

Series: Rethinking Church

Today: A Different Kind of Church

Text: Ephesians 6:17-20

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, June 13, 2010

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

It has been something of a reflective weekend for me. Yesterday was my birthday. I became a card carrying member of the Medicare system. I was thinking about how I used to know people as old as I am, and how I thought they were old back then.

Yesterday I also attended a memorial service for a YMCA friend who was just two years older than me, and I was reminded how fragile life is, and how it can change in an instant.

I was remembering how fourteen years ago on this weekend I came to be the pastor of this church and I was reflecting about what a great season of life these last fourteen years have been. That led me to think about how two years from now, on June 17, 2012, I will preach my final sermon here and then leave the role as the pastor of this church. And that led me to think about all the things we need to accomplish in the next two years in order to be ready for the person God is already preparing to fill the position I currently hold.

We don't know who that is yet, but somewhere there is someone who is just beginning to think that it may be time for them to seek a new call in their life, and eventually the Pastor Nominating Committee which will be elected in about a year will find that person and invite them to come and be Pastor of this church. I reflected on what we need to do as a congregation to attract the brightest and best leadership.

This is a great congregation, but we cannot sit still for two years and expect to be attractive to the best candidates our church has to offer. We are a 1,100 member church with a vital mission in the life of

this city, but in order to remain viable, we need to grow in our faith and grow in our numbers. Dare we dream of becoming a 1,200 member church which is still seeking new and different ways to serve so that the person who will come to lead this church says to himself/herself, *“Wow! A downtown church with a growing congregation still seeking new ways to be relevant; that’s the kind of church I want to be part of.”* And that led me to my sermon for this morning.

Today we are beginning a series of sermons on Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, and this morning I want to give you an overview of what we will be talking about during these summer months. We have given the series the title of *“Rethinking Church”* because if we are to grow in our faith and grow in our numbers over the next few years, we need to be thinking and re-thinking who we are and what we are doing so we can continue to fulfill the vision statement we believe God has given us for this time and place in the 268 year history of this church.

The letter to Ephesus was written about 20-30 years after the death of Jesus Christ. Scholars have argued for years about whether Paul was the author, or whether it was written by a disciple of Paul. The answer to that question is good for a Bible study, but makes for a dull sermon, so I am not going to put you through it this morning. Allow me to simply state my own bias after some study this week that I come out on the side of Pauline authorship written while he was in prison near the end of his life.

The purpose of the letter is to speak to the people about the power of God to hold all things together in unity. In his introduction to his translation of Ephesians, Eugene Peterson writes: *“What we know about God and what we do for God have a way of getting broken apart in our lives. The moment the organic unity of belief and behavior is damaged in any way, we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians joins together what has been torn apart in our sin wrecked world. He begins with an exuberant exploration of what Christians believe*

about God, and then, like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, he ‘sets’ this believe in God into our behavior before God so that the bones—belief and behavior—knit together and heal.

Once our attention is called to it, we notice these fractures all over the place. There is hardly a bone in our bodies that has escaped injury, hardly a relationship in the city or job, school or church, family or country that isn’t out of joint or limping in pain. There is much work to be done.

And so Paul goes to work. He ranges wildly from heaven to earth and back again, showing how Jesus, the Messiah, is eternally and tirelessly bringing everything and everyone together. He shows that having this work done in and for us, we are participants in this most urgent work. Now that we know what is going on, that the energy of reconciliation is the dynamo at the heart of the universe, it is imperative that we join vigorously and perseveringly, convinced that every detail in our lives contributes to [or distracts from] what Paul calls God’s plan worked out in Christ.” (from The Message, p. 2125)

What we have in Ephesians are the marching orders for what it means for us to be the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st Century. In the words of someone Mahatma Ghandi: “*be the change we want to see in the world.*”

Paul does not back away from difficult issues which he faced in the first century:

- As a Jew he believed that only those who had Jewish blood in their veins could be counted among the faithful. He now says “no.” All who place their trust in Christ are to be part of the faithful.
- He was a Pharisee, and he demanded strict observance of the Jewish Law as a way to earn the favor of God. Now he says “no.” The grace of God is all.
- He believed in hierarchy of the church. Now he says “no.” Each of us is called to contribute to the ministry using the unique gifts that God has given to each of us.
- He believed that the role of women in marriage was to look after her husband’s needs and have babies. Now he says “no.” Women are to be cherished by their husbands as Christ cherishes the church and gave his life for her.

This is the work of the church. All the old categories which kept people separate have been broken down. Race, economic class, gender roles, first world vs. third world; all the divides have been bridged and we are to demonstrate to the world what it means to *be the change we want to see in the world*. In Jesus Christ, those who were far off are brought near. Those who were strangers to God have become part of the family.

This is a different kind of church than what we are used to talking about. However, it is the kind of church we are called to be in the 21st century, and at the end of the letter, which is our text for this morning, Paul says that two things are required if we are to become that kind of a church: 1) We need to learn how to pray for each other, and 2) we need to learn how to pray for our leaders.

Praying for Each Other

Paul knew that times of persecution were coming and that the only thing that would sustain this new kind of church was learning how to pray for each other. His advice was to *persevere in supplication for all the saints*.

Following Christ was not an easy call when Paul wrote this letter. It could cost you your life. It took courage to stand against the prevailing attitudes of the culture and witness to the kind of world which God longs to bring. That kind of unity can only come when we learn how to pray for one another.

There is something that happens to a church when we learn how to pray for each other. We become connected to one another in a unique way. We share in each other's joys, and we learn to bear each other's burdens.

I read a story this week about a man who served as a police officer in a northern native settlement in Canada. One day a rabid wolf wandered into the Eskimo settlement. The policeman eventually shot it, but not before it attacked a young man and his grandmother in their home, making kindling out of a chair the young man used to protect himself from his attacker.

There were about 150 sled dogs in the village—more than a match for one sick wolf—yet the intruder was left alone to do her work. Why? The policeman explained that in order to prevent the dogs from fighting and wounding each other, they had each been tied to wooden stakes spaced far enough apart to prevent them from reaching any neighboring animal. Because of this, the wolf walked freely among the dogs, killing some and badly wounding others. In isolation they were no match for their foe, and they suffered terribly for it.

In isolation we are ill equipped to do the work which God is calling us to do, but if we learn how to hold each other in prayer and respond to the nudging of the Spirit when we sense someone is in trouble, we can be a powerful force for good in this community.

Praying for Our Leaders

The other thing we need to learn how to do is pray for our leaders. If Paul felt the need to ask for prayer from the Ephesians, surely Don and I ought to have the good sense to ask you for your prayers, too. Pray for your staff. Pray for your Session; your Deacons; and your Trustees. Pray for their boldness to lead us in the way of Christ even when it runs counter to our culture.

The other day I was visiting with one of our at-home congregants who is no longer able to make it to church. Her mind is still good, but her body has given up on her. She is 99 years old, and she said she wished she had the energy she had when she was 39 to help the church fulfill the vision God has given to it.

As we finished our time together she said to me, *“Randy, I want you to know that I pray for you and Don and our Elders every day. I pray you will have the wisdom you need to make good decisions and the courage to carry those decisions out.”*

I am absolutely certain that as I stand here today the faithfulness of this church to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is because of the prayers of people like her. I cannot begin to tell you what that meant to

me. It is humbling to know that someone is praying for you. It is even more humbling to know that they are praying for all of our leaders to have the courage to follow the Christ when we are running counter to the culture in which we live.

Conclusion

I am excited to see what God is going to reveal to us through this study of Ephesians about what is next on God's agenda for us. All summer long we are going to be *Rethinking Church*. I hope you will be part of the journey whenever you are in town, and when you travel you can still help. Pray for each other, and pray for your leaders and ask God to reveal to us what's next so we can be ready for the person God is preparing right now to be the next leader of this church.

I look forward to being part of that with you for as long as God gives me the energy to be your pastor, and when I am done, I will be cheering for you with deep affection as God leads us to build a church which fulfills the calling of God in the 21st century.