

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 19, 2014

"Blanket or no Blanket, Amen!"

John 1:35-42

There was a rather elderly lady who sometimes visited a church in her town. The lay elders of the church were always embarrassed when she did, because she loved to get excited in the service. "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!" she would shout. That was more than the dignified members of this congregation could endure. One Sunday morning the church elders greeted her at the door and made an agreement with her. They promised her a new, heavy blanket for the cold, winter months if she would not shout in their service. She agreed, and took a seat near the front of the sanctuary. She held her silence well at first, but as the pastor got into the his message, he got more and more wound up, really preaching from the heart, and his words gripped that little woman until she almost exploded with excitement. Finally, she stood up and shouted, "Blanket or no Blanket, AMEN!"

You and I are not likely to get that excited in our worship service. But sometimes don't you wish we did? Oh, not in an emotional, showy sense. Most of us are turned off by mere emotionalism. There is a story that is very popular right now about a fellow in the South who wasn't very deep in his commitment to Christ but who loved to go to revival meetings. Particularly if a visiting evangelist had put up a tent on the outskirts of town, he was there. When the invitation was given at the close of the service this man would be the first one to be at the altar. Kneeling, he would spread out his arms and pray loud enough for everyone in the service to hear, "Fill me, Lord Jesus, fill me."

Every revival that came to town, he would follow the same ritual. He would be the first one to the altar, and he would pray, "Fill me. Lord Jesus, fill me." Finally, a lady who knew him well couldn't take it any longer. Once when he was praying that same empty prayer, "Fill me, Lord Jesus, fill me," she stood up and prayed loudly, "Lord, Don't do it, he leaks."

Most of us are turned off by showy and shallow emotionalism. But wouldn't it be nice just one time to get so excited that you simply could not restrain yourself from telling the first person you met just how much Christ means to you?

Andrew was like that. He listened to what Jesus had to say and he listened to what John the Baptist had to say about Jesus and he got so excited that he went and found his brother Simon Peter and told him, "We have found the Messiah!"

When people first meet the Master they have that kind of excitement. Actually, the most enthusiastic members in most churches are the newest members. They have an enthusiasm and a willingness to serve that some people who have been around the church for a long time have somehow misplaced. That is one good reason for a church to keep reaching out. New people bring excitement into a church. Even more impressive, however, is the excitement of one who has just come to know Christ for the first time. Sometimes more mature Christians even feel they have to somewhat restrain the new believer's unbridled enthusiasm.

Baptist minister Harvey Cox, tells us that the only advice his father ever gave him concerning religion was, "Don't be a fanatic." It is amazing how uncomfortable we feel in the presence of someone who is really charged up about his or her faith. Yet there is something about a fresh experience of Christ that has that kind of effect on us.

If you and I are not as excited about the things of faith as we once were, perhaps it is because we are not as in touch as we once were with the source of our strength and power. When people first meet the Master, there is excitement. However, there is something else we need to see.

Excitement is fed by taking the gospel to the world outside. When we meet Christ, it is an exciting experience. To keep that excitement alive, however, we need to share that experience with someone else. Faith is like electricity. To be effective it must not be bottled up, but must be shared.

There was a large church in the downtown of a large city, a beautiful structure. It had four stories. It was neo-Gothic with flying buttresses, a classic large church building. It had a very dignified, educated pastor and a wonderful choir of professional quality. The church practiced what was described as a sort of "osmosis evangelism." They expected Christ to sort of "ooze" out of their fellowship into the world outside. In the narthex, the entry hallway to the church, they had a 10 feet tall marble statue of Christ with his arms outstretched. But times changed, people moved away to the suburbs. The church declined. They couldn't keep the building up. It was hardly used. Their Annual Conference considered closing it.

One night a fire broke out. Faulty wiring. The whole church went up in flames. Oak walls in the sanctuary, walnut banisters, etc. were destroyed. The floor in the narthex around the statue of Christ gave way and the statue went crashing to the floor of the basement. The next afternoon, after the fire department had doused the flames, workmen started to clean up and remove any surviving valuables. Then they were going to wreck what was left of the building for safety's sake. One of the workmen found the statue of Christ in the basement with hardly a mark on it, hardly a chip broken off. Gently they got a cable around it, lifted it out with a crane and set it on the sidewalk. Two businessmen were passing by. They looked at the ruins of the church and the statue of Christ. One said sarcastically, "Well, looks like Jesus is all they got left." The other looked at the sight and said, "At least they got him out on the sidewalk where the people are."

Growing churches are happy churches. There is something about the experience of taking Christ out on the sidewalk where the people are that does something for the morale of a congregation. We need Andrews, people who get so excited that they go out and tell their neighbor, their brother or sister. Then many more get caught up in their enthusiasm. Faith is more than learning a certain set of propositions. The life of faith is a life of positive expectancy.

Even more important than the attitude of faith, however, is the activity of love. Tony Campolo in his book, *Who switched the Pricetags?* tells a beautiful story about a schoolteacher named Miss Thompson. Miss Thompson was a conscientious teacher who tried to treat all her students the same. There was one little boy, however, who was difficult for her even to like. His name was Teddy Stallard. Teddy didn't seem to be interested in school. He was not an attractive child, his schoolwork was horrendous and his attitude was no better. In short, there was certainly nothing loveable about Teddy Stallard. Indeed, for some strange reason, Miss Thompson felt a great deal of resentment toward Teddy. She almost enjoyed giving him "Fs." There was something about him that rubbed her the wrong way.

Miss Thompson knew Teddy's background. His school records indicated that in the first grade he showed some promise but he had problems at home. In the second grade his mother fell seriously ill and Teddy started falling behind. In the third grade his mother died. Teddy was tabbed a slow learner. In the fourth grade he was far behind. His teacher noted that his father had no interest in Teddy's progress. Miss Thompson knew Teddy's situation, but still there was something about him that she resented.

Christmas time came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her some gifts. To her surprise among the gifts was a very crudely wrapped present from Teddy. Opening it in front of the other children she discovered a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half of the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. Sensing that the others were beginning to smirk and

giggle at the simple gift, Miss Thompson had the presence of mind to put on the bracelet and open the perfume. She put some of the perfume on her wrist which she invited the children to smell. "Isn't the bracelet beautiful?" she asked the children. "Doesn't this perfume smell lovely?" Taking their cue from her, the children responded with "oohs," and "aahs."

At the end of the school day, little Teddy came to Miss Thompson's desk and said, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my Mama...and her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents."

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got on her knees and asked God for forgiveness for her attitude toward Teddy. To make a long story short, from that day forward, Miss Thompson became a new teacher and Teddy Stallard became a new pupil. Both, Teddy's attitude and his grades dramatically improved.

Many years later Miss Thompson received a letter from Teddy telling her that he would be graduating from high school second in his class. It was signed, "Love, Teddy Stallard." Four years later she received another letter from Teddy telling her that he was graduating from college first in his class. Four years later there was another letter to inform her that the young fellow who once presented her with a gaudy bracelet with half the rhinestones missing and a cheap bottle of perfume was now Theodore Stallard, M.D. Also, he was getting married. His father was dead now, too. Would Miss Thompson be willing to sit where his mother would sit for the wedding if she were alive? "You are all the family I have left now," wrote Teddy.

Miss Thompson sat proudly where Teddy's mother would have been seated for that wedding. That moment of sensitivity and compassion many years before had earned her that right.

I am trying to say to you this morning that there are some very special people in this world. They are the luckiest people alive. They are the Andrew people. They are enthusiastic, joyful people. They are characterized primarily by two attributes. They have faith and a positive expectation about what God is going to do in their lives. And they have love. What they have received, they are willing to pass on to others. I know some people like that. Some of them are right here in this church. That's enough to make me want to say, "Blanket or no Blanket, AMEN!"