

Out of the Hollers They Came

Once there was a young Methodist pastor serving a two-point circuit in the hills of East Tennessee. (In other words, he preached each Sunday morning to two congregations.)

The larger church, which had its service at 10 a.m., had an average attendance of 70. The smaller church, which had the 11 a.m. hour for its service, had an average attendance of 4.

The young pastor resented preaching to just 4 people, particularly at 11 o'clock. He had already preached his sermon once. He had it down pat, and now he was preaching to 4 people – basically 2 elderly couples. It was depressing, he thought.

The preacher decided it would make much more sense if the 4 people at that service would hop in his car and go with him down to the other church. Four people. There was another elderly couple who came sporadically. So sometimes there were 6. And one old gentleman came on Christmas and Easter. So on those Sundays, they had 7, but he rarely came any other time.



One Sunday, however, this old man named Claude showed up on a regular Sunday. At the conclusion of the service, the young pastor could see that something in the service had touched Claude quite dramatically. He went back to him and asked, “Claude, is there a problem?”

Claude squinted his eyes and looked up at the young pastor. “Preacher,” he said, “things aren’t going to be like this around here anymore.”

“I didn’t know if he meant he was going to burn down the church or what,” the young pastor said later. “I didn’t know any other way that church could be changed.”

But the next Sunday morning when the pastor drove up to that little church, there were cars everywhere. He went inside and there were children and teenagers and older people. And on the little board where they posted attendance for Sunday school, it said 58. Fifty-eight! Now that’s not a big crowd at most churches, thought the young pastor, but when you’ve been averaging 4, it’s all the people in the world.

He looked for Claude. “Where did all these people come from?”

(more)

“Well, preacher,” Claude said, “I know these hollers (that’s a Southern term for small valleys) up in here better than you do. I went to old folks and shut-ins I knew who weren’t going to church, and I said, ‘If I come and get you Sunday in my station wagon, would you come to our church Sunday morning?’ and every once in a while someone would say, ‘Why, Claude you don’t have to come for me. My daughter could bring me down there.’ And I would go to a family that had young children and say, ‘If my son or I came to pick up your children Sunday morning, would you let them come to our church?’ And every once in a while, someone would say, ‘Why, you don’t have to come after my children, I could bring them.’ And this is what happened.”

Fifty-eight people! Well, the young pastor knew it wouldn’t last. And it didn’t. The next Sunday, they were down to 56. The following Sunday, though, they had 60. And for a decade after that, that small church – which had once averaged 4 on Sunday mornings – averaged about 50 people. Most of them would never have been in church except that a 78-year-old man named Claude was determined that his church wasn’t going to be like that anymore. That’s what it took.

Why? Because God chose to do something foolish. God chose ordinary people like you and me, and God set out to changing the world one person at a time.

Was God foolish to count on us? Only you and I and God know the answer.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter

