

Presbytery Meeting, August 19, 2017
King Hill Presbyterian Church

Sermon to the Presbytery

Title Stepping Up
Text Luke 4:14-21

I don't think there is a reflective pastor anywhere these days who isn't wondering where the world is headed and more particularly where the Church of Christ is headed 500 years after the Reformation. Across the denominations there has been plenty of "slippage", meaning that our young people are bailing out and leaving the organized church. Some researchers, almost apologetically, are telling us that they haven't lost their faith in God, they just don't care much for organized religion. Of course, when we look at Charlottesville, slippage might mean that they never got the message in the first place

I don't suppose that it would be much help to brainstorm a short or long list of reasons for this phenomenon, but I would like to say that I have found Brian McLaren's reflections helpful to me, so I would like to start there. In the opening pages of *The Great Spiritual Migration* he gives us plenty to think about. He says:

"For centuries, Christianity has been presented as a system of beliefs. That system of beliefs has supported a wide range of unintended consequences, from colonialism to environmental destruction, subordination of women to stigmatization of LGBT people, anti-Semitism to Islamophobia, clergy pedophilia to white privilege. What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life? Could Christian faith lose the bitter taste of colonialism, exclusion, judgment, hypocrisy, and oppression, and regain the sweet and nourishing flavor of justice, joy, and peace?"

I have three brothers. All of them are Baptist in the tradition of Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham. One of them is more concerned about preserving Capitalism as a way to fend off Socialism than to puzzle over Global Warming, which he rejects. He wants to legislate his brand of Christian morality and drop government support for the poor of the land because he says we can't afford the entitlements any longer. I can't get anywhere with him in any discussion of these matters.

And I tell you that because within the Christian community, and even in our own churches, there is this great divide. When I bring to the pulpit concerns for the poor, the environment, the marginalize and the refugee/immigrant population more often than not I find a quiet politeness, but sometimes resistance. I've even been told by folks that they just want something that makes them feel good, not such politics. No challenges, please!

Over the years of ministry, I have so often wondered what we've done that our kids don't want to follow behind us in the church, at least not like they used to. I learned the five points of a proper Calvinism at none other than Calvin College. Then I joined the Presbyterian Church, and I learned a bit more about how to apply my faith to daily life beyond doctrinal limits that had left me a zombie before. Now I was walking with both feet in the real world, so I took that to the teaching of my confirmation classes and to the pulpit. It didn't seem to matter, I guess, because I didn't preach extemporaneously or wave my hands enough or sing enough praise songs, or shout a few "Amens", or something. How often I felt like a failure because the best I could do, in spite of my passion to share Jesus, was to draw enough people that I maintained a status quo level of membership instead of busting out the walls.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I found something that helped me think about that. I came across an old CD of a talk Eugene Peterson gave at Whitworth College in Spokane. He said that he was raised in the church and brought up on a kind of magical understanding of things: miracles like walking on water and in nature, a solar eclipse, I suppose. When he got into parish ministry, he said, he realized that the church had changed, so that they weren't talking so much about things the world considered sleight-of-hand or extra-terrestrial, but now they were drawn into a way of attracting new members following a business model which predisposed them to actually finding what appealed to the masses, presumably so they could do the best job of "selling Jesus." The last time that didn't work for me, I lost my job, oh, and my house and any chance at more pension credits, which hurt because mine were not enough to survive on by anyone's reckoning, having committed myself to small churches.

I'm hurt but I'm not bitter because I had long ago committed myself to giving my life to Jesus and the church in spite of the cost, if that is what it took. It brought me here, where I am now enjoying the best years of my ministry, where people are salt of the earth folks and where I can focus on preaching the Good News and not having to meet somebody's quota of people coming through the door, or write up some fancy mission

statement which sounds more like Madison Avenue, or pious talk, than just figuring out what we all need to do to put the hands and feet on Jesus where we set down.

Maybe you need one of those mission statements. Go ahead, but I relate more to McLaren, who also noted in his book what we all know: "Jesus associated God more with gracious parental tenderness than strict authoritarian toughness. He preached that God was to be found in self-giving service rather than self-asserting domination. What would it mean for Christians to let Jesus and his message lead them to a new vision of God? What would it mean for Christians to understand, experience, and embody God as the loving, healing, reconciling Spirit in whom all creatures live, move, and have their being?... What might happen if we understand the core Christian ethos as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning – as an 'organizing religion' that challenges all institutions (including its own) to learn, grow, and mature toward a deepening, enduring vision of reconciliation with God, self, neighbor, enemy, and creation?"

In the latest *Sojourners* magazine, there was an article written by a Presbyterian minister who, like me, had grown up Christian Reformed. As an adult she went back one day, at her mothers urging may I say, (did that ever resonate with me) and found the service just slapped her in the face. She said, "And with that, I slipped out of my childhood church the way a snake sheds it skin."

Friends, the Church needs to slip out of its magical notions of God and accompanying self-righteousness as well as its Madison Avenue ways of selling Jesus. We need to listen to the Bible more closely the way Walter Bruegemann taught us to do and act on what McLaren is saying if the church is to reclaim its Reformation roots and retain any viability. We need to find ways to take ourselves and our children deeper into the faith experience not as a "Jesus-and-me" feel good thing or a buttress to the prosperity gospel, or a Pharisaical following of rules, but as a way to anchor ourselves in God's love against the storms of life, the challenges from the fringes of failed spirituality and false gospel, and the assaults of those who find the message of Jesus Christ a threat, including those on the Religious Right, in order to further the common good and demonstrate our support for what is human in all of us for Christ's sake and to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth in our lives and the lives of others.

I rejoice in my Reformed Tradition for giving us and the world sound doctrine. I rejoice in my Presbyterian Tradition, most particularly, for making sure that what Jesus taught didn't leave us with our heads in the clouds of faith but brought it down to earth where Peterson suggested it should be when he noted that Jesus was born into poverty and never left that demographic his entire life. So it really was true what he said, that the poor had good news preached to them. I rejoice to say that by God's grace I was called to live into this ministry of proclaiming the Gospel myself.

But best of all, I rejoice that this world belongs to God, and God is not done with what will be said and done yet by us and then other servants of Christ across the years ahead, because God is in the business of redeeming the church and the world back to God's self. To participate in God's redemptive work, however, we will have to allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit and put ourselves into the frame of mind that Jesus had in the Garden when he said "Thy will be done," which meant for him that men would nail him to the cross, but this was in order for redemption to become a fact. So the context of the future for the Church is doing God's will though it won't be easy and may also be painful. After all, the people still need to hear the Gospel, they still need to be helped, and they still need to be healed. By God's grace the Church will continue to step up, and I trust, for example, The Way Forward Committee will point the way as one indication that we ourselves are ready to embrace a new future.

Let me close with these words from St. Paul to the Ephesians in chapter 3:

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

This prayer of Paul is my prayer for all of you who follow behind those of us who are at the end of our time of ministry. God grant you strength to meet the challenges of a new era and the fresh opportunities to bring honor and glory to God's holy name. May Jesus Christ be praised! Amen.