

The Future of Faith

Either read the manuscript of my August 15, 2010 sermon below or listen on-line http://centralpres.org/worship/recent_sermons.html and you will learn that Central Presbyterian Church is not in decline, but rather is shifting toward becoming a marvelous manifestation of the future of faith.

Harvey Cox, in his book The Future of Faith, writes “At its outset ‘faith’ meant a dynamic lifestyle sustained by fellowships that were guided by both men and women and that reflected hope for the coming Reign of God. But when Christianity became swollen into an elaborate code of prescribed beliefs and ritual obligations, policed by a hierarchy, the meaning of ‘faith’ was warped almost beyond recognition.” (p.179) I need only look at CPC to see the truth of which Cox speaks. Faith again is becoming a dynamic lifestyle, lived with hope and confidence in the God who makes all things new.

I have been your Interim Pastor only since May 1, 2010, but in this time I have been greatly impressed by the persistence, faithfulness, and gracious spirit within the congregation. Where others might conclude that Central Presbyterian Church is declining, I see not decline but a shift toward increased commitment and faithfulness.

In Christ’s Service,

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Preaching Manuscript CPC August 15, 2010

Opening:

⁴⁹“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

These words seem out of place in the mouth of one who is called the Prince of Peace.

We recall the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke’s gospel;

⁸“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a

sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Did Jesus get the message wrong? Was he just tired? Having a bad day? In need of two weeks’ study leave?

I must confess when I first read the words:

⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother, ...”

I thought of some of our summer vacation car trips. “Don’t make me stop the car. We can turn around and go home. All right, I am pulling over. Your sister will sit up here with me and your mother will ride in the back seat with your brother.”

If you have been able to worship with us this summer, you will recall that all of our scripture lessons deal with division. When Jesus raised from the dead the widow of Nain’s son, the son had a choice to make. Would he return home and live the life he always lived? Would he turn his back on his old life and follow Jesus into the unknown? As Robert Frost might say,

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both ...

Remember, from Luke 9:51, the gospel story is about division. ⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” The words “taken up” refer to his death on the cross. All the stories after Luke 9:51 are about division: the way of Jesus or the way of the world.

The story of the Good Samaritan is about division: those who ask “Who is my neighbor?” and those who act by asking “Who will I be a neighbor to?”

The story of the disciples returning from their successful missionary journey is a story about division. The division is between those who focus on personal success and failure, and those who focus on knowing Christ and Christ knowing them.

The story of Mary/Martha is a story about division; the division between those who know how to balance serving with praying, from those who are all about either prayer or work.

The story, last Sunday, of the servants awaiting the master's return is a story about division; between those who anticipate the Lord's appearing again, and those who never give the Lord's return a moment's thought.

We can summarize these stories from scripture by saying "The call for decision is a call for division."

This theme captured in the Hymn "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat:
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

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There is a lot of talk about the decline of mainline churches: Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian. I have yet to serve a congregation as interim pastor where the church had more members than it did a decade earlier. Pastors, sessions, and congregations are forced to ask the question: "What is the future of faith?" Or more specifically "What is the future of our church?" The conclusion often leads to saying "Our church is declining, or dying. We have to get more members. We must invest in our future. Now is not the time to cut back."

Usually, the week before Easter, both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines publish a controversial cover story. Last year the cover story for April 13 was "The End of Christian America," written by Editor Jon Meacham.

John Meacham describes how disturbed Albert Mohler Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, became when he saw a startling statistic: The number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990.

"That really hit me hard" said Albert Mohler Jr, when he learned that in ten years the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation had doubled.

Turning the report over in his mind, Mohler posted a despairing online column on the eve of Holy Week, lamenting the decline of Christianity. "A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us," Mohler wrote. "The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture."

Anyone sitting in any of the presbytery's 55 churches would not be surprised by the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey which documents this shift. Even the churches that appear to be growing in presbytery are not immune to this shift. The larger churches in presbytery have not grown in proportion to the towns in which they are planted. In some cases their growth has been a migration of Presbyterians from one Presbyterian church to another Presbyterian church.

When I came to this presbytery in 1978 we had a presbytery executive and between two and three full-time associate executives. This has all changed: Now we have an interim executive with limited funding. Within the next two years there will not be sufficient funds to pay the salary of an executive.

In 2009, I attended the Festival of Homiletic in Atlanta, Georgia. Each year over a thousand clergy gather to sharpen their preaching and communications skills. Beside the focus on preaching, sociologists and theologians share their knowledge. Dianne Butler Bass, an interpreter of contemporary religion, spoke about the declining church membership. She spoke not about the decline of the mainline denominations, but the shift taking place within mainline denominations.

In her presentation she read from a soon to be released book entitled The Future of Faith. The author of The Future of Faith is Harvey Cox. I am indebted to both Dianne Butler Bass and Harvey Cox for a new understanding about the future of faith.

In Genesis 12:1 and 2 we read ¹“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”

Assuming Abram (later called Abraham) desired to become a Presbyterian pastor, as a candidate he would be required to write a Statement of Faith. Did he believe in one God? Did he believe that this God was maker of heaven and earth? Did he believe in God’s Son? Did he even know that God had a Son? Had he read the *Book of Order*? Did he have a copy of the *Book of Order*?

At this point, Genesis 12, the jumping-off point, Abram believed very little. Only slowly would he believe in one God. Only as he lived his life would he grow to understand that this God was the maker of heaven and earth.

What Abram lacked in belief, theology and orthodox, he made up by trusting the voice of the one who said “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

Luke is the author of Luke’s gospel and the book of Acts. Acts is the story of the early church and the divisions the church faced. In Acts 24, we read the story of Paul’s defense before the Roman governor, Felix.

¹⁰“When the governor motioned to him to speak, Paul replied: ‘I cheerfully make my defense, knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation. This I admit to you, that according to the Way... I worship the God of our ancestors.’” After Paul makes his defense, the author of Acts writes “But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing.”

The word “Way” is reflective of Jesus who said “I am the way...” The early Christians were known for their faith and not their beliefs. We use the words ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ interchangeably, but they are radically different.

The story is told of the high-wire artist who could balance on a metal cable suspended over Niagara Falls. After first demonstrating his ability to cross the falls, he asked the crowd if they believed he could do it again. Everyone in the crowd believed that he could. Now he crossed Niagara Falls while pushing a wheelbarrow. After this demonstration he asked the crowd if they believed he could do it again. Everyone in the crowd believed that he could. Finally, he asked the crowd, “Who wants to ride in the wheelbarrow?”

We use the words 'faith' and 'belief' interchangeably, but they are radically different.

The story of Christianity began as a story of faith, not belief. In the Letter to the Hebrews Abraham is held up as a model of faith. We read “⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.” (Hebrews 11:8) Abraham said, “Yes, I am willing to get into the wheelbarrow.”

The story of the early church began as a story about faith and not belief. It was not until 367 AD (or what we call the Common Era) that the church decided what to believe about the divinity and humanity of Jesus at the Council of Nicaea. This is why Paul speaks about being a follower of the Way.

The future of faith is not about the decline of the mainline churches. The future of faith is about turning from belief to faith. The future of faith is about turning from faith in Jesus to living life with the same faith Jesus had in his Heavenly Father.

Harvey Cox writes about faith during the first 350 years of the early church. “At its outset 'faith' meant a dynamic lifestyle sustained by fellowships that were guided by both men and women and that reflected hope for the coming Reign of God. But when Christianity became swollen into an elaborate code of prescribed beliefs and ritual obligations policed by a hierarchy, the meaning of 'faith' was warped almost beyond recognition.” (*Future of Faith*, p.179)

Listen again to what Harvey Cox writes about faith and think of your congregation. “At its outset 'faith' meant a dynamic lifestyle.... sustained by fellowships.... that were guided by both men and women.... and that reflected hope for the coming Reign of God.”

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In today's OT reading we see the same call to decision which leads to division. ¹⁵“Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

When I think about those words, I think about this church.

This congregation is not in decline. I have only been with you since May 1, 2010, but I can tell you, I do not see a decline, but a shift. The same shift Harvey Cox sees and Diane Butler Bass sees.

Now you have around 900-1000 members on the church roles. Worship attendance in the fall will increase, but never to 900 or even maybe 500. I don't say this because you are in a decline, but because you are going through a shift. Your session has worked longer and harder this summer than in recent or past history. In the Middle School Ministry, Children's Ministry, and Sr. High Ministry, I see more and more people stepping forward. Many of you remember JFK's inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

When people first come to a church they ask “What can the church do for me?” This is where they start. For our part we seek to support them and minister to their needs.

At some point, the question must become, “What can I do for the church?” This is the moment when the person becomes a disciple. Some of you carry the scars of discipleship because you are here not to be served but to serve.

We can ask nothing less of each other than what Christ asked of his disciples: to take their cross and follow him. Churches in decline have more people doing less. Churches in transition, churches going through a shift, have fewer people doing more, much more.

Sometimes my wife says, “The church work you do is all-consuming.” This is both a compliment and a criticism: a criticism because after 39 years she still likes to see me at the dinner table and a compliment because it means I believe in a shifting church, not a declining church.

Three days after the German offensive in the West, Winston Churchill gave his first speech to Parliament as Prime Minister:

“We are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history.... That we are in action at many points — in Norway and in Holland —, that we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean. That the air battle is continuous, and that many preparations have to be made here at home.

I would say to the House as I said to those who have joined this government: **I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.** We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering.

You ask, ‘What is our aim?’ I can answer in one word: ‘Victory’.”

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