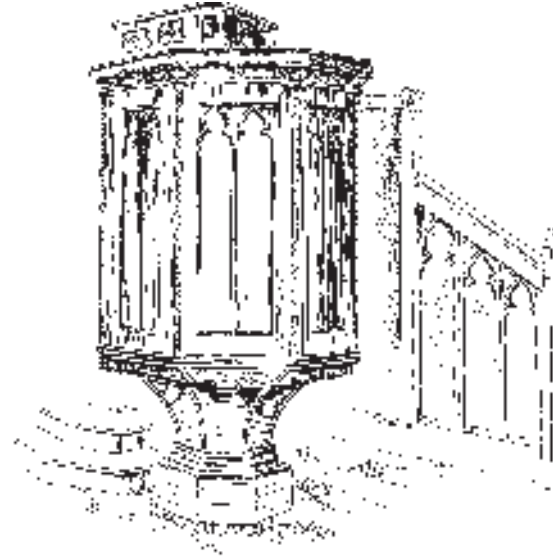


May 31, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Let the Beat Go On

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Psalm 95
Confession of 1967

My oldest granddaughter, Katherine, loves to talk on the phone. She'll be four in October. A couple of Sundays ago I asked her if she had gone to church that morning. She said, "No, I went to Mass." Her Presbyterian minister grandfather still is a little taken back with the Roman Catholic lingo.

Roman Catholics use the term "Mass." Why that word? What does it mean? Mass. The word comes from "missa," the word of dismissal used at the end of the old Latin service. It is the end. It is over - all those long prayers, awkward silences - all those anthems and aching knees. Now back to the fresh air. Back home. Sunday dinner. Now life can begin again.

At this table, we are nourished with a food found nowhere else in the world. After eating here, we are enabled to go out into the world - to really live. Like the prophets we are called in order to be sent. All that we do here is in preparation for that going out - for dismissal - for mass.

When at seminary, our President, Dr. McCord, used to tell us "life is a series of ups and downs, with our being emptied and filled again, with our being raised up and brought low." Now, as a former stockbroker, I could relate to that, but he insisted that it is the same with our spiritual life, too. "Faith, at times, is at full tide, God is near and affirming. But also, faith is like a sieve - it is a leaky vessel.

We lose its content, our relationship with Jesus Christ. Faith seems to drip away, and we become empty. We discover that we never have God – never possess God – but that we must go back to God again and again to be filled.” It is to this table we come – aware of our emptiness – aware too, that here is where real food is to be found.

Our Confession of 1967 has an interesting image of the church. It likens the church to a beating heart with its two movements – expansion and contraction. The members of the church, like the blood of a heart, are gathered and dispersed. “Wherever the church exists,” says the Confession, “its members are both gathered in corporate life and dispersed in society for the sake of mission in the world.”

“The church gathers,” as we are now, “to praise God, to hear God’s word for our lives, to baptize, and join in the Lord’s Supper, to ordain officers, to pray for the world, and present it to God.

But, the church is not confined to this room or this building. It disperses to serve God wherever its members are.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way, “The words ‘Worship Service,’ are really a tautology. To worship God means to serve him and there are two ways to do it. One way is to gather to do things for God that we need to do – sing songs for God, create beautiful things for God, tell God what’s on our mind and in our heart, listen to God’s word to us. And another way is to disperse – to do things for God that God needs to have done – run errands for God, carry and speak God’s message, fight on God’s side, feed God’s lambs.” Both the gathering and the dispersing are essential – like the beat of a heart with its expansion and contraction.

Several years ago I was part of a 10 day mission trip to Juarez, Mexico. Juarez is a third world border town near El Paso, Texas. In fact, if there is a fourth world, Juarez would be part of it. My clearest memory is the Sunday worship - the hunger of the people of God – their obvious faith – the enthusiasm of the worship – the reverence for the communion meal. I got the sense that the church was an indispensable part of those people’s lives – that they could barely exist without that time together each week.

Unlike the poor in Mexico, we eat so well elsewhere, we are apt to forget where to go for real nourishment. We all know our physical body cannot withstand the cessation of the heart’s beating – expanding and contracting. In the same way, our spiritual body cannot withstand the cessation of the gathering, dispersing so necessary for our life of faith.

We are about to celebrate the mass – an appropriate word for we have come together in order to be dismissed. In this feeding we are empowered to go out and live our faith, to serve God as God’s faithful people. We have gathered in order to disperse, in order to gather.

Let the beat go on.