

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, DAYTON, OHIO

Heritage Sunday
January 25, 2009

“THE PERFECT CHURCH”

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48, I Corinthians 12:12-27

Text: Not that I have already obtained this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. (Philippians 3:12)

INTRODUCTION

It is a great honor to be here with all of you on this Heritage Sunday, and I am grateful to the session and to your pastor, my dear friend Sandy McConnel, for the invitation to preach from this pulpit. As we say in the South, Barbara and I “have been knowin” the McConnells and the Woessners of this congregation since the early 1970’s when we started out in youth ministry at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, and we treasure our friendships with them over all these years.

I am also aware of the many good things happening here at Westminster, and of your tradition which is significant to this city and to our entire denomination. The theologian Jarislov Pelikan once wrote that “Tradition is the living faith of those who have died, while traditionalism is the dead faith of those who are still alive.” (“The Vindication of Tradition” by Jaroslav Pelikan, Yale University Press, 1984) – and this church is surely an inspiring example of the living faith which has been passed down from generation to generation!

I

But that is not so for every congregation. Some years ago, coming home from a Presbytery meeting, I was driving down Ralph Abernathy Boulevard in Atlanta, when suddenly I stopped at a red light and saw the sign on the front of a building which said “The Perfect Church.” I was surprised, because although many people are looking for the perfect church, I didn’t know that it actually existed.

So, I pulled into the parking lot, got out of my car, went to the front door and knocked. No one answered. I walked around to the windows and looked in, but nobody was there. I tried the side entrance, which was locked, and then went around to the back door by the children's playground, but once more, there was no response. As far as I could see, the place was empty.

And in the midst of that moment, the thought occurred to me back then, which I share with you now, that somebody may have finally figured out how to create "**The Perfect Church.**" Simply put a sign with that name on the front of the building, apply for tax exemption, and don't let any people in!

Because, without people, there would be no problems, no pressures, no fussing with each other, so financial difficulties, no theological conflicts, no denominational controversies – The Perfect Church. And if you have been looking for it, for The Perfect Church, I think I've found it – on the corner of Ralph Abernathy Boulevard and McDaniel Street in Atlanta, Georgia.

To take this a step further, it seems that some people are in search of "The Perfect Pastor." And if you want to know what she or he looks like, then how does this description sound, taken from an article in The Presbyterian Outlook magazine (March 2001):

"The perfect pastor preaches exactly 10 minutes, roundly condemns sin, but never hurts anyone's feelings. He (or she) works from 8 A.M. until midnight and also serves as the church janitor. The perfect pastor makes \$200.00 a week, wears fine clothes, drives a new car and tithes \$190.00 back to the church. She (or he) is 29 years old and has 40 years of experience.

The perfect pastor is supposed to work with teenagers and also to spend most of the time ministering to older adults. He (or she) attends every church meeting, but is always out in the neighborhood evangelizing the unchurched. She (or he) makes 15 home visits every week, and is always available in the office when needed.

Now, if your pastor does not measure up, simply send this notice to six other churches that are searching for perfection too. Then bundle up your pastor and send him (or her) to the church at the top of the list. If everyone cooperates, in one

week you will receive 1,643 pastors, and one of them should be perfect.

Have faith in this letter. One church broke the chain and got its old pastor back in less than three months!”

Well, let’s be honest about it. Our images and expectations of the perfect church and the perfect pastor have been shaped by a consumer mentality that permeates our society. We go “church shopping,” hoping to find what we think we want, and “pastor searching,” looking for the one person who will meet all of our needs. And the gap between our expectations and reality is as high as a steeple and as wide as the main street that runs through this city.

But here at Westminster, some years ago, you decided to take a different approach. The advertisement you placed in one of our denominational magazines said this:

“Imperfect church with imperfect staff seeks an imperfect candidate for associate pastor in order that grace may abound. Primary responsibilities include membership development, community outreach and global mission. Interested parties should forward information to imperfect head of staff, The Rev. Dr. George Hunt McConnel and the imperfect Search Committee, 125 Wilkinson Street, Dayton, Ohio.”

Now that was a remarkable and truly unique advertisement which caught my attention and gave birth to this sermon. Because you, in that statement, came ever so close to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to what He and those first century followers envisioned the church to be and to become.

II

In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, as Jesus preached The Sermon on the Mount, He put it this way:

You have heard that it was said “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in Heaven, for He makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain to fall on the

righteous and the unrighteous...be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43,48).

Now, Jesus knew what the Apostle Paul would later write to the Roman Christians was true: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). That is why God sent His Son into this world – to save us from sin and set us free from the darkness of evil. So Jesus was telling those first century people and all of us still today that love and forgiveness is the way God wants it to be. When we follow the gold standard of the gospel, the Bible says that *God's perfect love will cast out all of our fear* (I John 4:18). And that kind of perfection is our ultimate goal. None of us will ever fully attain it, but we can learn to seek and to aim toward it, in and through the Christian church.

My friends the Biblical image we have been given as Christians is the “Body of Christ” on earth. So said the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians:

For just as the body is one and has many members...so it is with Christ. For in the One Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of One Spirit...God has so arranged the body...that there may be no dissension among us, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. So, you are the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13, 24-27).

III

Therefore, on this Heritage Sunday, it is with some apprehension that I want to remind us as Presbyterians – we have not always lived up to our Confession of Faith.

I have here the chart of the history of the Scottish church from 1500 to 1920. The Church of Scotland has been a great witness to Jesus Christ down through the centuries, and helped to give birth to our denomination here in this country. But the tradition falls far short of perfection, as this chart reveals with the numerous conflicts and schisms, including one in particular called “The Lifters Controversy” in 1783. Do you know what happened

back then? In serving communion, some Presbyterian pastors, remembering the Roman Catholic tradition, believed it was proper to lift the chalice high over their heads...while others, who were former Anglicans, thought it was right to lift the chalice only so high in front of their eyes...and still other clergymen, rejecting all former practices, believed it was best to let the chalice simply rest on the communion table. They called it “The Lifters Controversy,” and it split part of the Church of Scotland into three different branches in 1783.

You’d think that we might have learned our lessons from past dissensions and divisions. But as all of you know, not only Presbyterians, but also members of different denominations are still not on the same page today.

Down in Atlanta, a predicament developed between a large Southern Baptist congregation and a smaller Methodist church which were located directly across from each other on Peachtree Street.

The problem was that the Baptists, who were booming in size and membership, were leaving their cars on Sunday mornings in the Methodist Church parking lot. The Methodists didn’t like it, so they sent a letter to the Baptist Board of Deacons, asking that they would cease and desist. They didn’t, so the Methodist pastor called the Baptist preacher on the phone to ask for some cooperation. He wouldn’t. Do you know how they resolved the conflict?

One Sunday morning, the Baptists came out of worship, crossed the street and found stickers on all of their back bumpers which read: “I’M PROUD TO BE A METHODIST.” The Baptists didn’t park there anymore!

Well, that’s the way it was in the Corinthian Church a long time ago. Those Christians were fussing with each other about theology and sexuality, about communion and worship liturgy, about stewardship and spirituality, about who was in and who was out. And sad to say, many of us are still struggling with those same issues in the Presbyterian Church today.

So listen again to what Paul wrote long ago, and let us try to hear these words in a reconciling and renewing way:

You are the Body of Christ...and the Body of Christ does not consist of one member, but of many members. And no member can say to another – I don't need you (Paraphrase of I Corinthians 12).

Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian author who lives in South Dakota, describes how she discovered this truth in her book “Amazing Grace.” She was joining a small, rural Presbyterian church and this is what happened:

“Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders. One man I didn't like all that much – I'll call him Ed – seemed ill-tempered to me, and also a terrible gossip... The minister asked him to formally greet the new members, and standing awkwardly before our group, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled ‘I'd like to welcome you to the Body of Christ.’ The minister's mouth dropped open, as did mine. Neither of us had ever heard such words remotely like this come from Ed's mouth... But I was astonished to realize, as that service began, that although I may never like Ed very much, I had been commanded to love him. My own small mind had just been jolted, and the world suddenly seemed larger, opened in a new way.” (From “Amazing Grace” by Kathleen Norris, Riverhead Books, 1998, page 142)

CONCLUSION

Now, the question on this Heritage Sunday is: “Do we believe that is true today? That all of us belong to the Body of Christ, and that we as members, are connected to one another, no matter what? And that the Lord Jesus, who is Head of the Church, has called us to stick together through thick and thin especially in this stressful time of financial trauma across our nation, which is trickling down to just about every congregation I know”?

In Scotland, they tell the story about an old Presbyterian in a Kirk outside Edinburgh who had been baptized and confirmed in the tradition of his forbears. In his mid-fifties, he was ordained an elder and served the church faithfully. But one night, in a session meeting, an argument flared up about financial issues, and a brother elder said something that was unkind, criticizing the faithful Scot in front of the others.

He was offended, rose from his seat around the table, walked out the door and refused to return. A month passed, and then a year, and then another year, and still, he would not come back. Letters were sent, phone calls were made, but to no avail. The Scot was bitter and hurt and believed that he had been forsaken.

Then, a new pastor came to the Kirk and was told about the man, who was now in his eighties. So, the pastor got down on his knees to pray, and then walked up the pathway to where the former churchman lived. He knocked on the door, and when it opened, he saw the old man standing there with anger in his eyes and resentment on his face. As they went into the living room, neither of them spoke a word. They sat down by the fire, looked into the burning coals and were silent for a long time.

After a while, the young pastor stood up, took a pair of tongs and removed a burning white-hot coal from the fire and set it down on the hearth. They both watched the coal flicker, grow dim and finally go out. Then the pastor picked it up again with the tongs, placed it back in the fire, and they both watched it begin to burn, bright and strong once more. The pastor looked the old man in the eye and said “We miss you at the Kirk.” And he walked out the door with a silent prayer on his lips and hope in his heart.

The following Sunday, the old Scot was back in his usual pew, and he worshipped there faithfully every Sabbath Day until his 91st year, when he died and joined the church triumphant.

Christian friends: that is what we need in our congregations today! To love and forgive one another, and to live together in peace and unity, in spite of all of our imperfections. I think that is exactly what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote these words to another church in Philippi: *Not that I am already perfect...but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own* (Philippians 3:12).

Do you believe that is true? If you do, or if you want to, then listen to these final words from Mother Teresa, rest her soul, who struggled with her own imperfection, but left us with a legacy that leads us in the right direction:

“Christ has
No body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours;

No feet but yours;
Yours are the hands
Through which He touches the world now.
Yours are the feet
Through which He goes about doing good.
Yours are the eyes
Through which He sees those in need.
Yours are the lives
Through which He blesses now.
Christ has
No body now on earth but yours.”
(Paraphrase)

You, Westminster Church, are the Body of Christ! So claim your heritage
and let His love show and let His light shine in your lives!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon delivered by:
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