

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?

Text: I Cor. 1:1-3, 10-17

7/18/10

I

Thank you for calling "Heaven's Gates" – your multi-church, multi-denominational hotline.

If you are a Methodist, please press "1" and your call will be transferred to the nearest potluck.

If you are Pentecostal, press "3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-3-Hallelujah!" and throw the phone onto the ground.

Presbyterians, please form a committee. If there's a quorum present and a 2/3 majority vote in favor of the motion, please press 4.

Lutherans, please press whatever number you wish, because, after all, you are the ONLY ones who use this line.

For the Amish, please walk to the nearest Mennonite and have them press "5".

For all Calvinists, please do not press anything. If you were meant to be connected it will happen.

If you are non-denominational, just press whatever you feel like. It all leads to the same place anyway.

It's more fun to talk about other people's denominations. Sometimes you have to pay attention to your own. We're Presbyterian Church USA. Without denying that many good things happen through our denomination, we have some huge problems, and few numbers point out the illness:

- Since 1983 (when the PCUSA was born out of two denominations the UPC and the PCUS), we have lost one million members, or 32% of our membership. We have about 2 million members.
- We lost 3% of our members from 2008 to 2009. By far the largest category of those who left was not death, or transfer, but "other" (104,000) which means they became inactive or just slipped out the back door.

A thermometer can tell you that you are sick, but it won't tell you why. Part of the reason is as old as the diagnosis that Paul gave the Corinthians: *I appeal to you brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another that there may be no divisions among you and that you might be perfectly united in mind and thought.*

But like them we are not. We are a divided denomination, losing members, and struggling mightily at the highest levels of the church. What is ailing us?

II

First, there is a wide-angle answer to the question. There is nothing happening to the Presbyterians that isn't happening to the Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and United Church of Christ – we are part of the “mainline decline”.

In the early 1900's 40% of Americans belonged to the “mainline” churches. Today is less than 15%. Evangelicals (Southern Baptists and all those independent folk) claim about 25%. And Catholics are about 24%.

Mainline churches have been in rapid decline since the 1960's. Part of that is the American trend away from big centrally controlled institutions to locally run ones – you may have experienced that in your business and professional life.

And part of it is that in our age marked by incredible diversity and constant change in everything - including spiritual attitudes – the mainline churches have not been able to meet the challenge. We have ignored the need for evangelism. We have been busy guarding our traditions, and negligent on telling new generations why they should care about them. And folks are looking elsewhere.

I believe the denominational tide is going out – probably by God's design - but in the mean time what will replace it isn't clear. And we're in that awkward place of watching one way of doing church disappear without being clear about what's next.

And then there's the narrow angle answer to the question. The Presbyterian Church USA (and many others) is deeply divided over questions about human sexuality and fundamental convictions about the need for faith in Jesus Christ.

The great new awareness of our time is of diversity in religious belief (there are lots of non-Christians religions, and people who don't seem to believe much of anything at all), sexual practices (what are to make of the growing social acceptance of homosexuality?), and cultural differences. A significant part of the church thinks that God's will is to be found in accommodating many of the changes in culture. A significant part of the church believes the clue to God's will in a changing culture is to be found first in Scripture and the church's long history of interpreting it.

These divisions are deep, at the center of people's faith, and create enormous mistrust in the PCUSA. Voting at meetings will not heal us. Business as usual is living in denial.

III

The most recent meeting of the PCUSA General Assembly, which ended last week, illustrates what I'm saying. There were many issues discussed – everything from totally changing the book of Church Order to issuing policy statements about the Israeli and Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. (Many of which I'll be ready to discuss tonight at our hot topics reheated gathering.) But this Assembly will probably be remembered for what it again did and didn't say about human sexuality.

For the fourth time since the language was first approved in 1997, the Assembly voted to ask the Presbyteries to remove the requirement that those being ordained practice fidelity if they are married or chastity if they are single. One again the entire church will vote and the standard could change if a majority of the 178 presbyteries vote to change it.

The margin was 53 – 46 percent a perfect example of our division. Those who wish to change the standard – to clear the way for practicing homosexual folk to be ordained – have declared that this a non-negotiable issue of justice. They will be back every Assembly until it changes.

The Assembly decided not to vote on a variety of issues on the subject of marriage including redefining marriage as being between two persons (as opposed to a man and a woman) by calling the church to a period of study. It did not approve an action that would have immediately allowed pastors and sessions to solemnize same gender marriages in states where it is now legal.

The assembly did urge the Board of Pensions to extend benefits to same gender spouses and domestic partners of non-ordained church employees and to raise dues for all members 1% to cover the cost.

But at the same time the Assembly voted not to allow churches which take exception to join non-geographic presbyteries of like-minded churches which would allow them to remain PCUSA but not participate in what their conscience will not allow.

You get the picture. Human sexuality – and what being a Christ follower means for us as sexual persons – is near the center of the divisions among us. General Assemblies do business; they don't solve problems. This one abides.

IV

Well so much for our illness, and my brief diagnosis of it. What do we do about it? My answer will sound contradictory, but hear me out. It's time to care less, and it's time to care more.

It's time to care less about denominational organization, structure, and identity. The only thing you can say with certainty about the PCUSA is that it will look different than it does now. Each year it gets smaller and the national organization has less money to spend than it did the year before. I'm no longer sure when the label says PCUSA on the side of the box, what's inside.

For over twenty years I have dedicated a significant part of my ministry to the renewal movement – the conviction that with enough organization and effort the current denomination could be renewed through embracing a more orthodox practice of the Christian faith. I don't believe that any longer. Whatever the future is, I don't think that what it is.

The best image I can give you is of a teapot. Teapots are carefully designed structures for heating water that can release the pressure (steam) when the temperature in the pot gets too hot. Thus you get hot water without blowing up the kitchen in the process.

The PCUSA today is a teapot. It's heating up – there's enormous internal pressure and friction...but no one yet has come up with a way to release the steam that comes from our divisions. Get it too hot and the structure will split. I hope for something better, but I no longer expect it.

On the other hand it is time to care more about the future of this congregation, how the denominational drama impacts us, and what the core faith convictions are that will guide us right here, right now.

If we remain in the PCUSA, we need to know clearly why we are here. If one day we were to leave, we need to know clearly why we would go and where we would go. The one thing we shouldn't do is pretend that if we don't talk about the problem will go away.

More importantly we need care deeply about what we preach, teach, believe, and practice with regard to Jesus Christ right here. The best answer to the confused world in which we live is not "We're confused too, so join us."

The far better answer is deeply and humbly held core convictions about Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. Deeply held so we don't become irrelevant in the chaos of our times. And humbly held, so we can practice the charity of Christ toward each other, those who don't agree with us, and those who have no idea what they believe.

It's time to care less; and it's time care more.

V

We began by giving the Apostle Paul the first word. We should end by giving him the last.

The Corinthian church was not so different from ours. They were divided in their understanding of Jesus Christ, how to deal with cultural issues in a plural world, and how to understand their sexuality as followers of Christ.

Anyone who believes that if we could just get back to the time of the early Christians and all would be well needs to read the New Testament. On the other hand those early believers have a lot to say to us about how to be the church in our time.

Paul didn't just diagnose their problem – factionalism and deep division. He gave them a clue to what would heal them. In fact he does it in the very beginning of his letter.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus, both their Lord and ours.

It's time to care more...

That we are called to saints – people set apart to demonstrate God's purposes in the world.

That we are sanctified in Christ Jesus – his teaching and his Spirit equips us to live out what we've been called to be.

And that we are called along with everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus – we are to align ourselves with brothers and sisters we find in every denomination, and in no denomination at all.