

Four Things Lost

What rural ministry can contribute to urban ministry

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A number of years ago there was a loss of electricity in the Northeast. It was caused by some trees that short-circuited a "grid" of some sort. But it was revealing to hear some of the side comments of the news people. One said, they "hadn't seen the stars like that for a long time." Another, knowing the lights were out, wondered if the electric had been turned back on when she realized it was the light of the moon shining brightly. When the situation is "normal" neither the stars nor even the moon are noticed much for the "light" of the civilized world.

Up to fifty million people, (in the neighborhood of 18-20% of this country) had such an opportunity. Considering that demographics that tell us 98% of the country is urbanized and that 2% are rural by character, it is not an insignificant event in that it, for a moment, cracked the door between two contrasting environments.

But it is more than a fleeting glimpse of the stars that separates a rural and urban experience. My observation is that there are four major experiences that have been lost in the cultural transition from the country to the city. There has been a loss of community, respect for life, the awe of creation, and dependence. And with the loss of these four experiences, or at the very least the frustration of these, there are values which have carried nations, tribes and families through centuries that are evaporating.

The challenge lies in not only recognizing these four things lost but also in creatively recapturing and applying them in the ministry of reconciliation. For rural ministry the question is, how can one take advantage of the available illustrations and applications of these experiences? For urban ministry the question is, how can these be recaptured in the hearts and minds of God's people? The successful end of both challenges is being drawn closer to our Creator, Provider, Savior, Encourager and His Body, the church.

The Awe of Creation

I do not know the number of times that people have said to me, "I can't understand how someone could say there is no God when I look at that sunset." That is simply a recognition of the Creator creating something that we cannot create. And sunsets are only the beginning. In fact, to catalogue creation is virtually an infinite task. With 35,000 varieties in the species of beetles, with 126 billion galaxies each containing a hundred billion of stars, with 3 billion DNA base pairs in each human cell and so on, one cannot help but step back and be in awe of God's creation. These facts remain no matter where we live. Yet, what is not in front of us is often not considered.

For a few years in my ministry I drove through downtown Houston on I-45. It is a beautiful sight. The city lights are amazing and attractive. But one day I wondered, while being overwhelmed at the glory and handiwork of man, what exactly was I considering here? David wrote in *Psalms 8:3* *When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; 4 What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?* No where in the Word are we told to consider the work of my fingers, at least not in the manner that David considered the work of God. But that is exactly what I caught myself doing.

Now of course we thank God for the technologies and the electricity and engineering capacities that He has revealed throughout the centuries and millennia. But I am simply saying in the pursuit of an ever-growing relationship with the Living God, we must also ask, what is it that impresses us; God's work or Man's work?

The challenge for the urban congregation in this regard is to capture the nature of God's creation and the place that God has put us by His love in the context of His creation.

The challenge for the rural congregation in this regard is to make certain that members worship the true God and not that which He created.

Dependence Upon the Provider

We know, in our confession, that God is not only our creator but He is also our Provider. He gives all good things. In fact, the Psalmist asks the question in *Psalms 116:12* *What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me?* He is thankful for all the provision of God, spiritual and physical, and he wants to show it. The dependence upon God's provision is apparent.

In the farming and ranching community, weather forecasts include pan evaporation rates (something that was never reported by Dr. Neil Frank of KHOU TV in Houston). The agricultural community is very much aware of the amount of rain that has fallen, where it has fallen, and how much impact it has on their business. I even sense a reduction of tension and stress in the rural community when the right amount of rain falls. On the other hand, when that same amount of rain falls in the city, the rain becomes a nuisance and even dangerous because the streets become slick from the water/oil mixture.

In the country, the cattle graze next to the roads on the grass that is growing because of the rain that fell. In the city, that same steer in the grocery store is two or three times removed from the field. And so the question is, how many barriers are there to the Provider.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we all raise our own cattle and grow our own vegetables. But there is an advantage and a challenge in these two dynamics. The advantage is for the rural culture that sees the cotton and the cattle and the corn in the field. Without God's provision and protection, they do not grow and that is clear. For the urban culture, the lack or increase of rain means a change in prices, up or down.

The illustrations that are used in Scripture are often based on agriculture and the challenge is making these illustrations meaningful to a culture that does not recognize the agricultural nomenclature. Whether in the city or in the country we are totally dependent upon God, our Provider of things physical and spiritual. Fields of concrete can obscure that reality.

Sense of Community

My family, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, et al, all lived within 170 miles of each other. I thought that was close. And truth is, in today's culture, it was. And with 170 miles of separation we had family activities, Thanksgiving dinners, camping trips, vacations, fishing excursions, all of which served to strengthen that sense of family and community. But today, with families having scattered across the country, that sense has decayed.

This last summer, driving through the fields of the mid-west, one could see farm houses with three floors; one providing living space for each generation in the family. On the ranch it is not unusual to find two and even three homes where other family members live and work. In each of these situations, when there is a problem to be solved, a question to be asked and answered, or an accountability to be made, it is done by people with whom we have grown and trust.

It has always been a kind of paradox that the loneliest places are often in the city. Where there are even millions of people an individual can be lost and forgotten, not even seen. And for a young family and expectant mother who has some "small" questions, the answers can be hard to find. Who should she ask? Raising children becomes an applied theory that comes from a book (and finally a division of labor when the child is signed up for pre-school) instead of the collective wisdom of generations given in candied and unplanned moments in a more relaxed calendar.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we all have our parents and brothers and sisters and their families all move into the same house. A reunion once every five years is probably a big enough challenge for most. But the ministry challenge in both the urban and rural culture today is to create a sense of community that has been lost. We need a place where questions can be asked, where assistance is not in doubt, and where time is set aside to talk about something or nothing at all. In the body of Christ, Jesus is the basis for this community and it is His relationship with us and His drawing us into the Trinitarian Community and the Body of Christ that give us the freedom to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Respect for Life, Coping with Death

I don't listen often to "A Prairie Home Companion," with Garrison Keillor on NPR. But whenever I do, he really holds my attention. He is a great story teller. He told the story of the slaughtering of one family's hog. He placed himself in the story as one of the young children watching this process. It was a family event. The hog was going to provide food and sustenance for a significant period of time for them. It was also a hog they had raised and taken care of on the farm. The father and oldest brother did the deed. The hog died and then they processed the animal. The younger boys watched this and then began to imitate, in a playful way, leaning toward being disrespectful, that which had just happened. When the older family members saw this growing mockery of the hog's death the boys were stopped and told this is not something of which to make fun. The parents said, "This hog gave its life so that we could eat." The message was clear. Instead of making fun, this hog's life and death was something to respect. That story impressed me. It was just a pig that died after all. But that family had taught their children to respect life at any level. They used this vivid illustration to teach the honoring of life.

Living in awe of God's creation and knowing that it is He that provides for us at every level and that His provision includes community and relationships, we find the respect for the life that God has given to man and to all of creation is more likely to be established.

And with this respect, children are a blessing to the family and not a burden. Yet the urban life style parent can hardly wait to get their children off to school, so I have had said to me many times. In effect children are not typically embraced as the blessing they are but are seen as a burden that imposes on a lifestyle.

The Elderly, as well, are often seen as burdens to have to look in on, more than as one who contributes wisdom and stability to the family community. One of the tasks that I have in ministry is to visit shut-in members. These are people who want connection and who indeed have helpful things to say were one to listen. They want to be embraced with a dignity and a respect called for in the life that God has created.

In those same homes where two or three generations lived, people also died. The family gathered around the one dying and made sure they knew they were loved by the family and by Jesus. The children watched. When my ministry was in the urban setting and when my children were young, I often brought them with me to many of the functions of ministry. This included the funerals of members. The thinking behind this was that my boys would not be afraid of the issue of death in the context of life in Christ.

The story is told of the Pastor who was called to the home of a member who was near death. The family was gathered around and the pastor wasn't sure what to do or what to say. He read a Psalm or two and had a prayer but beyond that he was silent. He sat and watched. The member finally did die. The Pastor was wondering to himself if he had done the right things and could he have said more and what that would have been. About that point in time, one of the family members sat down next to the pastor and said, "Preacher, you did just fine."

The presence of Christ through the ministry of the church is the coping mechanism for those in the community of believers. We know that life is precious, so much so that Jesus died and was raised again so that anyone, by faith in Him, need not fear death but have life everlasting.

If there is an advantage to the rural or urban culture in this regard, I am not certain. What I do know is that the issues of life and death are not so far removed in the rural context. A birth and a death, significant as it is, in the city is a statistic to the larger community.

The challenge in ministry is to teach that the life we have has been given to us by our Creator. We have to find ways to communicate that all life is precious and yet it is under the curse of the law. Still, our Creator loves what He made and so provides a solution to the curse that is upon us. Your life and my life is so precious to Him that He gave His own Son to die so that we could live forever. This value must not be lost.

Conclusion

At the end of the day this is not an attempt to romanticize rural ministry over and against the urban setting. Far from it. People are people not withstanding country, city, nation, family. Sin is sin and all have fallen short of the glory of God. The business of the church is to teach this truth as well as to teach God's solution to sin, death and decay. That being said, I do believe there are Biblical principles that are more easily communicated as these four experiences are recognized and embraced. The challenge for the urban church is to communicate these biblical principles where the experience and living illustration are often frustrated by what man has built, values, and fears. In this respect, the rural church has an advantage because it is just a little closer to the agrarian insight.

However, the fact remains: The hand of God is seen in creation. His creation is incredible and is reflected as such by the Psalmist in his worship; God's provision for us is not only temporal but eternal in Jesus; the community of Christ is one in the body of Christ, with all the saints in heaven and on earth; and life is so precious in the eyes of God that He gave His own Son to die in order that those who believe would live. These values, we cannot lose.