

7-12-09 sharing about Annual Conference sermons

The Old Has Gone – the New Has Come – All This Is From God! (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)

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My daughter Amanda was sitting beside me when this year's Moderator, David Shumate, was preaching on the opening night of Annual Conference worship. She was tickled to hear him start off by saying that the children who grew up in Montezuma, Virginia, are above average in just about every way. Montezuma is where we lived for 16 years while my daughter grew up. Of course, the children who grow up in Lebanon Co., Pennsylvania, are above average, too, each in their own way, for those who have eyes to see – Brother David just doesn't know about that because he hasn't lived here. But the point of his comment at the outset of his sermon was Jonas Miller, the son of the minister who followed me as pastor of the Montezuma congregation – a fascinating little boy who is fascinating precisely because he himself is fascinated by the little creatures that crawl around his feet every day in *"the verdant valley of Virginia."*

In particular, Jonas was fascinated by a voracious creature called caterpillar, which gobbled almost everything in sight, then spun a cocoon to hiding inside of until Easter brought forth a beautiful, amazing butterfly from the stillness of that cocoon. It dried its wings and flew away! *"Behold – the old has passed, the new has come! All this is from God!"*

The butterflies of our worship center give wonderful testimony to the fantastic transformations God desires to bring about in each of us, indeed in all of creation. *"Profound transformation and unambiguous conversion,"* as Brother David said in his sermon – *"the coming of new life into ... individuals – and societies as well" – "the rise of beauty from the midst of ugliness, and the rise of strength in the midst of weakness."*

David preached about how the Apostle Paul was transformed. When Paul went to Damascus to arrest the early Christians, all he could see in the followers of Jesus was a serious threat to the true godly religion of the Jews. But on his way to Damascus, Paul was transformed and began to know the Lord in a new way. And that made him see other people differently. *"From now on,"* the Apostle Paul wrote, *"we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view"* (2 Cor. 5:16 NRSV).

Do you know that that is like – to see people from a different perspective because you now see them from God's perspective? Such transformation causes people to seek peace – when we begin to see, as Jesus saw, *"the image of God in the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, and all of those who are the last and least"* – to see with *"divinely enlightened eyes."*

Brother Shumate then asked – and I quote from his sermon directly:

"What would happen in our society if the parents of our children sought to teach peace in the home by precept and example? No lessons are more deeply learned ... than those learned in the early years of childhood. Sermons, Sunday school lessons, peace academies ... fall far short of the example of parents consecrated to peaceful living after Jesus' example. Domestic violence, harsh words, and inattentive parenting have a tremendous influence on the violent nature of our nation and world. Our challenge today is to reconsecrate ourselves to allowing the home to be 'the first school of Christian living.' For it is in that peace academy that the seeds of faithful, peaceful living are planted and nourished in parents who seek to 'continue the example of Jesus.' The people of God cannot witness peace to the world without living peace in the home (and the church)!"

Bro. David went on to say: *"Too much of our church life is characterized by cocoon thinking."* We describe ourselves in terms of what we do *not* have rather than recognizing what we do have. We talk about our very limited resources – and yet our forebears, with very limited

resources, planted churches in India, China, and Nigeria, and developed CROP, Heifer Project, and Brethren Volunteer Service – by faith in God. We fixate on current issues and church organization to the neglect of vision. The question before us must be:

“From now on, where does Jesus want us to go?”

On Saturday night Dick Shreckhise picked up on that very point [for those who are not aware, Dick used to be pastor here at Annville – he is currently associate pastor at Lancaster]. In the opening of the worship service, a video displayed the many, many hurts and needs of people all around the world, and then closed with people of all ages and all nationalities, all echoing the same ancient words of the prophet Isaiah: *“Here am I, send me.”* That, Brother Dick said, is exactly what the Lord will do whenever we stand on holy ground (Brother David would say – whenever we see with God’s eyes) – God will cause us to say:

*“Send me to serve the hungry, homeless and poor! Send me on disaster relief projects!
Send me to be a help to the handicapped! Send me to work for peace in the world!
Send me to those suffering from AIDS! Send me – send me!”*

When you stand on holy ground, *“God will give you holy work to do!”* Brother Dick asked if the *“economic crisis in our world today may be an open door for us to teach and live a simple way of serving, saving, and spending.”* *“What is the mission of Jesus? What is he calling us to do?”*

Now, of course, that doesn’t do justice to Dick’s sermon – we have a DVD of all of the sermons, and I encourage you to listen to some or all. For now, I’m simply skimming over the surface.

Sunday morning we heard Eric Law, an Episcopalian who grew up in Hong Kong and who now works as a consultant to multi-cultural congregations. He preached about moving from fear to build trust and love in multi-cultural communities. I found the opening of his sermon fascinating, as he helped us realize how little we know about someone from simply looking at them. It takes getting to know each other to move from conflicts and tension into mutual cooperation to be able to do ministry together. *“It begins with love,”* Eric Law said. *“And love drives out fear.”*

Monday night’s sermon was by Nancy Sollenberger, who grew up in this congregation and now serves as co-coordinator for the CoB work in the Dominican Republic. I think you’ll want to listen to the DVD to hear her whole sermon. She tells about hiking to a 40 foot waterfall cascading down the side of a mountain that was featured in the movie *“Jurassic Park.”* They *“made the wise decision never to look down under any circumstances.”* They could not have foreseen the risks and struggles their journey would bring – any more than Christians can know what all it will mean to follow Jesus faithfully – in the Way of the cross. Some of you know the sufferings Nancy and Irv have shared alongside other Brethren in the Dominican Republic as they faced hostility from church leaders who did not want to have their financial impropriety exposed. In this sermon Nancy talked about how scary it is *“to stand before a judge falsely accused of a crime in a country not your own, trying to defend yourself in a language which is not your first ... [facing] the prospect of jail time and substantial fines, separation from your children, public disgrace – when you know you have committed no crime”* and how painful it is to have persons you worked with for years betray your trust ... all of which Irv and Nancy could never have imagined would be part of their journey with Jesus and his followers when they agreed to serve the church in the Dominican Republic. Yet the steadfast love of brothers and sisters in Christ who stood beside them throughout the ordeal brought forth deeper awareness of God’s presence and power that they could not have experienced otherwise – just as they could not have experienced the wonder of that waterfall without journeying through the treacherous terrain to get up beside it. ... a powerful sermon for you to listen to when you can.

Finally, on Tuesday morning, Jaime Diaz, pastor of the Castaner, Puerto Rico, CoB, preached about our need to live together in unity in the midst of our diversity. It took him out of his

comfort zone to have to preach in English. He asked us to be willing to move out of our comfort zones in order to work with all of God's peoples. We laughed as he talked about his wife's way of going to sleep by swinging her legs until she fell asleep, which he was not sure he could ever adapt to. We applauded as he shared that they have learned to live together for 18 years now, even though they continue to be very different in many ways. Brother Jaime challenged us to stop demanding that everyone else adapt to how we want things to be and begin to work more at loving each other in the midst of our diverse ways of living. He cited scripture: *"Perfect love casts out fear."* *"Brethren,"* he concluded, *"go out and LOVE somebody. Go and love somebody who's different. Go and love somebody with whom you might feel uncomfortable ... [and bring to next year's conference] powerful testimonies of how God is working with us, and how we are working with each other 'together in unity, though uniquely diverse.'"*

I like Brother David Shumate's conclusion to his opening sermon at Conference:

*"From now on, as a denomination, we must live as butterflies and leave the cocoons behind!
We must begin again to be a people of great vision, of great thoughts and great acts."*

The children among us need to see "the reality of butterfly living ...
in you and me and all of us! FROM NOW ON!"

Amen.