

AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION: THE SECRET IS OUT

Dr. Ron Vallet, ABC/NYS Ambassador for United Mission

Greetings from your Ambassador for United Mission in these days leading up to Lent 2010!

Matthew 4:1-11 tells the story of Jesus' testing by the devil. We learn the kind of person that Jesus is. At his baptism, the voice of heaven had declared him to be the beloved son (Matthew 3:17). In Matthew 4, the clouds clear a bit more and we catch a glimpse of Jesus' character, his sense of calling, what his vocation entails. Jesus knew who he was and what God had called him to do.

When we forget--or fail to remember--that to be part of the reign of God is to be part of the household of God, confusion and uncertainty inevitably follow.

A friend of mine, Canadian theologian Christopher Levan, wrote about his Aunt Jane (*Living in the Maybe*: Eerdmans. 1997):

I was reminded of the importance of memory when I got an emergency call about Aunt Jane from the nursing home.

We all have an Aunt Jane. She lives in the senior's complex over town, has that sit-around-the-fire grandmotherly charm, and, as of late, she's losing her mind. Actually, it's not really her mind that is deteriorating, just her memory.

My Aunt Jane is dignity personified. In younger years, she would never set foot outside her door in anything but the latest fashion. Dressed to "the nines" with none of this polyester and pearls, my aunt looked her Paris-collection best at all times.

You can imagine my dismay when her memory loss became serious. There was the time she called the house in a breathless fluster. "I can't remember where I put my teeth." (Jane had replaced the real ones with a set of dentures--a great blow.)

I asked the obvious question: "Where did you put them last?" Talking her through the apartment, she scouted out the bathroom and her night stand by the bed. "They're not in the glass," she said. A search of the kitchen counter was equally fruitless.

In desperation, I asked her to recall what she was doing just before she missed them. "I was eating a sticky bun, but I didn't like it. They make them so sweet these days. I threw the whole thing out."

A light blinks on!

“Say, Aunt Jane,” trying to sound nonchalant, “why don’t you look in the kitchen garbage can?” Sure enough, there were her false teeth still stuck to the half eaten Chelsea roll. Still wedged in the dough, they went into the wastebasket along with the bun; she hadn’t even noticed.

That’s sad, but not nearly as tragic as the time she came to the door not remembering what to wear. My knock caught her between bath and clothes closet. She knew she should do something, but had no memory of what exactly was needful. So she opened the door with a towel around her neck and a smile--nothing else.

My heart sank for her lost dignity. How could the loss of memory be so cruel to a woman who wore her self-respect with such poise and class?

When we forget, we do embarrassing, undignified things.

Levan added: In a mad dash to shore up the cracks in our religious institutions and balance our church budgets, we’re a bit like [my] Aunt Jane. Forgetful and naked, stripped of the assurance that grows from a knowledge of our past, we are prone to grasping at easy answers or accepting half measures that promise finality. This would be an error. There are many texts that offer the latest in ecclesiastical management techniques. It seems wise that our understanding of any twenty-first century programs be based on a solid appreciation of history’s judgments and questions concerning the merits of church life and the role of stewardship within that.

For us as American Baptists, it is important for us to remember God’s call to us. When the church forgets what it means to be *God’s* household, it is a disaster. Because God’s promises for the future were given in the past, if we don’t have a memory of them we have no real knowledge of God’s promises and, therefore, no hope. We need the miracle of memory.

The story of Jesus’ temptations ends on a positive note. In that final scene, when Jesus rejects the invitation to serve two masters by citing Deuteronomy 6:13, he says, “Away with you, Satan!” And the text reads, “Then the devil left him.” In the end, it is not Satan who has the power over Jesus, but Jesus who issues commands that Satan obeys. To be sure, Satan returns, **BUT THE SECRET IS OUT. AND WHAT IS THE SECRET: IT IS IN BEING FAITHFUL TO ONE’S VOCATION TO BE GOD’S CHILD AND CLINGING TENACIOUSLY TO GOD’S MISSION.**

May we as American Baptists remember our vocation and the calling that God has given to us! We are people called to help carry out God’s mission. American Baptist United Mission (UM) is the core of how we as American Baptists carry out God’s mission locally and throughout the world.

In actuality, God's mission is why the church exists. United Mission makes it possible for each American Baptist congregation to join together with other congregations to do collectively what we cannot do on our own.

Your church's UM giving supports your local region, which makes it possible for the region to provide more effective support for your church and others. In fact, most of the income for each of our regions comes from gifts to United Mission. Our giving to UM pays the major parts of the salaries of our region's staff who provide:

- staff service for search committees;
- assistance resolving church conflicts;
- field ministers to maintain contact with individual pastors and with associations and small groups of churches;
- camping ministry;
- resources to assist your church in growth and spiritual health; and
- education and training of pastors, youth, and lay leaders in congregational empowerment.

UM giving also supports:

- The Office of the General Secretary
- American Baptist Men
- American Baptist Women's Ministries (through the Love Gift)
- ABC Information Services
- National Ministries
- International Ministries
- Colleges, Seminaries, Homes Hospitals, etc.
- Career Centers
- Mission Resource Development
- American Baptist Historical Society
- American Baptist Personnel Services
- Orientation to ABC Life

Reminder: If you need a remittance form with your church's name, address, and PIN number, please contact your regional office.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron

**When we are united in God's mission,
our United Mission will grow.**