

SEEING MY CHURCH DIFFERENTLY

Texts: Jer. 29:4-7; 2 Cor. 3:1-3

9/20/09

Introduction

I'm middle-aged. I know that's true for at least two reasons. First, I'm 48 and $48 \times 2 = 96$; the pension fund and Social Security are both gambling that I'll never reach 96 so I must be at least half-way home.

The second is that I threw my back out this past week. Now that's nothing new. One time I threw it out in a high school wrestling match while I was going for the glory. But this time I threw it out walking from the car to the back door – no glory and no story. And as I have gimped my way in and out of bed this week and leaned on the heating pad in my office chair, it's been hard to deny that some things in life have changed.

It's a chapter in everybody's inevitable story – birth, growth, maturity, decline, death. It helps to laugh about it because we can't change it. What is not so well known is that in at least this one way churches are like people. They too have a lifecycle.

Let's have a little family conversation about aging today. Let's talk about us. Brothers and sister as a church we have arrived at late middle age. That's not a measure of our 30 plus years. It's a measure of our history. Eighty-percent of the churches in the United States are either on a multi-year numerical plateau in their attendance or are in decline. A church consultant would call that late middle age or older in the lifecycle. And we for the last ten years have been firmly among the eighty percent.

But we as a church are unlike people in an important way. We can begin a new lifecycle. We can seek our Lord for insight and guidance and begin choosing our way into a vital future for many years to come. But that requires a willingness to see our church differently.

- 1. If you walk into Westminster Presbyterian Church today you'll see a beautiful, well-kept facility. You will see active people of different ages and experience creative ministries. You will participate in great worship. Friendly people will greet you and if let them loving people will care for you. You'll see a mature, living church.**

What you may not see, because it has happened slowly and consistently, is that about half as many of us are here as there were in 1998.

I'm not a numbers guy. The numbers don't concern me; but the trend does. Each of the last ten years has told a similar story.

So what do we do? It's most tempting to say, "*I don't want to see that so I won't.*" I'm comfortable. Things look pretty good around here to me. This is a beautiful place with great people. Leave it alone and somehow everything will work out.

Or we might be tempted to say, well *there must be an easy fix*. Tweak this and twist *that*, then things would be like they were when there were 650 in worship and over a thousand members on the roll. A little tune-up and the engine will work fine.

But I don't believe it's that simple, and I'd encourage you not to either. There's no one reason that explains the last decade. At the very least there's the reality that Snellville - and our world - is a very different place than it was in 1978.

I'd suggest we do something very different than engage in denial or look for quick fixes. Let's look back over our shoulders. Not at some time fifteen or twenty years ago in an attempt to recreate a preferred past. Let's go all the way back to when some of you were sitting in the chairs in the cafeteria at Britt elementary school thirty years ago. Back when there wasn't building to maintain, a mortgage to fund, or much of a staff to pay. Back before there was a history to remember or forget. Back when the mission was all there was because there wasn't much else. And you asked, "*What does faithfulness to God require right here, right now?*"

Now is the time to ask that original question again – because we are a vital and a hopeful church. Now is the time to choose to see our church differently – because we still can. Your Elders have committed themselves to a year of discernment about our future direction. You can too.

I suspect that the answers will look different than the faithful answers of thirty years ago. But I believe that if we do this fearlessly – it will be the best of times for Westminster.

2. Suppose we are willing to see our congregation differently. Suppose we are willing to ask again “What does faithfulness require?” How do we go about answering the question?

The prophet Jeremiah had the difficult task of getting people to quit living in the familiar past. They were God’s people who found themselves for many reasons – some their fault, some not – in exile in Babylon. And to make matters worse there were other prophets telling them that any day now they would go back home to Jerusalem. Soon they would be able to do yesterday over again.

But Jeremiah said God had an altogether different plan:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry have sons and daughters...increase in number. Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Jeremiah’s people had to discover that God wasn’t chained to the temple of their religion in Jerusalem. He was ready to heal, save, and bless in the daily reality of their Babylon. In blessing their strange new world they would find their blessing. It was time to invest in the community where God had planted them. And we have to discover it too if we want to see our church differently.

One of the sure and certain marks of a church well down the road in its lifecycle is that it spends an increasing percentage of its time, energy, and money taking care of itself. If we want to challenge that trend at Westminster then we will have to develop the ongoing ability to recognize God at work beyond our footprint at 2208 East Main Street.

You should ask that of your pastors. You should ask that of your leaders. *And most importantly ask it of yourselves.* I have no doubt that the best future ministries for Westminster Presbyterian Church will be found the way the ones we look back upon with pride were started. As we watch and listen to our next door neighbors, police chiefs, school principals, co-workers and needy people in this community with missional eyes, we’ll discern the movement of Jesus Christ. And what begins as the discovery of one or two sensitive to the Spirit often grows to captivate us all.

When we discover we are a mission movement we innovate. We find fresh ways to be the church because we are doing all we can to bring people into relationship with God. If we want to see the church differently, let’s not restrict Jesus to the sanctuary.

3. Faithfulness requires that we look at this community and expect to find Jesus working in it. And it requires that we look at ourselves differently too.

When critics in Corinth wanted to know if Paul's was a first class apostle or a bit of a fraud, he didn't justify himself. He didn't pull a letter of recommendation out of his pocket. Instead he pointed to the people of the church and said:

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with but with the Spirit of the living God...

Do we understand that God writes himself upon our hearts through the ministry of the church so that he can mail us to his world? Jesus isn't a private possession. We see Westminster differently when we see that we are all letters from Christ written to be read by others.

A church is a gathered and scattered thing. One of the misunderstandings I fear as this point is that people are going to think that I don't think what we do in here matters very much. But nothing could be further from the truth. No church succeeds very long at being outwardly focused unless it is equally committed to being inwardly strong. And that inward strength comes through gathering for familiar things like worship, bible study, prayer, and fellowship. That's spirituality. That's how God writes on our souls. But we gather for those things to be formed so that we can scatter in this community to recognize and serve Jesus.

That means we have to learn a bit differently. We need to know what the book of *Philippians* says about the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ, how to find peace in troubled times, or how to pray. We also need to go to a class like *LifeKeys*, or a workshop like *My95*, to learn how to use the instrument God has created each of us to be in our personal mission in our little piece of God's world.

Written and mailed, inwardly strong and outwardly focused, gathered and scattered – are we seeing a rhythm here? We'll see our church differently when we are as personally committed to becoming one as we are to becoming the other.

A church that wants a new lifecycle grows its spiritual roots to support its missional shoots. Like a healthy tree it asks us to sink our spiritual roots deep into the soil of a living Jesus so that we will be anchored to be his strong and visible partners in this city.

Conclusion

Welcome to late middle age. We can do what comes natural to a church. Or we can seek the Lord and choose to begin a new lifecycle.

What does faithfulness require, here and now? Where is Jesus at work in the many places and among the many people that Westminster people touch? Am I willing to pack up my faith and be sent to where the action is?

I hope you will pray about these questions fervently. And then I pray God will give us the courage to answer them. I believe that the time has come. What do you believe?