

“God’s Odd Squad”
Romans 12:1-8
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
August 21, 2011

Micah 6:6-8

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,

by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

²Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me
I say to everyone among you
NOT to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith
that God has assigned.

⁴For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,

⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.

⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;
⁷ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching;
⁸the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence;
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Sermon

At some time or another
you may have heard someone say
that the church is to be IN the world,
but not OF the world.

Or, speaking of our individual lives as Jesus’ followers –
we are to live IN the world,
but not be OF the world.

It’s a way of saying that following Jesus
means being a resident of one world...

being fully engaged in this world,
while living in another.
The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:20 –
“our commonwealth is in heaven,”
meaning that in baptism our citizenship is transferred
from one realm to another,
and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves,
resident aliens.”¹

You may also know that the earliest Christians
were said to be followers of “THE WAY.”
Following Jesus was a WAY to walk...
it was a WAY to live...
it was a WAY of seeing people and the world around them.
And here, in some of Paul’s most quoted words,
the apostle appeals to us NOT to be conformed
to the values of the world...
to the ways of the surrounding culture.

But that’s hard to do, isn’t it?
It’s hard NOT to conform...
it’s hard to be IN this world and not be OF it.

Well, one of the things that characterize “the world”
into which Paul is writing is its DIVISIONS.
People were all lumped into types and categories...
there was a definite “pecking order.”
Some were insiders and others were outsiders.
Some were on top and others on the bottom...
some were winners and others losers...
some were honored and others were shamed.²

All human relationships in Paul’s world
were carefully scripted by these divisions so
it won’t surprise you that
that these categories and hierarchies
found their way into the life of the early church.

In Rome the church was not what you and I tend to think of as church...
a central building for large gatherings of worship and fellowship. No, the Roman Christians
gathered in small house churches –
there were mostly Jewish house churches
and mostly Gentile house churches.
Jewish churches worshiped one way and Gentiles another...
Jewish Christians organized themselves one way
and Gentiles another...
even in their common meals, Jewish churches ate one thing
and Gentiles another.³

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Abingdon – 1989, p.11

² Charles L. Campbell in his essay on this text “An Odd People,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2002, p.36

And if you add to that the divisions between male and female...
slave and free... rich and poor...
pretty soon the church looks whole lot like the world.
The colony of Jesus followers
is almost indistinguishable from the world around it.

“Well, we are not going to live that way,”
Paul announces to God’s people.
“Nope, by the mercies of God we’re going to see people
according to the gifts God has given them...
different gifts, yes... but all important to the whole.
We won’t have insiders or outsiders...
There’ll be no winners or losers.
In the grace of Jesus Christ,
we will live as one body with many equal parts.
“By the mercies of God,” Paul says,
be not conformed to this world...”

Clearly, it has been a 2,000 year struggle to live into these words
and just as clearly that struggle continues...
because the truth is the church does conform to the world;
especially when it comes to division,
and we Presbyterians are no exception.

Just in the past 75 years
there have been three formal schisms in our church.
In the 1930’s congregations departed
for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church...
in the 1960’s and 70’s they left
for the Presbyterian Church in America...
and in the 1980’s and again since 2005 congregations have joined
with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.
The latest report I saw said more than 100 congregations
have left the PC(USA) just in the last six years...
and everyone expects many more to do so.⁴

I know of at least three congregations in our presbytery
which are in serious conversation about leaving.
And then, later this week in Minneapolis
there will be a large gathering
of mainly conservative, evangelical Presbyterians.
Last I heard there are over 2,000 registered for this event -
a truly remarkable number in Presbyterian circles.

Well, from talking to folks I know
and reading what has been written by and
members of this group,
my sense is that these are brothers and sisters
who love Jesus and are devoted to his church,

³ David L. Bartlett in his commentary on Romans, Westminster Bible Companion (WJK – 1995), p.2

⁴ Joseph D. Small in his essay, “Why Stay? Why Go?” published in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, June 27, 2011.

but who believe the Presbyterian Church is gravely ill.
They are folks who acknowledge with grief
that our fellowship is already badly fractured
by years and years of disagreement
and political and theological wrangling...
and they are tired of fighting.
They are not alone in that!
And they earnestly believe that the adoption of Amendment 10-A
(the amendment which removed any specific reference
to sexual behavior from our ordination standards)
they earnestly believe that this action
has severely compromised the integrity
of our common bond of faith.
So these sisters and brothers are gathering in Minneapolis
to think and talk and pray together
about the future of our denomination and their place in it.

Church historians tell us
that at various times in our Presbyterian history,
different groups within our Presbyterian community
have been alienated from
the prevailing beliefs and practices in the church.
Sometimes it was the liberals feeling disenfranchised and unheard...
other times it is the conservatives.
Sometimes it is racial-ethnic persons...
other times it is rural churches.
Sometimes it is those who believe with all their heart
that God calls and equips all people –
gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or straight...
sometimes it is those who believe with all their heart
that this is not God's will.
And the question has always been this:
How will those,
who at any given time are angry or threatened or grieving or dismayed
by current realities in the PC(USA)...
how will they respond
to what they view as a church that has left them...
a church that no longer represents
their core values and beliefs?
The question, put simply, has always been:
“Will they stay? Or will they go?”

Well, I think it is in the asking of that very question...
the “stay-or-go” question...
that we Christians most conform ourselves to the world.
Because simply asking the question:
Will we stay or will we go
expresses an understanding of the church
that is foreign to Scripture...
foreign to our confessional heritage.
What it is NOT foreign to is this consumerist culture in which we live.

You see, our culture would have us see
the Presbyterian Church
as nothing more than a sociological phenomenon...
a human construct which has no more claim on our loyalty
than the brand of laundry detergent we currently use.
We've all heard of "church shopping," right?
If our current brand of detergent underperforms...
or even worse, if the parent company
that makes the detergent
supports a cause we don't agree with,
then we are free as consumers to shop around...
to vote with our pocketbooks...
to vote with our feet...
and to find another detergent that better meets our needs
and represents our values.
That's the American way.

But it is not the Biblical way.
The witness of Scripture...
and the witness of the history of the whole church...
testifies that division within the body of Christ is a grave matter
that should never occur quickly or easily.
Although there may be times when separation is inevitable,
that should only be a last resort, not a first instinct.
We should make very effort
to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁵

Well, when writing to the divided Christians in Rome,
Paul announces this audacious news
that by the mercies of God,
the divisions of the world will not rule their lives in the church.
"We're not going to live in that old world anymore.
We're going to view people in terms
of the gifts God has given them.
In the grace of Jesus Christ...
we will live as one body with many equal parts.

Exactly how they are to do this, Paul doesn't say.
And precisely how these words might become flesh
amidst the real and deep differences
we have within our denomination, I don't know.
What I do know is that if we have learned nothing else
over the past several decades,
it is that it does not work
to reduce complex matters of faith and belief
to "two sides of the issue."
It does not work to simply divide ourselves
into rival constituency groups.

⁵ Small again.

It does not work to play “dueling overtures...”
to depend on voting Yes or No.
All that produces is what the world produces –
winners and losers.
It is hard to be “united in the same mind and same purpose”⁶
when you believe that the Bible
and your most cherished theological tenets
have lost out in a church vote.
We’ve learned that what may work in politics
does not work well in the church
(and may not even work in politics).
We’ve learned that Presbyterians are not at our best
when we are “legislating” together.
We are far better when we are “discerning” together.

And if we are to stay together...
if we are to make time and space to discern together...
(which some folks are trying to do)
we will have to listen carefully Paul’s words
just after this morning’s text.
Here is a sampling:

Let love be genuine.
Love one another warmly as Christians,
and be eager to show respect for one another.
Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians
and open your homes to strangers.
Ask God to bless those who persecute you.
Do not be proud... do not think of yourselves as wise.
Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody.⁷
If we are to stay together our life will need to be marked
by these daily acts of love

Jack Haberer is the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook...
and he begins his “What I Did On My Summer Vacation” essay
with these words:

“Twenty-eight relatives. Seven days and nights. One house. Chaos.”

The scene is North Carolina’s Outer Banks
where the extended Haberer family is gathered
for a shared week’s vacation all under one roof.
Spanning four generations
and coming from six different states,
it is a fairly homogeneous gathering racially and ethnically.
But when it comes to religious convictions
they are anything but alike.

⁶ 1 Cor. 1:10

⁷ Selected verses from Romans 12:9-21 in the Good News Translation.

Ranging from agnostic to devout,
from Roman Catholic and Anglican
to Pentecostal and nondenominational.
Throw in a couple of Presbyterians
and ideologically what you have is Wall Street Journal devotees
having to live with NY Times zealots under one roof.

Now, as Jack goes deeper I quote him:
“Not all is well among us.
One family branch lost its patriarch to cancer just a few weeks ago.
A third great-grandmother was left behind
in a rehab center after she fell.
Another matriarch fell on our second night here,
breaking her wrist.
Four younger members just suffered breakups.
Plus, terms like “neurotic” and “eccentric” come to mind often.
Nevertheless, we think we top all others who have made the claim,
“We put the fun into dysFUNCTIONal.”

Well, using his family vacation experience as a metaphor,
we might ask:
How can this same thing happen in the life of our denomination?
How can two million Presbyterians from all generations
and worship styles
and theological perspectives
possibly live together under one roof?

Well, Jack Haberer identifies two fundamental realities
that were present within his family on the Outer Banks
and will need to be present in our days ahead.
First, the Haberer clan gathered in a big house.
The house was big enough to provide BOTH common areas
AND separate quarters.
While everyone shared the same
kitchen and living room and pool and beach,
every couple and each older single person
had a private bedroom and bath.
In other words, their common life was balanced
with each one’s need for their own space and freedom
to self-define and self-manage.
And the second reality was that they were family.

Some were born into it... others married into it.
But nobody stormed out the door.
Divorce was not an option.
“So, too,” Haberer writes,
“the Presbyterian Church will need to be a big house
with lots of common areas for meals and meetings and worship.
There will also need to be private rooms
so that folks with diverse visions of the church
can operate somewhat separately, somewhat together.
Sort of like sisters sharing a house,
perhaps we can recreate the common areas
and the separate quarters
that are necessary to facilitate
both our relatedness and our individuality,
without threatening divorce.
Imagine... two million Presbyterians. Generations together.
One family. Chaotically dysfunctional, yet relatedly connected.
Why not?

People far brighter than I
are thinking and talking and praying
about HOW, practically speaking, this might work.
My hope and prayer is that
God’s Spirit will work through them
enabling them to do what we do best – discern together.
And that in the end, by the mercies of God,
the Presbyterian Church might be nonconformist...
a church not reflecting the divisions of the world,
but reflecting Paul’s vision of a body
with many equal parts,
each performing a vital function.
Two million Presbyterians. Generations together.
One family. Chaotically dysfunctional, yet relatedly connected.
May it be so, Lord. May it be so.