

August 28, 2022

## Post-Pandemic Purpose: Youth

Jeremiah 1:4-10



Some of you may have seen this picture before, from an agricultural display. On the left, the man's right, are native North American prairie grasses. You see their roots going down some six feet and spreading out. On the left, just above the man's head, you see modern agricultural grains, and you can see that the roots go down maybe six inches. This is important historical data.

You see, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century westward expansion, settlers staked claims on the prairies, ripping out prairie grass to establish farms, turning these vast plains into "amber waves of grain." But of course, rain is less consistent on the American plains than in Central Europe or Ireland or wherever the "Old Country" was for those settlers, and droughts are more common. In drought years, when the only water to be found was deep, the shallow-rooted grains simply died. But it gets worse. Without that spreading network of prairie grass roots, there was nothing to hold the dirt in place during a drought, and so when "the wind came sweeping down the plains" – as it does – it just picked up the topsoil and took it with it, which is how we got what we call "the Dust Bowl." Those farmers only meant to make the land more productive, as they understood productivity, but by opting for large yields of their preferred grains over the short term, they not only lost their crops but lost the land itself.

There are a lot of lessons to draw from this but when I saw this picture and read the explanation, being a nerd, I thought about the modern church. I said in a sermon a few weeks ago that Jesus didn't start out to found a church so much as to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, a much greater goal. But how did he set about doing that? What was his method? Well, he gathered around him a small group: some twelve men and a few women. Then he spent a *lot* of time with them alone. Yes, he also spoke to large crowds, but after speaking to crowds, he dismissed them and retreated with his small group to teach them privately. John specifically says that Jesus didn't trust the crowds. Jesus even went out of his way to keep the group small by being harsh and demanding. Both Luke and John tell how he actively discouraged some who wanted to join him, because he saw them as less than fully committed. Clearly, what Jesus set out to establish on earth was a small group of followers with very deep roots.

This is not how the church operates today. We are not suspicious of crowds. We love crowds. We long for crowds. We envy other churches if their crowds are bigger than our crowds. We measure our success in terms of crowds: counting membership and attendance numbers. There is no box on our annual statistical reports for hours spent in prayer or individual lives transformed. I've told this story before, but it's worth repeating. I attended a seminar at Annual Conference one year on prayer – it was called "Breakout Prayer." The leader began by talking about the importance of prayer, then said, "If you do all that I'm about to tell you to do, I promise you that your church numbers will increase by fifty percent." Even setting aside the absurdity of that promise, it is stunning to me that this presenter apparently thought that the way to encourage a group of church leaders to pray was to dangle in front of them the possibility of

numerical growth. Prayer itself is not the goal here. Prayer is a tool to be used for the *real* goal: numbers. Presumably if prayer doesn't work as advertised, you drop it in favor of a Plan B. A cappuccino bar or Speedo Sunday, or something. No, in contrast to Jesus himself, we are not aiming at very deep roots. We are quite content with our shallow-rooted methods that promise bountiful yields on the surface, *now*.

Except that those methods aren't working anymore. Back on the prairies, it must be said that when conditions were right, those farmers did produce bumper crops. The land is good land, and in years with enough water, it was amazingly fruitful. The same could be said for the church. In the 50s through the 70s, conditions were good for the church – a sense of community coming out of World War II, millions moving into the middle class by means of the GI Bill and union wages, and *so many children being born!* As a result, the church boomed, at least in terms of numbers. We could grow anything we wanted to. But conditions have been getting worse ever since, and our old methods have been failing. Our churches have been drying up. And then, in a global pandemic that shut our churches down for years, we had a dust storm. It feels like we ought to go back to planting some prairie grass, but where do we even start?

We read Jeremiah chapter 1, verses 4-10, the prophet's account of his call.

<sup>4</sup> *Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,*

<sup>5</sup> *'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'*

<sup>6</sup> *'Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me,*

*'Do not say, "I am only a boy";  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.*

<sup>8</sup> *Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
says the Lord.'*

<sup>9</sup> *'Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,  
'Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

<sup>10</sup> *See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.'*

Jeremiah was one of the most relate-ably human, and yet also most awe-inspiring, of biblical characters. His prophetic ministry spanned some fifty years – from early in King Josiah's reign, when Judah felt itself on top of the world, with a renovated temple and dreams of territorial expansion – to the utter destruction of the temple, Jerusalem, and the nation of Judah by the king of Babylon. But every minute of that ministry was hard. No one ever listened to Jeremiah. He was banished, imprisoned, beaten, placed in the stocks, thrown into a muddy pit to die, and nearly stoned by the crowds, but through it all he remained faithful. Not quiet, exactly, or uncomplaining. He complained a lot. But he was faithful. And it all started when he was a boy, a youth. We're not sure exactly how old, but definitely pre-adult.

One of the best examples of the modern church's shallow-rootedness is what we have done with adolescents. When I talked about children last week, I mentioned that until the Sunday School movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, churches didn't do much just for children. Well, separate programs just for teenagers are even more recent. We didn't start those until that church boom of the 1950s, when denominations formed separate groups for their teens. Some of you remember MYF, the Methodist Youth Fellowship. (My parents went to the BYPU – Baptist Young People's Union.) These did involve some Bible study, but today they're remembered mostly as Christian-oriented teen social clubs. A place to meet potential spouses who didn't smoke or drink. In the late 60s and 70s, these morphed into church "youth groups," which were again partly social, but they included Bible studies, youth rallies, youth retreats, youth convos, youth mission trips, and so on. And these are good things that, in many ways, make sense to do this way. In an era of sharp generational differences, it makes sense to present Jesus to youth in a way that will be seen as more hip than their parents are. Youth groups provide a place for mild rebellion against parents, under the safe supervision of a youth pastor. For many adolescents, youth groups have been powerful formative experiences.

But there has also been an unsettling side to the youth group idea. Often there has seemed to be a greater emphasis on making Jesus cool, so as to attract youth, than on actually going into what he taught, resulting in a relatively shallow version of our faith, and youth groups easily get caught up in the relentless effort to keep kids entertained. Moreover, the successful youth group is often the one with the most charismatic youth leader, which, in recent decades, has led to the phenomenon of nomadic church youth, gravitating to whichever local congregation has the coolest youth pastor, until that pastor moves on. Even more sobering, once you move past the numerical measure of success, youth groups tend to produce dubious results. They do not consistently lead to faithful adult church members. Instead, once adolescents age out of youth group, most disappear. Sure, a few do make the transition to adult church life, but the motivating force for these doesn't appear to be their youth group time. In my own experience, youth who persevere in church after adolescence are often the ones who *hated* youth group. Ask my daughter Grace how she feels about youth convo sometime. Our primary plan for guiding teens into faith has been a shallow-rooted method designed to produce immediate surface results, and it produced those results well under favorable conditions. But it is not working now. When you break church involvement down by age-group, teens and young adults are the group least interested in the church today.

Now think back to that kid Jeremiah. God didn't call him to a waiting room, where he could hang out with other kids his own age until he was older; God called him to service. God didn't promise him entertainment. In fact, God promised the opposite: "This is going to be hard, but I'll be with you." We don't have many youth left in our church. Even before the pandemic it was hard to get enough together to honestly call it a "group," and two and a half years off has not made that easier. What if we stopped trying the old plan? What if we got out of the youth entertainment business entirely? What if we went back to planting prairie grass teens, calling them to service alongside the rest of the church, fostering their roots through mentoring them in leadership roles? I know; that's easier to say than to do. But the first step in a long journey is to set the destination.

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One final word: Those farmers who destroyed the prairies were not bad people. They were hard-working, hopeful people trying to create a new life. The damage they did was out of ignorance. The same is true in the analogy of the church. Our problems are not the people. Both in this congregation and with my ministry colleagues, I work with some of the finest people you will find anywhere. But I do think we have a systemic problem in the church: we have been focused on the wrong definition of success, and it's not working anymore. Let's plant prairie grass Christians, shall we?