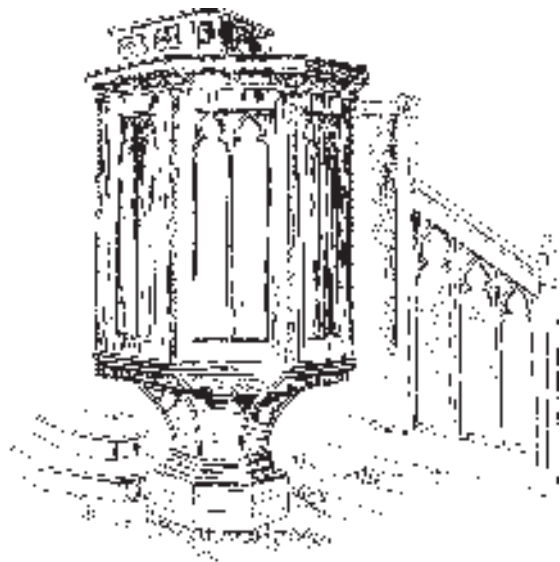


May 23, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

On Being Presbyterian
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Judges 2:6-10

I know this congregation always pays attention to music, but I hope you were really listening to the words of our hymn just now. Just in case you missed it, I want you to open your hymnals again to Hymn 442. Let's say together the third verse:

“Though with a scornful wonder
This world sees her oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed,
Yet saints their watch are keeping;
Their cry goes up: ‘How long?’
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.”

While Samuel Wesley wrote these words nearly 150 years ago, it's hard to think of a more appropriate description of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2010.

Much of the world does look upon us Presbyterians with a “scornful wonder.” They see a church in hot water, or as Wesley put it “sore oppressed”—openly criticized, or worse, ignored in the national press

and having lost a million members in the last 20 years. They see a church split up into factions or as Wesley put it, "by schisms rent asunder," pro-life/pro-choice, the Laymen, The Witherspoon Society, Presbyterians for Gay and Lesbian Concerns, Presbyterians for Renewal - the special interest groups go on and on. There are so many factions it's hard even for an insider to keep it straight.

Folks see a denomination containing all sorts of people proclaiming all sorts of things, none of which are entirely true. "By heresies distressed," says Wesley. What an accurate picture!

And yet...and yet, I don't know about you, but I'm still proud to be a Presbyterian. I'm still an enthusiastic Presbyterian. Why? Well, the kilts and the bagpipes help! But, it's much more than that.

In a word, I am still an enthusiastic Presbyterian because Presbyterians take sin seriously. The polity or government of the reformed or Presbyterian tradition is built on sin. Yes, that really is true, at least in part. Let me explain.

There are three basic forms of church government. On one side is the Episcopal form of government, in which the bishop is the authority just like a monarch - examples are the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church. On the other side is the Congregational form of government, where the local congregation exercises the predominant power and authority; examples are the Baptists, the Congregationalists and the Assemblies of God. In the middle are the Presbyterians. We are ruled by elders, like the ones we just ordained and installed. Our form of government comes between the other two, with not just one person fully in charge, nor all members.

Why was our form of government chosen? Because of sin. Do you remember who were the arbitrary despots at the time of the Reformation? They were the rulers and the principalities, the kings and the ecclesiastical bishops, the cardinals and the Pope. These were the perceived powerful sinners who were not to be trusted - ergo, a collective bishop is brought onto the scene, a committee, to make all the decisions. No one was fooled, of course. Everyone knew that a group of people can collectively sin, but it was felt that a *group* was much less likely to be arrogant and arbitrary than just one person, acting often in that person's own self-interests.

It is worth noting in this connection that a church pastor can do very little alone. Some Sessions have been known to allow a pastor to become a tyrant or dictator, but they are very naughty and negligent (as is the presbytery) to allow anything like that to happen. The pastor alone can baptize no one; can make no decision about the use of the church property, cannot decide who will become a member or cease to be a member; cannot fire the Christian Education Director or employ a secretary. The Session is responsible for all these things. Yes, the pastor is the moderator of the Session and has a vote and authority to speak and can exercise great leadership. But, the pastor can do or decide very few things without an action of the Session. Without the Session's approval, the pastor can only choose the hymns and the scripture for the sermon, decide who to marry or bury and what to preach! And at Westminster the pastor better not even choose the hymns before talking to John!

We Presbyterians do not have a pure democracy, but a representative form of government, quite similar to the civil system in the United States. That is not coincidental! Instead of city, county, state, and federal government, we have Session, Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. Every governing

body, above the Session has an equal number of “ruling” elders and “teaching” elders, or Ministers of Word and Sacrament. We call it parity. Long ago the Reformers rejected rule by priests, or the paid professionals. All church members are “represented” by those relatively few who are elected and then installed to be the elders for that congregation.

However, (and here’s the catch!) elders and ministers do not seek the will of the people, but the will of Christ.

This is a fundamental principle that holds us together. It is not always well understood. Persons elected for leadership responsibilities do represent, that is, come from, the body that elects them; but, they are not to take a poll of that body to see how they should vote. Rather, these representatives should seek the will of God in concert with all other elders and pastors in a Session, and with all presbyters in a meeting of a higher governing body. This is part of the covenant between God and the people. God’s will is to be done—not the will of a presby group, or the choir, or a special interest group, insofar as any human group can discern God’s intention.

So, as ministers and elders we are to represent God. God rules, or in Calvin’s great conviction, “God is sovereign.” This is why we must try to take very seriously our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit which we celebrate this Pentecost Sunday. God’s Spirit might move us collectively in ways that individually we might never have thought possible. Yes, it can be risky to listen to the voice of God. God might want us to cross the Red Sea when an enemy army is pursuing us from behind. God might call us to abolish child labor or to change our mind on slavery or to affirm women as equal to men in the eyes of God and the church or to accept homosexuals as deacons.

A common distraught cry from many members upon hearing of an action by a Presbyterian governing body—say on Angela Davis in the 70s or on Viet Nam or abortion or integration reform—is, “They surely don’t speak for me!” You are right! Sessions and General Assemblies don’t speak for you. They speak to you on behalf of God. It is not intended that an elder or a minister should cast a vote in the precise manner in which even the majority of the membership they represent think best. The governing body purports to speak to you and me from the leading of God’s Spirit. Until and unless church members comprehend this principle in depth, they may never be comfortable in the Presbyterian Church and its understanding of representative governance. A popular referendum will never be tried in the Presbyterian Church because the church is not seeking a popular vote or a poll on any issue; the church corporately seeks to ascertain the will of God, and that is often a great deal tougher to do than to just pull together a majority of individual votes or to make a series of judgments.

For good reason Calvin thought long and hard about polity in the Reformed Church, and we are his ecclesiastical heirs. We joke a great deal about our multitude of committee, Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly meetings, and we need to take much of it in a light vein, but we also need to remember that we are constantly working on our continuing effort to reform this great church whose very methods, whose very procedures, whose very processes, bind us together in a community of believers who trust one another and the leading of God’s Spirit. As office bearers we seek to ascertain God’s will and to try to act on God’s guidance.

Our scripture reading this morning from Judges tells of the perils and the precarious nature of passing along the faith. We are always within one generation of extinction. At times, during the past 30 years Presbyterians as a denomination have looked like they might self-destruct. However, I think we Presbyterians have bottomed out. I think others are recognizing the strength of our government and the wisdom of our theology. The concluding phrase to Wesley's third verse of Hymn 442 is accurate, too:

"Soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song."

I'm proud to be a Presbyterian! It's not a perfect form of government, but it's the best I know. How about you?

Let us pray:

Almighty and ever-living God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Resources used in this sermon:

The Significance of the Church by Robert M. Brown

What Unites Presbyterians by Clifton Kirkpatrick and William H. Hopper, Jr.