

**Sermon by Rev. Dale Woods – May, 2010 at “Stewards By Design”
Stewards of God’s Mission**

John 12:20-26

The story is told of a series of advertisements that reportedly appeared in a daily newspaper:

Monday the ad read: “The Rev. A.J. Jones has one color TV set for sale. Telephone 626-1313 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Donnelley who lives with him, cheap.”

Tuesday an attempt at a correction was made: “We regret any embarrassment caused to Rev. Jones by a typographical error in yesterday’s paper. The ad should have read: ‘The Rev. A.J. Jones has one color TV set for sale, cheap...Telephone 626-1313 and ask for Mrs. Donnelley, who lives with him after 7 p.m.’”

Wednesday, the embarrassed paper made a second correction: “The Rev. A.J. Jones informs us that he has received several annoying telephone calls because of an incorrect ad in yesterday’s paper. It should have read: ‘The Rev. A.J. Jones has one color TV set for sale, cheap. Telephone 626-1313, after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Donnelley who lives with him.’”

Thursday, in frustration the minister placed his own correction: “Please take notice that I, the Rev. A.J. Jones, have no color TV set for sale; I have smashed it. Don’t call 626-1313 anymore. I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Donnelley. She was, until yesterday, my housekeeper.”

Friday he placed a new add : “Wanted: a housekeeper. Usual housekeeping duties. Good pay. Love in, Rev. A.J. Jones. Telephone 626-1313.”¹

It seems that sometimes no matter how hard you try, you just can’t communicate. The harder you try the worse it gets. I remember once in grade three, the teacher was trying to get across the concept that one plus zero is one but one times zero is zero. I didn’t

¹ [First United Methodist Church, Meadville, PA, Content, The Newsletter, August, 1990, p. 3](#)

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think it was that hard of a concept but it seemed to bog down most of the class and the teacher was getting more and more frustrated. At one point, he asked me for my thoughts. I don't know why he did that, and as things unfolded I wished he hadn't asked me. I said, “I think *they're* just not getting it.” But what he thought I said was, “I think *you're* just not getting it.” I can tell you that the consequences of that misunderstanding were not pleasant!

I wonder if that's how Philip and Andrew felt the day some Greeks came to them looking for Jesus. It seemed a simple enough request: “We would like to see Jesus.” But for some reason Philip seems unwilling to make the decision himself about whether or not these Greeks should be taken to see Jesus. So he gives them a copy of the latest Jerusalem Digest and tells them to have a seat and he'll be right back. He rushes over to find Andrew: “Andrew, there are some Greeks who want to see Jesus. What should we do?” Andrew scratches his head because he's not really sure either. So together Philip and Andrew go directly to Jesus and tell him: “Jesus there are some Greeks who want to see you. We didn't know what to say. What do you want us to do?”

The question seemed simple enough. But what follows is the strangest answer you could imagine: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit...Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

You wonder: ‘What in the world does that have to do with Philip and Andrew's question?’ Philip and Andrew are left standing there their mouths open, mumbling something like, ‘Yes Jesus, but what about the Greeks who want to see you? What should we tell the Greeks?’ They stand there with no answer to their question.

It's a strange story and you wonder why Philip needs to get Andrew's views on whether or not some Greeks can see Jesus? And why does Andrew think they have to take this question right to the very top...why does he think they need to ask Jesus?

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It begins to make more sense when you put it in its context. The men who come are Greeks and not Jews. Jesus is the Jewish messiah. He has just made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He is king of the Jews. So Philip is wondering what would the King of the Jews want to do wasting time talking to some non-Jews, some Greeks. He's pretty sure that's the right answer but just to be on the safe side he takes the case to Andrew. Andrew's pretty sure too, but he's been around long enough to know you can never really be sure what Jesus will do, so just to be on the safe side he decides they should ask Jesus directly.

They can't help but think that “there is a limit to whom Jesus is inviting into their group. So they wonder, Jewish? Yes. Hellenized Jew? Most probably. God-ferarers? Maybe- but only with a little catechism. But Greeks? Probably not. You have to draw the line somewhere, so they go to ask Jesus himself.

Ever since this story was told the church has struggled with the issue of open and closed doors.

Fred Craddock talks about the first church he served in the eastern hills of Tennessee. The small town began a kind of growth spurt when the economy turned around due to a new plant being built there. There was a housing shortage so many of the people just brought travel trailers or small house trailers and set up a temporary trailer park. It wasn't much to look at, but it served its purpose.

The church wasn't far away from where the new trailer park was built. One Sunday after church the minister called on all the leaders to stay behind and said that he thought they ought to have an invitational campaign to invite these new people to their church. There wasn't much enthusiasm for the idea. Someone said, “They're just temporary. They won't stay long. What's the point?” Someone else said, “I don't think they will fit in here very well.” The minister said, “Well, why don't we just invite them and try to make them feel as if this is their home?”

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There was a long debate and it was agreed that they would meet next Sunday to vote on it. Next Sunday the minister opened the meeting with prayer and someone stood up and said I have a motion. “I move that in order to be a member in this church, you must own property in the county.” Someone else seconded it. And it passed.

Many years later the minister went back to show his wife this church that had passed that motion. As he drove closer he noticed that it was very different from what he had remembered. The parking lot was full of cars. Out in front was a huge sign that said, ‘Barbeque, all you can eat.’ It had been turned into a restaurant. All the pews were pushed up against the walls and the sanctuary was filled with tables and chairs. He looked around at all the people there, all different kinds of people, from different places. And he turned to his wife and said, “It’s a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn’t be in here.”²

That’s a painful story but it highlights the problem that most churches have in dealing with Greeks who come looking for Jesus. “According to a recent report in The Christian Century, only 15% of American congregations have grown by even one person in the last five years.³ In another study, 1,000 churches were given a survey that included this question: ‘Why does this church exist?’ Eighty-nine percent of the respondents chose this option: ‘The church’s purpose is to take care of my family’s and my needs.’ Only 11% chose the option that “The church’s purpose is to reach out into the world with the gospel of Christ.”

I know what we could say in defense. We could say, “Well, we put it on our sign: Everyone Welcome. What more do they want?” The problem is that it’s not signs on the outside of a church that make it welcoming. It’s those of us on the inside who do that.

One minister tells of sitting in a coffee shop. All the tables were full and a young man came in so the minister invited him to sit at his table. They engaged in conversation and

² Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories, p. 28-29

³ The Christian Century (Nov.20 –Dec. 3, 2002) p. 5.

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when the minister said what he did for a living the young man said, “You’re kidding! I’ve been thinking about going to church!”

The minister writes, “The next day, sure enough, Mike was in our church, sitting stiffly by himself. Following morning worship I rejoined him in the Fellowship Hall only to meet a strange scene: he wasn’t hard to spot. He was standing almost in the middle of the large room all alone. Pockets of people were standing all around in their various groups laughing and talking about the weather and sports scores.

“Sorry no one’s come up to meet you yet, Mike; let me introduce you to a few folks around here,” I said. “That’s okay pastor,” he said, “after all, *this is a church.*” I don’t know of a congregation that doesn’t think of itself as friendly, but the real question is ‘friendly to whom?’

I don’t know how you interpret this morning’s story, but I see it as a kind of warning. A warning about becoming isolated, insular, even remote. In a way it’s strange this would happen to Philip and Andrew. You would never have guessed it looking at the beginning of the story. Andrew and Philip were the first people to become disciples in John’s gospel. And not only that, but right from the start they invited others to come and see. When Jesus calls Andrew he says I’ll be back in just a moment and he rushes out and tells his brother Simon, Come and see. Come and see this Jesus. And when Philip was called he said the same thing. “I’ll be back in just a sec.” And he rushes out to tell Nathaniel to ‘come and see’ come and see this Jesus.

But now, some Greeks have come asking to see Jesus and Philip and Andrew aren’t quite as inviting. In fact, they get in the way. I take that as a warning; if Philip and Andrew can become insular and isolated, wanting to keep Jesus to their own little circle, then surely it can happen to anyone, including me.

One day when I was working in the congregation in Brandon I was coming across the parking lot and noticed that across the road a young mother was sitting on the steps of the house directly across from the church. Most of the homes in that area were

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moderately well kept; except this one. It was a rundown rental, owned by a landlord who never reinvested in the property. There were a couple of young children playing around the mother, maybe three to five years old. I realized she was new to the area and she looked dejected and uninterested in what was going on. I continued on into the church. I wasn't long into my work when the whole picture of that scene flashed into my head again and I thought to myself; why didn't you go over and introduce yourself to that young mother? Why didn't you go over and tell her that we have moms and tots program at the church on Thursday afternoons and it's a great chance to meet with some other moms and to let your kids run around a bit while you have some adult company. Why didn't I go out my way to at least make the invitation? It's exactly 85 feet from the steps of the sanctuary to the steps she was sitting on. (I know because later I paced it off.) But as far as she's concerned it might as well be 85 miles. True, she might have said, 'Mind your own business or no thanks.' But I didn't even give her the chance.

We are stewards of many things, but nothing is more important than being stewards of God's mission. True, we don't own the mission, it is always God's. But we are called to serve that mission. "As the Father has sent me" says Jesus, "so I am sending you." When Philip and Andrew came to ask Jesus what they should do about the Greeks Jesus began to talk about a grain of wheat going into the soil to die so that it might bear fruit. And then he said, that the son of man would be lifted up and when he was lifted up he would draw, not just the Jews, but all people everywhere to himself. That was Jesus' answer to Philip and Andrew when they wanted to know if the Greeks could see Jesus. Yes, by all means. Go and invite them in Philip and Andrew. God's love will not be reserved only for some. It is open to all.

It's possible to ask ourselves the question: 'Do we believe that?' But the more important question is "Do those outside of the church know that we believe that?"

We are stewards of God's mission. Amen.