

Series: Lessons from the Lectionary
Today: Let the Church be the Church
Text: Acts 2:42-47

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, May 15, 2011
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Dr. John MacKay, a former President of Princeton Theological Seminary, had retired by the time I arrived on campus, but he would still visit the school and eat with the students from time to time. It was always a treat to be one of the people invited to share a meal with him, and I remember the evening it was my turn to sit and listen to his wisdom. He said, *“Gentlemen (there were very few women during my years of seminary, and I married one of the brightest and the best that was on campus); Gentlemen, I know we are teaching you to be pastoral theologians, but I must tell you this: your challenge as a pastor will be to **let the church be the church.**”*

Dr. MacKay truly believed that the church is like no other institution in our society, and that it was our job as pastors to be sure that we helped the Church of Jesus Christ to fulfill the destiny for which it was created; to help it do the things it is good at and allow it to become a shaping influence in the culture in which it is placed.

Well, the church which I was ordained to serve and the culture of which it is a part have changed rather dramatically over the 40 years I have been ordained, but this morning I want to take seriously Dr. MacKay’s challenge for the time and place in which we find ourselves today. How do we “let the church be the church?” I want to use our text for this morning as the text to challenge us. Luke tells us that the church of the first century had certain characteristics which marked its life as a church: 1) A Commitment To Spiritual Formation and Growth; 2) A Sense of Awe at God’s Activity in our Lives; and 3) A Sense of Responsibility for the Well Being of Others.

A Commitment to Spiritual Formation and Growth

The first thing we notice about the church in the first century is their commitment to spiritual formation and growth. Our text says *“They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and fellowship; to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”* This was a church that wanted to know more and more about the God of the Bible and what that God had done in the lives of the community of faith. They were not ashamed about what they did not know. They wanted to know what scripture said and how to apply it to their lives. They were unwilling to settle for being biblically illiterate.

Some of us here this morning may identify with the members of that early church. We may have wound up here because you wanted our children to have a Christian Education, but our own knowledge of the Bible is pretty shaky. If we are going to let the church be the church, we need to encourage each other to be honest about our own lack of knowledge and find ways to make it comfortable to learn the things we need to learn in order to help you grow in our faith.

I love the story of the 9-year-old who was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School. *“Well, Mom, our teacher told us about how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge, and all the people walked across safely. He used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters and call in an air strike. They sent in bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.”*

Joey’s mother was a little concerned about what her child was learning, so she said, *“Now, Joey, is that REALLY what the teacher taught you today?”* To which the little boy responded, *“Well, not really, Mom. But if I told you the way the teacher did teach it, you would never believe it.”*

Letting the church be the church means paying attention to the way we do our spiritual formation. We know that there is a hunger in people for biblical literacy; to know what the bible says

and how it can be applied to their lives. We sense that there is a desire for authentic worship in this culture, but we also know that traditional forms of worship do not always fulfill that desire for everyone. So we have committed ourselves to find other styles of worship that meet people at the point of their need, and to meet the needs of a new generation. We know that people hunger for connection with God through prayer because we see this every time someone comes in asking for help. After helping them we offer to pray with them. 100% of those who seek help say thank you for praying for them; that this is something they wanted to do but didn't know how, and that no one else has offered.

Letting the church be the church means paying attention to the way we form people for the journey of faith. We need to do that with care.

A Sense of Awe at God's Activity in our Lives

Our scripture goes on to say that awe was a sign that God was at work in the life of the early church. *"Awe came upon everyone, because of the many wonders and signs that were being done by the apostles."* Perhaps we need to foster a greater sense of awe at where God is at work in our lives.

On Monday when we were planning the service for this week, Alisa Bair asked me if I really thought that people were in awe of God anymore. I told her that I thought that most people didn't identify what was going on as the activity of God in their lives and that we needed to teach them that life was more than a series of coincidences.

One of the most dramatic revelations of this came seven years ago during the summer of my sabbatical leave. You may recall that my daughter's kidneys had failed and she was on kidney dialysis. She asked me if I would be willing to be a kidney donor, and of course I was. Unfortunately, even though I was a match, the doctors would not allow me to donate my kidney because my blood pressure is controlled by medication and they were concerned what would happen if I had only one kidney.

So Holly asked if I would be willing to help her find a donor, and of course I was. I sent out emails to everyone in my address book. I spoke of the need openly when I was in public gatherings. All to no avail; there was no donor forthcoming.

Then on my sabbatical I was scheduled to visit two churches in Santa Barbara, California who were having some success in reaching post modern young adults. However, in spite of the arrangements I had made in advance, the pastors of both of the churches in Santa Barbara forgot that I was coming and both of them were out of town the weekend I showed up.

There I was, stuck in Santa Barbara (not a bad place to be stuck) with no one to see and no plans to fulfill. So I called my best friend from college and my roommate in seminary who lived about 120 miles south of Santa Barbara and asked if I could come and take him and his wife out to dinner. He was thrilled, but insisted that we eat at their home.

When I arrived for dinner, they had invited a mutual friend of ours whom I hadn't seen in 20 years. During dinner the conversation turned to Holly's kidney failure and my inability to be a donor for the kidney she needed. Suddenly, our mutual friend was asking all kinds of questions about what it took to become a kidney donor. To make a long story short, three months later that woman was in Philadelphia donating her kidney to my daughter.

Some might call that a happy coincidence. However, as a friend of mine put it when he heard the story, coincidence is sometimes God's way of remaining anonymous. We had so many people praying for Holly. I was in a place that I wasn't supposed to be having dinner with a woman with whom I had very little contact. Her kidney was almost a perfect match; almost as good as my own. Was this coincidence? Or was it a sign and a wonder of the presence of God hovering over us and giving us the fervent desires of our hearts.

I believe there are signs and wonders going on all around us if we will simply pray for the eyes to see them and the ears to hear them. If we align our heart with God's heart and commit our way to the Lord, trust in God and believe that God will act, we might be amazed at what is revealed in the way of signs and wonders.

A Sense of Responsibility for the Well Being of Others

Finally, our text tells us that a sign of the presence of God in the life of the community was the responsibility they all took for each other's well being. They held all things in common, and if anyone had a need, they would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to those in need. They spent time together, eating in each other's homes, coming to know each other's concerns, and caring for each other in tangible ways.

That is something that is far easier to preach than it is to practice. I know I am not alone in believing that this is the kind of care we want to exhibit as the body of Christ here at First Presbyterian Church. However, it is far easier to practice this kind of love when we are with people who think like we think and believe what we believe. It is far more difficult when we are asked to love those who don't believe as we believe and don't think like we think. The text says that it was this witness that kept attracting strangers to their fellowship; the way that people who did not always agree with each other took care of each other.

On Tuesday afternoon at Peace Presbyterian Church in St. Louis Park, MN, the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area became the 87th and the majority Presbytery to vote yes on an amendment to the Book of Order of the PCUSA called Amendment 10-A. The amendment removes language which forbids gay and lesbian people who were called of God and selected by their congregation to serve as Deacons, Elders, or Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

I know that not everyone in this church will agree with the action that was taken last summer and which finally became the policy of the PCUSA last Tuesday. What I hope we will remember is this: even though we may not agree with each other, the way we treat each other is a sign of the presence of God in the life of this church, the Presbytery of Donegal and the whole PCUSA.

There are some for whom this action will be the last straw; who will feel called to leave our church and join one which is more closely aligned with their theological and political beliefs. That makes me sad because there are many who have felt equally as strong about this issue from the opposite point of view for more than 20 years now, and they have not left the church or the denomination because they were in the minority.

I think most of you know where I stand on this issue. Our daughter lives in a same sex relationship with her partner for the last 12 years. She had the courage to tell us her sexual orientation over a decade ago. She was raised in the Presbyterian Church and she has always been a leader in her high school, college, and now in her professional career as a social worker. The professional organization to which she belongs just recently honored her leadership. She is a leader in the PTO of her daughter's school. She is a leader in our family, but until Tuesday she could not be a leader in the church where she was baptized and confirmed because of her sexual orientation.

What this amendment does is to allow us to examine candidates for Deacon, Elder and Minister of Word and Sacrament and discover their gifts and talents to serve Christ as leaders in our church. We don't have to ordain anyone whom we do not feel is called of God to serve, but we can no longer exclude anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation.

It is my belief that here at First Presbyterian Church we will do better than many churches in our denomination in dealing with the impact of this amendment. We will honor the decision of the majority and accept the minority's right to disagree. However, in the midst of our disagreement, how we treat one

another will be a sign to the world in which we live of the presence of God in our church or of the absence of God's presence. I pray that God will give us the patience to listen to one another and love one another as we move forward together as the body of Christ known as PCUSA.

Conclusion

"Let the church be the church." This was the challenge of Dr. John MacKay to a group of idealistic students at Princeton Theological Seminary 40 years ago. It is my challenge to you today, as well. Let us be the church in our Commitment To Spiritual Formation and Growth; 2) our Sense of Awe About What God is Doing; and 3) A Sense of Responsibility for the Well Being Those We Call Brothers and Sisters in Christ.