I don’t know whether the microphones picked up any of what I was saying to the choir, but of course, you know that the phrase “preaching to the choir” isn’t a literal one. However, I thought it might be both a lot of fun and a poignant illustration if I turned and let you look at the back of my head for a change. The phrase has been around since the 1970s as a way of criticizing speeches, sermons, or ideas as being something your audience already agrees to. In earlier times, at least in the religious context, the phrase would have been “Preaching to the converted” and criticized a common practice among evangelical preachers of never preaching about anything other than trying to get people to make a profession of faith. Baptists were particularly attracted to this style of preaching and it indeed resulted in much of their early growth, but it was really the Sunday school movement coupled with missions and the graded choir program that precipitated the explosive growth of Baptists in mid-twentieth century America.

There are other phrases used to describe preachers and preaching, such as “He’s done stopped preaching and gone to meddling.” Or maybe something like the woman who when asked what her preacher was like got her words a little mixed up and said, “He’s a real hellnation and damnfire preacher.” So, today, however you may describe me or my preaching, I’m hopeful I can really preach what you “need” to hear rather than what you might already be convinced of. This may be a good opportunity to rid yourselves of rotten tomatoes and I’m grateful for once to have this pulpit to “hide” behind. But keep in mind that you just might miss me and hit Marcus or the choir, and then you will be in big, big trouble!

It was just a year ago today, I think, that I preached for you the first time, and you were most receptive to what I had to say, possibly because it was the truth and something of a reality check of what we as a church needed to do. I could not have imagined then that within a month Travis would have resigned and I would be filling this pulpit on a regular basis
thereafter. Depending on one’s viewpoint, I was either the biggest fool on the planet or God’s person in the right place and time. I sincerely hope it was the latter, although you more than likely think it was the former. I am most grateful to Lynn Hyder for sharing the misery with me last Fall.

So, here we are a year after that most miserable experience of last August and once again we are in dire need of a reality check or two. Chief among those is the need to realize and accept that we are a small church with a big old building. Neither of those is particularly problematic. It’s obvious we have way more buildings than we need. Unfortunately, the real problem is that we have buried our head in the sand and continue to think and act like we were the same church as we were some decades ago. In truth, our average attendance is about 65 in worship and only about 20 in Sunday school. Some of you are pessimistic enough to suggest that it’s time for us just to pack it in and move elsewhere or even close shop altogether. But the real problem is a lack of faith. Do you suppose decades ago when the church was young and had just reached a total of 65 members for the first time that they were as suicidal as we seem to be? Do you suppose they looked around and said, “Well, folks know where the church is, they’ll come if they want to?” Do you think that in the 50s and 60s when the average attendance was more like 350 that those folks thought, well we’re big enough, let’s just stop reaching people? I hardly think so -- they built this very fine facility in order to minister to their own and the neighborhood around them. They not only built a fine facility, but they built a congregation of people who were sometimes labeled as outcasts and rebels so far as their theological positions were concerned. Some of us remember when nearly half the faculty of Baptist Seminary were members here and a good chunk of faculty from Tulane and UNO, as well.

What’s changed? Why are we not still capitalizing on the fact that we are quite different from the typical Baptist church? Why are we not making a concerted effort to reach the “up and out” who are largely being drawn to the super churches where they can “hide out” in the crowd and be given a grand hour of entertainment where all they have to do is “just praise the Lord” without any fear of being asked to do much of anything other than throw a few bucks in the offering plate. If we are the diverse church that we claim to be, open to those with differing theological, political, and social
ideas, if we are affirming of all persons and not just those most like us, why on earth are people not beating down the doors to come here? Could it be that we have grown so complacent in our diversity that the unity we should have in our Christian faith is just a ruse? What if we just admitted that we are a small church united more by our complacency than by our commitment to God? Isn’t it time we confessed our sin of complacency to God and not only asked for forgiveness but a vision of just what we might become if we were willing to get off our duffs and actually serve God right here, right now? Now would be a good time to throw rotten tomato number one—but save some for later, it gets worse!

Reality check number two is that financially we are barely paying our way anymore. The real truth is that even had Travis stayed on, we could not have afforded to pay him at the same level. On our present income and what we might reasonably expect for the rest of the year from all contributions and usage fees, half would have gone for his salary and benefits and the other half for maintaining these buildings, with nothing left over for anything else! And nearly all the budget contributions are coming from a core membership of about 30-40 people who have been remarkably faithful and consistent in their giving. The problem is, it just ain’t enough! And the only solution is to either increase our numbers, give much more money, lease more space at larger rates, or. The truth of the matter is that we cannot afford to hire a new pastor even at half the salary and benefits as before under the present circumstances. It is my opinion that we as a church travel down a slippery slope if we think that these buildings can ever support our total expenses in and of themselves. Until we can support all our ministry functions and expenses from member contributions alone, our future is indeed a bleak one. As much as I would like to put a positive spin on our situation, the stark truth is that we must step out in faith and follow God’s leadership or we will indeed be successful in our suicide! So, go ahead and throw rotten tomato number two!

So, what must we do? Eventually you will run out of rotten tomatoes and both you and I will be left standing stewing in place, unless and only if we ask forgiveness for our complacency and start being the church! Outreach and evangelism in our church are at a standstill. Yes, we have an outreach
committee who work hard at bringing in more members. But there is no outreach without “reach out.” And at that we are not very good. You are so good about giving money to various causes, but where is the giving of our time and talents? If this is such a wonderful church, why are we so reluctant to reach out to those who would benefit so very much from the kind of fellowship we have? We need to broaden our horizons, not pull back. We need to find ways to involve not only ourselves but those around us in being a pro-active force for good in this community and this city. Instead of living in fear that we might lose these buildings through shaky finances or unfair taxation, what’s to prevent us from using them for every kind of imaginable activity that would benefit those less fortunate than ourselves. If we don’t have enough people from our own membership, what’s to keep us from getting college students, neighbors, and even strangers on board to help us create a “community of faith” from among the various other communities surrounding us? Are we so greedy in our resources that we think we have nothing to share? Instead of dumbing down and gearing down, we need to ramp up our ministries with the mindset that God has placed us here on this corner to serve this city right here, right now. So what if we only have 65 people, is it too much to ask that each of us do everything we possibly can to reach at least one other person? We could so easily be back at the 120 average attendance level if we would just share our love for Christ and for the church with one other person. So, go ahead now and throw that third rotten tomato!

I close today with something I’d rather not say, but I feel God wants me to say to you. It’s time this church stood up or shut up! We can either be the Church or just another social club. We can either serve God or serve ourselves. And if we reach out to others without first allowing God to reach in and take control of us, we will most surely fail. If God is not the author and motivator, then we are just trying to hang onto a lovely building, a lovely idea, a lovely group of people. And if we think that our financial problems can be solved just by finding more members, then we are just being mercenary and basing outreach on money. Only when we truly reach out to people and fulfill their needs will we succeed. And after all, isn’t that our purpose as a church, to worship God and serve our fellow humans?
So, you’ve thrown your rotten tomatoes, and here I stand covered with the stink. Here’s an illustration you will find strange beyond words, no doubt. But several years ago I found a deodorant that works better than anything I’ve ever tried. The product is called Pure & Natural and is a crystal stone made of entirely natural products. I found it at C’s Pharmacy, a small local discount store which recently sold out to CVS, another giant corporation. Pure & Natural works because it addresses the root of underarm odor, which is to kill the bacteria that cause the odor in the first place: so simple, so effective, such pleasant results, and yet almost impossible to find in drugstores. Why, because there just ain’t enough money in it for most stores. You see, this little deodorant stone costs about $3.00 and it will last maybe a year. I mean it only wears away slowly from the rubbing action on your armpits. There’s a sticker on top of this one that says over 10 million have been sold. That means that those 10 million at $3.00 each would amount to $30 million for the company. Not bad for a single product. But you understand that in comparison, a bottle of Ban which sells for about the same price will run out in about a month and you will need to buy another one again and again, and all you really have is something that smells pretty for a little while and then the smelly problem returns. It does little more than mask the odor and you are right back where you started. From a purely profit standpoint, the makers of Ban seem far smarter. So, what’s my point? Which would you rather have, a product that solves the problem or one that merely makes the problem smell nice for a little while? We can either use what God has given us to address the spiritual needs of our city and thereby solve problems, or we can just mask the odor of our rottenness. We can either be the presence of Christ in our city or we can just put ourselves in hospice and wait for death! When is enough, enough? Shall we reach out in greedy hope of bringing in big money to save our buildings, or shall we reach out with our hands full and overflowing to offer those around us God’s love? If we will just let go of our stubborn wills and egos and just share God’s love with those who so desperately need it, God will provide everything our hearts could desire, because in the end our only desire should be to give away God’s love!

AMEN?