

MOVE OVER MR. COFFEE
Sermon by Paul R. Powell
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans
Sunday, November 10, 2013

Some months ago when I thought my interim period would end around the first of July, I started thinking about what my last sermon might be. At the time I had no clue who our new pastor might be, so this is not about Mr. Coffee moving over for Mrs. Coffee. My sister had just bought one of those Keurig coffee makers that are now appearing everywhere. No doubt, some of you have one. And the title “Move Over Mr. Coffee” came to me since these new coffee makers seem to be replacing the older Mr. Coffee machines, and that seemed to be a good analogy for the monumental changes that are taking place in society and in the church at large. It’s not so much that these new systems make better coffee, but it is of course a way for the coffee companies to ramp up their profits. Those little single serve packets cost an arm and a leg, so the same amount of coffee you used to get in a pound bag is now packaged in cute little cups and sells for about twice as much. Ain’t progress grand?

In the archives at Princeton Seminary where I worked some dozen years there is a collection of more than 30,000 pamphlets from the early American period and many of these are “farewell” and “election day” sermons preached to congregations in New England and the Middle Atlantic states. Can you imagine going to church for an hour-long sermon before going to the polls? It was fascinating to read some of these. Of course, back then, preaching and sermons were often about the only entertainment people had in the villages and towns. Almost everything has changed except that too many folks still expect the preachers and musicians to entertain them.

Coffee and coffee makers in some ways tell us a lot about the flow of history and the flow of church history, as well. One of my fondest memories from childhood is cemetery workings. In the country, folks used to gather at their family cemeteries in the Spring and again in the Fall to cut the grass, clean around the tombstones, and place flowers brought from their yards on the graves. Dinner would be served on the grounds and a local preacher would be invited to give a devotional. Someone would have built a fire and hung a big coffee pot over it. That smell of strong coffee brewing still awakens memories of those times. Some of my relatives had their own coffee grinders and roasted their own beans. Coffee was dripped slowly through a cloth bag, and down here in south Louisiana, many people set their coffee pot in a pan of boiling water and spooned the water over the grounds one spoon at a time. This took a little time but the end result was truly tasty.

A little later, the electric percolator replaced the old-fashioned drip pot, but somehow the flavor was changed and not in an altogether good way. Here in Louisiana you would never serve anything other than fresh coffee to your guests, but some folks left

those percolators going forever and the end result was too nasty to describe! Even instant coffee became the norm for a while until folks noticed just how awful it really was. Then along came Mr. Coffee, a method of heating the water electrically and dripping it over the grounds much like the old-fashioned drip pots. But, of course, Mr. Coffee was more expensive which somehow made you think that coffee making had been much improved. Not really, it was just an old process in a slightly-newer electric version. Then came Keurig, more or less the same, but speedier and far more expensive. Well, who knows what comes next? Our society is addicted to technology and to doing just about everything instantaneously. Did you see the report about those three young nerds out in California who re-programmed the Obamacare website into just what the government wanted, and did it over last weekend?

Bill Easum, author of *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, points out that there have been only three great transitions in church history prior to the 21st century. The first of these was from about 350-450, or the Classical Age, and was dominated by the tribe, polytheism and oral tradition. The second occurred from about 1300-1600, or the Middle Ages, and was dominated by monotheism, nation states, and the printing press. Notice that there was a period of about 1,000 years between these first two transitions. The third transition occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries or what we call the Modern Age and was dominated by denominationalism, nationalism, and newspapers. There was a period of about 500 years between the second and third transitions. And now we are at the early part of the 21st century and experiencing yet another major transition which some scholars have dubbed post-modern or in religious circles post-denominationalism which is dominated by agnosticism, tolerance, digital media, mass communications, and the prevalence of Pentecostal-type super churches.

Easum points out that some historians point to the year 1954 as the key turning point between modernism and postmodernism. Not coincidentally, that was the year that Bill Haley and the Comets unleashed what would become the most important song in modern history – *Rock Around the Clock*. It wasn't long before Woodstock, the Jesus movement, the space program, hippies, and war protests burst on the scene at the same time that IBM introduced the first mass-produced computer. Within a decade, Sam Walton was experimenting with what eventually became Wal-Mart. I and many of you lived through all that never thinking how influential all these would be on society and on the church. Mainline denominations were at their peak. Had the churches dealt with these monumental changes at the time they might well have been prepared for the changes in the church itself that were destined to bring us into the so-called worship wars, declining attendance and giving, and a back-burner status so far as society at large is concerned. You very well know that we are living in a time of non-religion or even anti-religion and certainly anti-institutionalism. If you don't believe that, then just look at what Loyola has faced in trying to build a parking garage next door, or at Tulane's struggles to build an on-campus football stadium, or at our church's concerns when we talk to schools and other programs that might be housed here. Neighbors

who in former times would have welcomed any of these are now fighting them tooth and nail. Clergy are no longer the most respected group of professionals. Infant baptism, adult baptism and church membership may disappear along with the denominations that still hold to these practices. Church weddings are rapidly becoming the exception rather than the rule except for those who want the ambience of a church setting. Many of those leasing our chapel or sanctuary for weddings are mostly just looking for a beautiful space in a prestigious location. Even the venerable church newsletter has been replaced by the church website.

Part of what I am trying to convey with this imagery of Mr. Coffee versus the Keurig coffee makers is that the changes which Christianity is facing are monumental and there is no going back if we are to be effective proclaimers of God's message of love to a world more interested in how they make coffee than in how they make a life. We can fret over the changes, but fretting gets us nowhere. If THE CHURCH and OUR CHURCH are to survive and thrive, we must embrace those changes which we can while at the same time maintaining our allegiance to God, the ultimate changer of circumstances. Just as a good cup of coffee is the goal by whatever method or technology we use, so the life committed to Christ must still be the goal of the church's mission however we might obtain that goal. And if we become more fascinated with technology and methodology than with the sharing of God's gospel of love, then the church ... our church... has no future. Growth in numbers and contributions must never be our goal, and in fact if that is our goal, we will most surely disappear. On the other hand, if our goal is spiritual growth in the lives of our members and at the same time being the presence of Christ in the world around us, then we will have a wonderful future no matter how different that future may be from today.

We must change the methodology of proclaiming the gospel message, but we must not change the gospel message!

We as the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church must broaden our horizons to include not just the seekers who genuinely want to become a part of a loving congregation, but we must also engage those persons who neither want nor seek the gospel message. If we think we can just sit around waiting for the masses to appear in our pews, well we're only about fifty or so heartbeats away from annihilation.

Nearly every one of you has a computer and a cell phone, and we use these to stay in touch with one another and our loved ones, sharing messages and photos instantaneously regardless of where we or the other person may be anywhere in the world. Many of us are masters of "Googling it" for everything from the best gas prices to the definition of unfamiliar terms. We use a GPS to get us from home to the gas station just up the street. We use our phones for every kind of information imaginable. We can be sitting in the pews texting to just about anyone anywhere – don't tell me you haven't done it! And you can be sitting in an airplane or a coffee shop and pay your

bills, and if we would just get with it around here, you could even make your church contribution in the same way. Yet, when it comes to spreading the gospel or to educating ourselves in the Christian faith, we somehow think that can only be done sitting around in a classroom or sitting in worship on a Sunday morning. When will we wake up to the possibilities of this wonderful technology at our fingertips to change the way we learn to live the life of faith and to change the way we proclaim the gospel? And maybe, just maybe, if we learn to use the technology at our fingertips for reaching people, maybe, just maybe, we can change our world.

But whether by personal contact or by using technology effectively, we must also become engaged with the world around us. We can no longer expect to realize growth in numbers or in spirituality just because we are sitting here on the corner of Broadway and St. Charles. Just as John and Charles Wesley, founders of the Methodist church, took the Church to the people, so we too must take the gospel TO the people. The gospel is not and has never been static. We cannot simply sit around hoping that the walls that separate us will somehow just fall down. Those walls must be broken down one at a time. Communities of faith are not built by the meek and lowly but by the brave and joyful. Nations are not changed by throwing out the teapot along with the tea. Change only comes when God's faithful do as we have always done, and that is to love others just as much as we love ourselves, to overcome evil with good, to take care of one another, to share the world's goods with the poor, to bring justice to the downtrodden and outcast, to bring peace by first becoming peaceful through the life-changing, attitude-changing, mission-changing power of God's Spirit working in and through us as individuals and as Christ's church. And finally, we must find ways to enliven our worship in ways that can reach across all boundaries to give voice to all who would lift their hearts and voices in praise to God.

Boys and girls, it's a brave new world we face, but we must embrace the world God has given us and let the Spirit of God guide us into the troubled waters, carrying the light of God's love and redemption to a world just as lost without the love of Jesus as it has ever been.

And my final message to you is the one I have tried to preach and teach in every service, and that is – faith, not fear! For it is only faith in our unchangeable God that can overcome the fear that would keep us from becoming the persons and the church that God has created us to be.

To that end, I pray God's richest blessings on Elizabeth Lott and on us that we may live up to God's call to be his presence in our world today.

May God usher in a new day for St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, filling us all with peace, hope, joy and love as we follow in the steps of Jesus!
AMEN.