

"Happy to Be a Presbyterian" Day

Robin E. Lostetter, September 25, 2011

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Scripture: Romans 14:1-12

According to some of my colleagues, today, September 25, is "Happy to be a Presbyterian Day" - Who knew?! Sure sounds like a good reason for a party!

So I thought, rather than throwing a party - sorry 'bout that! - I might take a look at what makes us Presbyterian. So I went right to the source - the "New Form of Government" for the PCUSA - Presbyterian Church in the USA. And since that new "Book of Order" is so concise, I can tell you pretty much what it says in just a couple of minutes.

This part is at the very beginning, under the title "Foundations", and is in Chapter 1, "The Mission of the Church". After noting that the Church is called as the Body of Christ, and what the "Marks of the Church" are . . . a very old phrase, once used to identify faithful churches . . . we find "The Notes of the Reformed Church."

First of all, you need to know that "Reformed" here begins with a capital R, and refers to that branch of the Protestant Church which includes such denominations as the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Reformed Church in America (RCA) — and us (PCUSA). (*There will be a test on acronyms later!*) The term "Reformed", when capitalized, has nothing to do with Luther, but harks back to our specific ancestors - John Calvin and John Knox, in particular.

So here we have the "Notes" of the Reformed Church:

Where Christ is, there is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever:

the Word of God is truly preached and heard,
the Sacraments are rightly administered, and
ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.

It goes on to say:

In our own time, we affirm that, in the power of the Spirit, the Church is faithful to the mission of Christ as it:

1. *Proclaims **and hears** the Word of God,*
responding to the promise of God's new creation . . . and
inviting all people to participate in that new creation;
2. *Administers **and receives** the Sacraments,*
welcoming those who are being engrafted into Christ,
. . . just like Lily Grace will be later this morning!
bearing witness to Christ's . . . resurrection,
anticipating the heavenly banquet that is to come, and
committing itself in the present to solidarity with the
marginalized and the hungry; and
3. *Nurtures a covenant community of disciples of Christ,*
[a community that lives] in the strength of God's promise and
[gives] itself in service to God's mission.

So, both historically and contemporaneously, the Reformed Church, as embodied in our Presbyterian

denomination, focuses on 3 things:

1. The proclamation of the Gospel, through the written and spoken word that witnesses to the Living Word, Jesus Christ.
2. The celebration of the sacraments . . . kids - how many are there? And
3. Nurturing the faith community. (You'll note the emphasis on nurture rather than discipline in today's church. This is a 20th-21st century change. If you read some of the session minutes from around 1900, you'll see things such as: "Elder Thomas and Elder McAndrews – both male, of course – visited the home of the Willis family, where they lectured Mr. Willis on the evils of alcohol and tobacco." Today if an elder or pastor visits you, it's usually all about food and conversation!¹

So that's a good reason to be Happy to Be a Presbyterian today!

Now, buried somewhere in all that verbiage – which you may have tuned out – is the statement that the mission of the Church is to invite and welcome folk into this faith community.

Someone posted a cartoon this week of some folk in the back of the church, observing a couple of young people in Goth clothing and body decoration walking up the church aisle. One says to the other, "Oh, I invited them . . . but I never thought they'd really come!!"²

Well, as a church, we do invite everybody. And, as in that cartoon, sometimes it makes people uncomfortable. What's interesting is that this seemed to have been the case in Saint Paul's time too. In the opening to Romans 14, which was read earlier, a more accurate translation implies that the majority of the congregation shares Paul's faith and conviction, but there's a person or persons - not a large generalized group of unchurched folk – "those who are weak in faith" as the NRSV says. No, Paul says "Accept him [singular] whose faith is weak." Apparently there was a little bit of "holier than thou" stuff going on in the church in Rome. (That's in the first century, of course. ☺ It would never happen today! Not in Rome! And not here, either!)

I can't believe I never really understood the message of this wonderful little passage . It's not just about which kind of music you like, or whether you were baptised as a child or an adult, or if you're vegan or not. It's not referring only to those external things. But it's more about the unchurched person who wanders in out of curiosity – or the kid who's not sure what this Jesus stuff is all about. It's about your questioning friend raised in another tradition – maybe Buddhist, maybe Jewish, maybe Mormon. As N.T. Wright puts it, "Paul's point is that they must be made welcome, but that this ought not to become an occasion for people to ask them about their particular views and engage them in disputes over matter that are the subject of genuine questioning."³

Actually, that's just a lesson in religious etiquette. There are places for these deeper discussions . . . an adult church school class, a small seminar, a one-on-one conversation with a friend . . . or even your pastor! But when you greet a visitor at the door of the church, entering or exiting, Paul says you're not supposed to grab them by the collar and inquire about their theological orthodoxy!

And for this I am extremely grateful!!

After all, there is much about Christianity that is, as Wright put it, the subject of genuine questioning. Oh, Paul may have referred to meal practices, observing holy days, fasting, and – in other letters, even whether non-Jewish converts must be circumcised. Today's disputes may center around other things . . . the ordination of gays and lesbians, or the interpretation of "I am the Way," or what role religion should have in the public arena.

And Paul reminds us . . . reminds you and me, that, ultimately, we are responsible only to God, accountable to God . . . not to some religious authority. As a Presbyterian, that gives us the freedom to consider how our God of Grace may reach out to those who are not raised Christian, by virtue of being born in some other culture. As a Presbyterian, that gives us the freedom to consider how “more light” may yet be shown on scripture, such that our understanding of human sexuality may differ from the understanding of the 1st century writers. As a Presbyterian, perhaps most relevant this day, it gives us the freedom from fear about the souls of our children . We believe that our children are loved and claimed by God before they can speak or understand. As our new and old Books of Order say, “The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God’s love claims people before they are able to respond in faith.” Lily Grace is a Child of God, and has been for her entire life. You, each one of you, were claimed by God. If you were baptised, your baptism is an affirmation of that; it’s a symbol of your inclusion in this family. At some point, we may respond to God with mature faith . . . not with faith that is free of all doubt and questions, but faith that still centers on trust, rather than intellectual knowledge, and which we may claim in the Confirmation of our Baptismal Vows.

Presbyterians still believe in mystery. Presbyterians still believe in conscience. Presbyterians believe in the interpretation of Scripture, not just in memorizing it or using it as a club to bully those with whom we disagree.

There’s another statement in the New Form of Government (nFOG, for short). It begins with a quote from Paul’s letter to the Galatians (3:27-29), and continues with an interpretation:

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

And here’s the interpretation and application: “The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church’s membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person.”⁴

So, on this “Happy to Be a Presbyterian Day,” a colleague of mine from Alaska has this to say about the “proclamation and hearing of the Gospel”, the Gospel of God’s good promises, of God’s love and covenant with us. He says, “That’s the gospel. That’s the message we have, and it’s supposed to mean something in this world. Our struggle is to proclaim it, for there is much that opposes our proclamation. Doubt opposes it. And scorn opposes it. And disdain opposes it. And greed opposes it. And idolatry- the love of things- opposes it. And selfish self-interest opposes it. And perhaps most of all, fear opposes it. Because when we fear the future it is nigh onto impossible to trust in God.”⁵

And to frame that more positively, Cynthia Bolbach, moderator of the 219th General Assembly of the PC(USA), discusses her experiences in and vision for our denomination: "I do not believe we are deathly ill. I believe our health is not measured by our membership numbers or resources, but by how faithfully we proclaim the Gospel."⁶

Friends, today is Happy to Be a Presbyterian Day — it’s a good reason for a party — for the festivities that the O’Malley family will have, surrounding Lily’s baptism, for the conversation and laughter that will ensue downstairs during Fellowship Hour. And for every day of our lives. Preach the Gospel — the GOOD News! Use words if necessary . . . or hugs, music, laughter, inclusion, acceptance! Paul said it — in all things, live to the Lord! So, in all things – show God’s amazing love! Use words only if necessary.”⁷

ENDNOTES

1. F-1.0303 The Notes of the Reformed Church.

2.



George Pasley, *Facebook*, September 23, 2011.

3. N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans”, NIB, Vol. X, 735.

4. F-1.0403 Unity in Diversity.

5. George Pasley, *Facebook*, September 17, 2011.

6. *Facebook*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office, July 1, 2011.

7. “Preach the Gospel always. Use words if necessary.” –St. Francis of Assisi