S.D. Presbytery Sermon

Frist Presbyterian Church, Brookings, Friday, 25 October 2019

Prayer of Illumination:

Merciful God, who understands our motives and knows our every thought,

we seek in these moments to be attuned

to your Word and will,

that we may be humbly receptive

to the proclamation you would have us share with the world.

Grant us strength to persevere in our witness, so others may catch a vision of the joy

you offer to all who serve you.

In the strong name of Jesus I pray.

**Amen.**

Text: Hebrews 3:1 (msg)-

“So, my dear Christian friends...

companions in following this call

to the heights,

***take a good hard look at Jesus.***

***He’s the centerpiece***

***of everything we believe...”***

Well, it’s happened again.

The Pew Research Center on October 17th published their latest Religion & Public Life report. You know... an update on the one in 2009 and the one in May 12, 2015, titled America’s Changing Religious Landscape...

“Christians Decline Sharply As Share of Population.”

The recent updated report of the 17th of this month titled... “In U.S., Decline Of Christianity Continues At Rapid Pace.”

In research that covered from 12,000 to 25,000 people, 65% of Americans describe themselves as Christians... down from 77% in 2009.

In contrast, 26% of Americans describe themselves as having no interest in any religion... up from 17% in 2009.

Protestants are now only 43% of U.S. pop.

Catholics 20%.

The Pew behemoth report details the awful news that North America has decided that we’re just not that interesting anymore.

Oh, if you’re someone still mentally living in the 1950s, the church might offer something, but the statistics show that what we’re handing out just isn’t all that interesting... and then... to top it off... our own beloved PC-USA continues it’s years long slide from the heady days of that Friday, June 10, 1983, when the PC-USA was created... 36 years ago. To my chagrin, I overheard one past say at an PCUSA evangelism conference in St. Petersburg, Fl...upon hearing of the continuing slide in members...

“That’s okay, I’ll be retired before it gets really bad.”

Another pastor from over east said, “I figure I’ll stick with my congregation for 5-7 more years, then retire and get a stated supply post in Florida or Arizona.”

What in the name of all that’s holy is going on??

What’s happening to the church?... To us?

It begs the question that Francis Schaeffer asked long ago... “How then should we live?” or What is the answer to our condition?

I’m glad you asked...

Surveys show that in a gathering like this,

by the time you get to your car in the parking lot, you will have forgotten 75% of everything you've heard today.

Within an hour of leaving the parking lot, you will have forgotten 95% of everything you've heard today.

You will only remember, maybe, 5% of all you hear today.

Therefore, it seems the most important thing I can say must be summed up in the 5% that you will remember.

Not to worry.

When the time comes…

I'll tell you what is the 5%.

I submit to you that the answer to our condition is a return to the “center” of what we are about... not pcusa... the church.

We have moved our center and have lost our focus.

Friends, we must, again, take a good hard look at Jesus... he’s the center of everything we believe.

Eugene Peterson said,

“It seems odd to have to say so, but too much religion is a bad thing.

We can’t get too much of God,

can’t get too much faith and obedience,

can’t get too much love and worship.

But religion... the well-intentioned efforts

we make to “get it all together” for God... can very well get in the way

of what God is doing for us.

**The main and central action is...** everywhere and always...

*what God has done, is doing, and will do for us.*

**Jesus is the revelation of that action**.

Our main and central task is

to live in responsive obedience

to God’s action revealed in Jesus.

Our part in the action is the act of faith.

But more often than not,

we become impatiently self-important along the way and decide to improve matters

with our two cents worth.

We add on, we supplement, we embellish.

But instead of improving on the purity and simplicity of Jesus,

we dilute the purity, clutter the simplicity.

We become fussily religious, or anxiously religious.

**We get in the way**.

“Too religious” Christians, are “Jesus-and” Christians...

Jesus-and-politics, or Jesus-and-education, or Jesus-and-equality,

or Jesus-and-social justice, or even Jesus-and-Buddha.

We must delete the hyphens, the add-ons.

Then the focus becomes clear and sharp again:

God’s action in Jesus.

And we are free once more for the act of faith,

the one human action in which

we don’t get ***in*** way, but ***on*** the Way.”

Friends, we’ve drifted from our main focus. We haven’t taken the time, in our busyness, to stay truly focused on what’s really important.

In 1986, a movie was released entitled,

“The Name of The Rose” starring

Sean Connery as a 14th century Franciscan monk sent to a monastery in the mountains of northern Italy to solve mysterious deaths.

While there, a conference/debate of great import to the church was to be held.

Specially selected and invited Cardinals from across Europe traveled for weeks, some for months, in order to attend this great debate.

Finally, with great pomp and circumstance, they were assembled;

and the moderator of this auspicious debate solemnly announced the topic to be debated. The topic they had travelled such great distance to debate.

The topic was… ***did Christ, or did he not,***

***own the clothes that he wore?***

A complete loss of focus…

Today, in many respects,

it seems little has changed.

**\*\*\***Friends, our center, our focus,

is Jesus, the Christ. Jesus. Period. Full Stop.

On Saturday, October 31, 1517, a Catholic monk sent his 95 theses to the Archbishop of Mainz

and also nailed them to the door of the church in Wittenburg...

next Thursday... 502 years later... we will celebrate the Reformation.

In 2008, a feisty woman from west Tennessee named Phyllis Tickle wrote a book titled, “The Great Emergence.”

She said, “every 500 years, the church cleans out it’s attic and has a giant rummage sale.”

Her study of the history of the church convinced her that every 500 years,

the tectonic plates of the church shift;

and something dramatic takes place.

**God does something new.**

And she along with many others,

who we consider knowledgeable and

well informed, tell us that we are

in the midst of the shifting

of the tectonic plates of the church.

**God is doing something new.**

Responding to the blockbuster Pew Report of 2015, she said,

“Christianity isn’t going to die!”

“Christianity is reconfiguring.”

“It’s almost going through another adolescence. And it’s going to come out a better, more mature adult.

There’s no question about that.”

And the Word of God rings in my ears,

“I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

As a participant in a think tank in Seattle, a few years ago, on the future of the church, one of the facilitators was Alan Roxburgh,

an internationally recognized speaker/leader

on congregational transformation.

He said, “Don’t look to your denomination to “fix” your congregation.

It must be, it has to be, congregation up, not headquarters down. Then he asked, “What does it mean to be God’s people in our communities?”

And suddenly, all 50+ people in the room got very quiet.

And Alan said, “Friends, God is messing with the church. And hidden in the messing is the Spirit of God gestating a new thing, and it coming from the bottom up… from the congregations up to the national headquarters.

Congregations must learn to walk their story, their journey, together.”

Later, in a private conversation, he said,

Donald, God is saying...

“I’m leading you into something new, not a fix of the old.

Pastors and congregations are worn out with national headquarters fixes.

Every 5–10 years a new “fix” comes along.

Power church, emerging church, multi-site church, contemporary showbiz church where all the lights and bands and smoke machines accompany songs around the theme “Jesus is my boyfriend,”

house church, new monastic church, commune church, missional church, and on and on and on.

And we’re worn out.”

Living Jesus in your world, in my world, is living the embodiment of the mission of Jesus in the world, by incarnating the gospel.

It is imperative that Christians be like Jesus, by living freely within the culture as those who are as faithful to the Father and his gospel,

as Jesus was in his own time and place.

It is living the transformational Way... the Way of Jesus.

Now... here’s **the 5%...**

**You can’t be the noun,**

**without doing the verb.**

Profound, isn’t it??

Actually, it’s common sense once you, again, make Jesus the center of everything you believe.

But the question is... do you really want Jesus to be the center of everything??

We’ve all seen the cartoon, haven’t we?

The preacher asks, “How many want change?” and all the hands go up.

Then the preacher asks, “How many want **to** change?” and no hands go up.

Friends, you... me... us... we are leaders.

We cannot, we must not, ask our congregations to make commitments we are not willing to make. We must lead them.

How badly do you want real transformation in your congregation??

If the wind of the Holy Spirit blew across your congregation,

would you be ready, even welcoming??

Oh, I can hear it...

Preacher, you’re not from here.

You don’t understand South Dakota.

We’re different... just settle down... you’ll be all right.

Friends, Jesus is not different and

he’s calling our names.

The Spirit of God wants to do a new thing in each of us.

We have to decide...

are we going to be Fishers of men and women;

or are we going to be Keepers of an Aquarium??

They were just college kids, 2 here, 3 there, unbeknownst to one another, praying for God to move on their campus.

It was a Christian college that required chapel attendance at 10:00 every morning... it was only 50 minutes long... just like a class.

It seemed to be a normal Tuesday chapel, filled with 1,500 students,

on that chilly February 3rd, 1970.

But they soon found a difference.

God by the Holy Spirit showed up for that chapel service

and fell upon the entire student body.

The president of the college, Asbury College, was away

in Alberta, Canada, on a speaking trip.

Someone ran to get the Vice-President who had been detained in a meeting.

He hurried into the chapel and reported later that as he walked in,

he was overwhelmed with an inner voice that said,

“You are treading on holy ground.”

He said the Spirit of God was palpable in the room.

Students and professors alike were pouring their hearts out to God in confession and repentance and asking forgiveness of one another.

Sins were being confessed and lives were being made clean and whole.

It continued all day and into the night and into the next morning.

No one left the building. The Vice President phoned the President and said “you better get back here right away. God is moving here.”

The President came as soon as he could arrange... and by now the move of God had extended past three 24 hr. periods... classes had long before been canceled. He walked in concerned that it was an emotional, out of hand, situation. Instead he found orderly students waiting their turn to speak,

to confess, to give praise, to ask forgiveness.

The move of God spread across the street to the small Asbury Seminary and was just as powerful... by the summer, teams had gone across the United States and into South America. Over 130 college campuses experienced a move of God from the Asbury teams.

In Anderson, Indiana, a Church of God congregation had to move to a basketball arena, and it remained packed with 2,500 people

daily for 50 days straight as God moved on the community.

Wheaton College experienced the same.

Friends, God is still in the transformational, reviving business.

We as leaders must, we must, fall in love with Jesus again...

not with the Bible, but with the Jesus of the Bible, not with the Book of Order, not with the Book of Confessions, not with our pet projects;

but with Jesus.

When is the last time you told Jesus that you loved him??

I mean just flat out said, “Jesus, I love you, I truly love you.”

He’s been telling you over and over how much he loves you...

when’s the last time he heard you say it back to him?

Are we spending time with him

like we would with someone we really loved?

Are we talking with him

like we talk with someone we really love?

Do you really, really want the Holy Spirit to do something

transformational in your life and your congregation??

Friends, Jesus always worked with small numbers.

That’s why I love my small country rural congregation so much.

Jesus is right at home there.

Oh, make no mistake, we’ve got some re-centering and re-focusing to do.

Dwight L. Moody once said, “The world has yet to see what God will do through someone who is totally sold out and committed to Jesus.”

Are you ready? Is it you?

What are you willing to do

to have the Spirit of God move in your congregation??

Isaiah was taken into heaven and saw the Lord high and lifted up. He saw and heard the praises and the “holy, holy, holy.”

He said, “I am definitely in the wrong place.

I am dead meat. I have unclean lips just like my people.

And a Seraph flew and touched his lips with a coal from the alter and said, “Now you are clean.”

And the Lord said, “Whom shall I send?

And who will go for us?

And Isaiah, knowing he was now clean, said,

“I’m here. I’m available. Send me.”

Friends, God wants to do a new thing in the PCUSA, and I believe with all my heart and every fibre of my being that God is looking for a Presbytery that wants to bring the Holy Ghost fire to the PCUSA.

Why not our South Dakota presbytery?? Why not us?? Why not us??

We could be God’s instrument to do a new thing in the entire PCUSA!!

We’ve been touched with coals from the alter.

And God is still asking, “Who will go for us?”

Are you willing to say, “I’m here. I’m available. I’ll go.” Amen.