



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: May 7, 2017

Title: "Gifted Past, Bold Future, Part 2"

Scripture: Exodus 35: 20-29

Description: The first person who will realize the impact of our Gifted Past, Bold Future campaign will be your next pastor. A successful campaign will create a pool of candidates from among the top echelon of pastors nationwide.

For three decades I've been trying to do something beautiful: lead a church. From our inception, Pleasant Hill Church has attempted to offer an alternative way of being Christian. In the very beginning we expressed that geographically, Presbytery owned land on Hwy 120, between Buford Highway in downtown Duluth and I-85. If you've driven that stretch, you may have observed that fifteen other churches are located in that three miles. We didn't want to merely fall in line with all the other churches here. So we asked Presbytery to sell that land and we'd look for another site. At 3700 Pleasant Hill Road, a large cross on a tall steeple proclaims clearly that we are Christian. But not cookie-cutter Christian.

We didn't want Adrenalin-fueled worship, for instance. Contemporary Christian rock music in a concert-like setting attracts mega-numbers of attendance. It's so enticing to fall in line with the going thing. Looking around us at the humanity God has created, however, we see so much diversity. God created humans in so many shapes and sizes and preferences and tastes, surely God would want to have more than a single kind of church, even if one kind is highly successful. We don't believe God would be pleased with a one-size-fits-all approach to worship. Heaven contains souls that prefer Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton over Bach and Mozart and would rather play soccer than football. So Sundays at Pleasant Hill Church offers what we call "cutting edge traditional"—vintage worship that contains elements created since the turn of the millennium. It will never result in 20,000 people a week like Northpoint, but we do offer an alternative and we try to do it well.

It's more than style. From our beginning, we wanted to offer an approach to faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior that didn't focus on a line-in-the-sand stance that divides people between us and them, saved and unsaved, future citizens of heaven and those destined for eternal condemnation. So we emphasize the unconditional grace of God and we try to embody that grace through offering open acceptance for all people. Not just on Sunday morning. Every day we seek to exhibit the way Christ makes us God's companions. We have fun, hang out, sacrifice, serve, pray, and play. We attract life-long Christians and start-up Christians and non-Christians, prosperous and desperate, agile athletes and disabled geriatrics, privileged and

excluded. We welcome all into the company of grace and glory for which the single word is: church. How are we doing? I think it's beautiful. What do you think?

For three decades, that's what has gotten me out of bed in the morning. I've driven to work in order to try to do something beautiful: lead this church. Every Sunday morning, I walk up here and say, "Good morning, Pleasant Hill Church." In my mind, I wave my hand, and say silently but truly, "This is what church looks like." This is what church looks like, and it is beautiful. My life's dream is that this church grow even more beautiful in the time to come.

I will retire this year. In terms of being pastor here, I'm almost done. But this church isn't done. My ministry here isn't done. The measurement of my life's work here is not the past thirty years, but the next five years. My greatest hope is that Pleasant Hill Church will now grow to be more beautiful than ever.

I'd like to return here five years from now and hear you describe PHPC with the word "launch." As in, "The first decades were like a blast-off: we prepared and built and gained energy and power; then suddenly we reached lift-off and began to soar. I want you to stand beside me as you show me what you've done and what you've become and wave your hand to say, "This is what church looks like!" That is when I will rest. That is when I will whisper to myself, "Okay, you did a good job."

Gifted Past, Bold Future. Nothing is more evident than that God has gifted our past. God's constant touch on our lives is what launches us into the future courageously. I want to share with you my vision of that future.

The first impact of our Gifted Past, Bold Future capital campaign will be felt by your next pastor. Give yourself an imaginary 3x5 card. Write a two paragraph ad to run in Christian Century, Presbyterian Outlook, or other magazines read by pastors. What would you write in two paragraphs to "sell" PHPC?

Let me suggest what you might write two months from now, after we've launched our Gifted Past, Bold Future campaign:

"Healthy, mid-sized church in suburbs of North Atlanta. Debt-free."

"Debt-free." Two words will convey that this church does not drag the decisions of the past—good, faithful decisions—into the future. Within the next months, around \$130,000 a year will be available for creative, imaginative, meaningful ministries instead of payments to the bank. It will say that this congregation raised well over a million dollars in a capital campaign *knowing they were about to have a change in pastors*. What a message of optimism, hope, and loyalty you will send.

A successful Gifted Past, Bold Future campaign will elevate the quality of person interested in being your next pastor. This church will appeal to the highest level of talented, gifted pastors nation-wide.

You will elect a team to serve as your search committee. When they narrow their selections to the top two or three, they will invite those candidates to come for a visit. Here's what those prospective pastors will experience when they're here.

First, they will fly in one of those seats that cost an additional fee to provide a little extra leg room. Even if she isn't tall and doesn't need the room, she'll get the message: this church respects their pastors and does not cut corners with personnel. Gifted Past, Bold Future will have provided funds for our search team to conduct a first-class quality search process. We don't do things on the cheap.

The prospective pastor will want to know, "What kind of problems will I have to address as pastor here?" Today our answer would be that we have a 15-year-old bus that is no longer safe. But how do you purchase a \$60,000 bus from the annual operating budget? Two months from now, with your generous commitments, they'll see a brand new bus shining in our parking lot. Paid for in cash from Gifted Past, Bold Future.

They'll ask, "What's the condition of the facilities? In so many churches, the building is a bottomless money pit, sucking up so much money and energy." They'll see new carpet in the Fellowship Hall and coffee areas. In fact, every one of the thousands of people who hold meetings here and vote here will see that the God we worship here is first-class and our commitment is strong.

We'll tell the candidate about a healthy reserve fund newly in place to meet future contingencies such as a new roof or air conditioner unit. Funds to address future needs have been created by Gifted Past, Bold Future.

They probably won't see the new coat of paint for our complete exterior, but you can tell them that project is already scheduled and already paid for.

"That's impressive. But is this congregation all about themselves and their own comfort?" We have an innovative program called Laundry Love that offers face-to-face community ministry to our neighbors. It was the dream child of our former pastor, but we've embraced it. It is, in fact, fully funded for the next two years. And we continue to have a waiting list of volunteers to serve.

Through Rainbow Village we are providing an additional case worker to help homeless families here in the suburbs to receive the personal guidance and mentoring they need to break the cycle of poverty and abuse. Pleasant Hill Church is covering the full costs of that position and it effectively gives the kids in those families the vision and skills to break free and thrive as adults.

We offer salaried internships to students preparing for careers in ministry, exposing them to experience working among a church staff who enjoy and respect each other and among a membership who love their church and enjoy serving here. This exposure to a healthy, vibrant church will shape the ministries of these interns for their entire careers. Now that's a Bold Future!

"Where did the generosity come from to enable these things?" the prospective pastors might ask. But they will not ask. Because they know. (Move to Communion Table.) They know it comes from people whose spirits have been fed here, who have known the loving touch of God here, and who respond with bold generosity.

Let's gather here at this table once again, to remember the gifts we have received and to affirm our loyalty and allegiance to the Lord and Savior who promised to meet us here. Let us pray:

O God, who gives us life and breath, who shapes us in the womb, who guards our lives from birth to death, then leads us from the tomb: deliver us from fears that kill the life we have from you. Help us to know your Spirit still is making all things new. O God, who calls your people out to venture and to dare, to plumb the bleak abyss of doubt and find you even there: This day by faith we're drawn to you and will your people prove, as on our hearts you write anew the covenant of love.

