not to idolize our structures. God, and God alone, in other words, is the one to be worshipped. But, nevertheless, this is a God who creates matter and stuff and delights in it and calls us while worshipping him to use all of these gifts for his glory.

I suppose one way of summing all of this up would be to say this:

that the God of scripture, from beginning to end, is interested not only in those saints who seem to walk or glide through life, as if untouched by the mundane things of life; but the God of scripture is also interested in every part of life within the church and within your life, all the bits and pieces of life, and calls us to bring all of that under the sway of our Lord Jesus Christ. And as we offer that to God, as if our material life and our spiritual life were of one piece (not as if our material life is “over here” and our spiritual life is “over there,” but all of it is under the sway of God) – as we offer all of that to God, then God will use us and those structures in powerful ways to do his work. And I for one cannot express my joy enough that this is the God revealed to us in scripture who cares not just for these high and holy things, but for all the details in church life, and in my life and in yours.

ADDENDUM

Objective 1.1 Matthew 10:12, 18:20; Ephesians 4:15

COMMUNITY/SPIRITUAL GROWTH: Be a community of small groups growing together in faith and knowledge of God’s Word; within five years at least fifty percent of NPC members participate in NPC small groups.

Objective 5.1 Genesis 16:4, Exodus 25:8, 31:1-36:7; Luke 9:1-4; Romans 16:3-5

FACILITIES: Update 50-year-old facilities to support our ministry well into the 21st century.

At a glance, our facilities are grand and inspiring. However, our facilities are aging. We have a large backlog of deferred maintenance tasks. Our facilities also impose accessibility challenges for many. While hospitality and a welcoming spirit are keys to building community, NPC’s structure is difficult to navigate and poses significant physical barriers to ministry and congregational intimacy.

Our facilities were not designed to support our vision and mission for the coming decades. Additionally, there may be opportunities to unlock new revenue streams from our real estate assets to help sustain NPC into the future, providing opportunities to further the mission of the church while being witnesses to our neighbors as good stewards of God’s world.

Objective 5.2 Exodus 18:13-27

ORGANIZATION: Align NPC’s organizational, staffing and leadership structure to more effectively serve a church of NPC’s size, demographics, and location in a major metropolitan city.

NPC is a large church organized like a small church. To grow and thrive, our Session and councils must be freed from administrative details so they can focus on strategic decisions; staff must be empowered and trained to efficiently and effectively support NPC's congregation and our outreach to the community; and pastors must have the resources they need to run effective ministries for and with the congregation.

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