

NBC Devotional
January 18, 2023
“Ox Carts & Holy Things”

In the mid 1960s, my father who was pastoring Circleville First Nazarene in Ohio, took a pilgrimage trip to the Holy Lands. Like most tourists of that era, he came home with many trinkets and souvenirs from the trip, including several sets of olive wood camels that were hand cut, hand painted and chained together in sets of three to indicate the three wise men. He carefully packed his prized possessions for his family to assure they arrived home safely. A week after coming home, he noticed that on the bottom of one of them, there was the finely inscribed reality; Made in China.

Why do we treasure handmade items? They’re unique, irreplaceable, and someone has given of their personal time, energy, and lives to produce them.

When my wife and I left our first ministry position as staff members at Marietta First Nazarene in Ohio, the older women of the church gifted us a beautiful quilt that we treasure to this day. It is far more valuable to us than machine made quilts that lack personal attention. We know the people who gave their time making it for us.

In the Old Testament we are reminded that some things cannot be mass-produced.

When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings. He also anointed and consecrated the altar and all its utensils. Then the leaders of Israel, the heads of families who were the tribal leaders in charge of those who were counted, made offerings. They brought as their gifts before the LORD six covered carts and twelve oxen—an ox from each leader and a cart from every two. These they presented before the tabernacle.

The LORD said to Moses, “Accept these from them, that they may be used in the work at the tent of meeting. Give them to the Levites as each man’s work requires.” (Numbers 7:1-5)

Moses had the responsibility to divide the offerings given to him. In our math, it’s pretty simple. Six carts, twelve oxen, and three groups of people mean that each group should be given two carts and four oxen. But God’s math is often different. The Gershonites got two carts and four oxen. The Merathites were given four carts and eight oxen. The Kohathites got nothing.

Verse five is the key ... “as each man’s work requires.” The Kohathites were given the responsibility of moving sacred items from the temple. Those had to be meticulously wrapped and carried by hand.

In preparing for the work of the temple, most things required ox carts to move. There are many things that can be moved by systems, mechanics, equipment, etc. But some things needed to be moved by hand. Remember when David tried to move the holy things of God by ox cart?

In the world where we live, there are structures, systems, and blank lines in sermon outlines that all need to be filled in. We are in an age that computerizes things that can just as easily be done by paper and pencil.

People have become repetitious machines that lack attention and detail, doing inanimate routines without any real understanding of the ultimate purpose. We disconnect our minds and bodies as we multi-task digitally, watching a zoom session while thinking about our other pressing tasks.

Attitudes infiltrate the church, and we begin to see people as tools. We talk of down-scaling, retooling, downtime, down shifting, pulpit supply and filling a church. If someone leaves, we just replace them with someone else.

There is a place for machinery to accomplish routine tasks, but the primary mission of the church is something that can only be done by hand. What happens when our ministry becomes an ox cart? What happens when we try to move the holy things of God by systems, programs, and methods rather than by human touch? Remember when we were a holiness movement and not an organized denomination?

When we plateau or decline, we resort to programs and methods to restore hope. And we have tried all the programs, haven't we? If you google Christian Church Growth Programs, you'll find 63,500,000 results.

Doubleyourchurchattendance.com, Evangelism Explosion, The Seven Touches, The Maxwell Corporate CEO, business church, Leadership Dimensions, Small Church Institute, Great Commission Church Method, Ministry 101 Method, Power of Door to Door, Church Outreach Marketing, The Lakeland Method, Evangelism Coaching, New Church University, Millennium conference, M3, M7, M11, etc... Well, that's getting too close to Nazarene Home.

We try all the methods, we go to all the conferences, we buy all the notebooks, we line them up in our office book cases, and force those programs on our churches because certainly there's got to be a better way to reach people than actually talking to them!

You can learn a lot from other ministries, but until God is moving us, it's nothing more than ox carts. Changing the color of the ox cart doesn't help much.

Grandma Dessie was a member in my last pastorate. Every Sunday she'd come into church, struggling along on her walker but moving steadily. She'd give me a small wave in the vestibule and move on to her classroom for Sunday School. But if she had something to tell me she would shuffle directly toward me. When she was within reach, she'd grab my tie and pull me down, until we were face to face, so she could talk to me.

It was well known that Dessie had an unsaved granddaughter that would go to her house once a week and help with house cleaning for her. Every week, Dessie would witness to her granddaughter while they cleaned the house. Some even said that Dessie would mess things up, so she would have more time with her granddaughter, giving her more time to talk about her faith as she tried to win over the young woman.

One Sunday, Dessie came in and quickly turned her walker toward me. Within moments, she was in front of me, where she grabbed my tie and pulled me down to speak.

"My granddaughter is coming to church today." She told me.

"That's wonderful, Dessie. I look forward to seeing her." I replied.

"My granddaughter isn't saved." She told me.

"Yes, I know. I know you've been praying for her." I commented.

With that, Dessie looked me in the eye and gave me this demand. "Don't mess it up!"

What Dessie was really saying was that she had been pouring her life into the life of her granddaughter. It was a unique ministry. It was time-consuming. It was irreplaceable. She had given her time and energy to produce fruit for the kingdom.

Many things about our work are nothing more than ox carts. Board meetings, trustees' gatherings, district assemblies, reports, and committees are all just systems we use. But the real work of the church is not done through ox carts. It's done when people pour their lives into the lives of others.

If God wanted to save the world by programs, the Church of the Nazarene would be the largest denomination on earth. We've got lots of programs. But Jesus came into this world, personally to show us that loving people can't be done through a program. He came to lowly Bethlehem, ate with sinners and tax collectors, went to parties and weddings, expressed grace to those of other nationalities, touched the unclean of society, healed the sick, and washed the feet of his disciples.

He, the great example for us, shows us that true love is hand made.

Rev. Kevin Dennis