

Problems or Solutions?

Joshua 17:12-18

Why aren't we more successful? As individuals, and as a congregation, why aren't we making more progress in our efforts to show and share the love of Christ with others? What's holding us back from making a real difference for Christ in the world?

It seems that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were suffering from a similar kind of frustration. Even though chapters 16 and 17 extensively and exhaustively list all the land that had been allotted to them, in verse 14 of today's passage they came to Joshua asking for more. Why weren't they satisfied with what they already had?

We can see the first reason in verse 14 – they said that the Lord had blessed them so they had become a great people, a numerous people. And this was in fact the case. After all, as verse 14 says, even though Ephraim and Manasseh were actually the sons of Joseph, they had been adopted by their grandfather Israel as his own.

Why did Israel do this? Because even though Joseph was one of his younger sons, Israel wanted to give him the double portion that traditionally went to the firstborn son. So, Israel adopted his two grandchildren so the descendants of Joseph could be doubly blessed, receiving two allotments of land. It's no wonder that the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh thought they deserved a lot – they were accustomed to being the favorites.

And I wonder if we American Christians don't sometimes fall into such a feeling of entitlement. After all, most of us remember a time when the Church was at the center of our culture, and when Biblical teachings about right and wrong were simply taken for granted by everyone. You can still see some of those traditional ways here in Mississippi, where participating in Sunday worship is still the socially acceptable thing to do, at least for nice people – people like us.

For we're doing all the right things, right? We've all made a public profession of Christ as Lord and Savior. We're here at church on most Sundays. We don't do the sorts of things that might cause our names to end up in the police roundup in the newspaper or that might get our pictures displayed on the wall of the post office. So, why are we still struggling as individuals with so many sins and problems in our lives? Why are our relationships still so difficult? Don't nice people like us deserve to be happy?

But let's take this a step further, for if any group of Americans has a right to feel entitled, it's us Presbyterians, right? I mean, we designed the same form of government that's used, not only throughout our denominations, but in Jackson and in Washington as well: a system of graded governing bodies made up of representatives chosen by the people. And it's our Reformed heritage, our emphasis on the importance of studying and understanding the Scriptures, that formed the foundation of America's educational system. After all, hundreds of private and even public colleges started out as Presbyterian institutions of higher learning, you know.

So, doesn't our nice Presbyterian congregation deserve to have all these pews filled every Sunday? Shouldn't all the lost people just come to us like they are supposed to? So, why aren't more people coming to Jesus? Could it be that there's something wrong with us after all?

For that's the funny thing, isn't it? It's easy for a feeling of entitlement to shift into the same sort of confusion and even discouragement that the descendants of Joseph were experiencing. Yes, they were a numerous people. Yes, God had obviously blessed them. So, why were they having such a hard time taking up the inheritance that had been allotted to them? Why weren't things working out smoothly and easily for them, the way they thought they should?

And so, as entitled people, as people who thought themselves to be deserving of great things, they naturally began looking around them for reasons for their failure. And of course they had no trouble identifying the problem: the Canaanites with chariots of iron that are described in verse 16.

And make no mistake – for the people of Joshua's time, iron chariots were a most serious problem indeed. After all, the mass-production of iron objects was the latest and greatest high-tech innovation of the day. Iron swords and spears were much stronger than those cast from bronze. And in the days before stirrups were invented, chariots were the only way that warriors could add the power and speed of a horse to their own strength in wielding those swords and spears. In sum, asking Bronze-Age infantry to stand up against iron chariots was a bit like asking cavalymen to charge against tanks. That's an impossible task, no matter how entitled to victory they might have thought they were.

And what about our equally difficult problems? I mean, how can we possibly reach people for Christ if they won't come to worship like they're supposed to? How can we reach the children if we're not allowed to teach the Bible or pray in the public schools like we used to? There's selfishness and poverty and ignorance and hatred everywhere we look. Instead of turning to Jesus, people all around us are trying to medicate their despair and discouragement and fear with sex and booze and pills and power and money. How can we make Jesus relevant to folks who are constantly distracted by social media? What can any of us possibly do about any of this?

Well, what did Joshua tell the people of Ephraim and Manasseh? In the first place, he took direct aim at their sense of entitlement. Oh, he didn't deny that God had richly blessed them. After all, in verse 15, he readily admits that they were in fact a great people, a numerous people. But he refused to go along with their assumption that God's blessings on them in the past somehow inoculated them against the need to provide for themselves in the present. That's why he told them in no uncertain terms to get themselves up into the forest and get busy clearing the land – even though there may have been hostile giants living there.

And the same thing is true for us. Y'all, it won't do any good to pine for the good ole days when going to church was what everyone did – those days are gone. And it won't do any good to go on moping about how we Christians in general and Presbyterians in particular don't get the respect that we think we deserve. It's time for us to face our situation honestly. We can no longer rely on social pressure to bring people to us. We can't depend on the mass media or the public schools to teach basic morality, and we can't expect the government to enforce what the Bible says about right and wrong. No, we all have to roll up our sleeves and get busy ourselves, doing the work of sanctification and evangelism, just as the people of Ephraim and Manasseh needed to clear that land and slay those giants.

But how could they win battles with giants? How could they defeat Canaanites with their iron chariots? And how can we modern American Presbyterians make any headway against all the forces in the culture that are increasingly opposed to the claims of Christ? How can this small congregation hope to make any sort of difference, even in our little corner of the world?

Well, what did Joshua tell the people of Ephraim and Manasseh? He acknowledged that they felt entitled because God had blessed them in the past and made them a numerous people. And he admitted that their numbers required them to expand into dangerous areas. But he encouraged them to use their blessings, to use their great numbers to attack their present problems. Look at verse 17 – “You are a great people and have great power.” So he told them to act like it. He told them to get busy and use the tools, the numbers, that God had given them.

Now, I know that what was a strength for them is a weakness for us: they had great numbers and we don’t. But we have some other tools in our toolbox, don’t we? We have a legacy our ancestors have left us, don’t we?

I mean, look around at this beautiful, historic sanctuary. Lots of congregations, including many of our presbytery’s church plants, would love to have such a building in which to worship. And you can’t get a better location: right on Highway 61. And we’re well known – everyone I tell about this church knows right where it is. And we’ve got lots of room for more folks to come – no need for an expensive building program like many churches have to undertake.

More importantly, we Presbyterians have inherited a rich legacy of careful, Biblical scholarship, enshrined in our Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. The EPC has adopted modern-language versions of these documents, and all of them are available to download from our website. Along with all the Scripture references, they’re a tremendous resource for Bible Study, helping us find the answers to all sorts of difficult theological questions. Moreover, in our Leadership Training Guide, we have an easy-to-understand explanation of what we believe and why we believe it. In short, if our culture is drowning in confusion, we Presbyterians are uniquely equipped to provide clarity.

And that’s because of another part of our legacy, our determination to learn and to teach the Scriptures, the highest source of truth there is. We value Bible study and make it the key component of our Sunday school hour, our Tuesday afternoon class, and our weekly worship service. But we don’t have to stop learning when we walk out the church door. There are daily devotions on our website and on our Facebook page that can keep us engaged with the Word all week long. And if you miss a Bible study or a worship service, you can check out our website, our YouTube channel or our Facebook page for video recordings. Such ready, constant access to the truth is a great resource, especially for modern people who wonder if there’s anyone or anything they can trust.

But trust isn’t just earned by being truthful. Most of the time, we trust people because we’ve spent time with them and have come to know that they care about us. In an increasingly lonely world, where more and more people settle for virtual relationships through their computer screens, real connections with real flesh-and-blood people are harder and harder to find.

And that’s where what looks like a weakness for us actually turns out to be a strength. Remember: the problem for the people of Ephraim and Manasseh was their large numbers which required them to expand their territory into dangerous areas. Just so, we tend to look at the few people in worship with us and think our small numbers are a problem.

But in an era where people are hungry for real relationships, and in a time when real relationships must be formed before people are willing to accept the truth, and in a time when people need the truth more than ever before, small groups are the key to growing our faith. The intimacy and familiarity of

small groups – groups like this one – make it possible to live the Christian life together with honesty, as well as with integrity. Simply put, when we all know each other’s strengths and struggles, it’s much easier to give and receive real love in a real, tangible way. It’s easier to believe the truth when you hear it from someone you trust.

You know, there’s a reason we’re all here this morning instead of in the big churches just up the highway. There’s something we all value in this small congregation with our Bible-based worship and opportunities for fellowship with people we know and love so well. So, could it be that what we think is our biggest problem, our small numbers, is actually our greatest strength? Could it be that God has indeed given us everything we need to grow deeper in our faith, deeper in our knowledge, and deeper in our relationships with fellow Christians? Could it be that what attracted us could be attractive to those around us? Could it be that we really do have the tools to fight the giants and to face down the iron chariots, to make a real difference where we really live, one conversation at a time, one loving deed at a time with one neighbor at a time?

Of course, we can go on clinging to our feelings of entitlement. We can retreat into our longing for the good ole days. We can refuse to be open and honest with one another. We can refuse to reach out to the lonely and hurting people around us, insisting that they come to us as we believe they should, and getting our feelings hurt when they don’t.

You know, that’s the sort of thing that the Israelites ended up doing. Verse 12 tells us the children of Manasseh refused to drive out the Canaanites from their midst, even when they had the strength to do so. They refused to claim more territory for the Kingdom of God – and the book of Judges tells us that in the years that followed, they lived to regret it.

Just so, we can go on hiding our light under a basket instead of shining it into an increasingly dark world. We can keep our salt in the salt-shaker, instead of letting it be a preservative in an increasingly rotten world. But if that’s our choice, we shouldn’t blame God if the culture goes on sliding into the selfishness and hatred that we see all around us. We shouldn’t be surprised if people who don’t have God’s light and God’s truth go on hurting themselves and hurting other people.

So, why not let our light shine? Why not share the truth we know? Why not reach out to one another in love? Why not reach out to those around us with welcome and encouragement? It may be that a small group of loving Christians is exactly what the world really needs to see. So why don’t we show it to them?