

# Presbyterian

January 27, 201

1 Corinthians 12:11-31a

Ordinary 3

Look around you for a moment. Go ahead—indulge in a little “people-watching.” While we may look rather much alike—more over fifty than under; almost exclusively white and English speaking—the church of Jesus Christ, and that’s us, is anything but an amorphous collection of look-alike, think-alike people. We are drawn from every nation, from every race and culture, and from every ethnic and social identity. We are male and female, young and old, liberal and conservative, high church and low, rich and poor, educated and not, sophisticated and rough around the edges. This rich diversity of the church, however, is not only a matter of human circumstance, but also one of divine intention. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ,” writes St. Paul. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” This passage from First Corinthians goes on to affirm this diversity not as something to be overcome, but as something essential to the church’s life and mission in the world. We have different “gifts” and different functions, but each is needed; each of us has a place and a role to play.

What is true of us individually is also true of us as the gathered community of faith. We don’t all fit the same mold. While we are all Christians, some of us are Christians who happen to be Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and a growing variety of non-denominational flavors. Each of us has our strengths and weaknesses, and a variety of theological, liturgical and political emphases, styles, and practices. Presbyterians occupy a kind of middle ground. Liturgically at one end of the spectrum is the Prayer Book tradition where things are pretty much prescribed, and at the other end is the Free Church perspective that is bound by no rules for worship other than local custom. Presbyterians enjoy both a Directory for Worship that gives directions for our Worship and A Book of Common Worship that offers forms that may be used in worship. At one end is form and little freedom; at the other is freedom and little form; and there we are in the middle with a judicious mix of both. In terms of church polity or governance, at one end of the spectrum is the episcopal form of government where the power to govern is vested in the hands of an individual. At the other end is the congregational form of government which retains all power for the whole congregation. Presbyterians are governed by a system that neither gives power to one person nor leaves power in the hands of all but vests that power in the hands of elected leaders or elders. The same may be said of our theological convictions. We are in the middle. To be a Presbyterian, though, does not mean to be forever picking the proverbial splinters out of your backside for having straddled the fence. Presbyterian Christians stand within a tradition which, while recognizing the validity of the convictions and beliefs of others in the Christian community and recognizing that we share more in common with them than not, still

clearly and boldly states the convictions and beliefs at the heart of our identity. Through our confessional statements, we declare who we are; what we believe; and what we understand God is calling us to do as his people in the world.

While Presbyterians do not hold to any theological beliefs that are uniquely our own, there are emphases that distinguish us from others. At the heart of our theological convictions is the “affirmation of the majesty, holiness and providence of God, who in Christ and by the power of the Spirit, creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in sovereign righteousness and love;” which is to say, that while it may not always appear so to us, God is sovereign in all things. This affirmation assures us that the world, and your life and mine, have their beginning in God, are sustained by God, and though they may from time to time give every evidence of careening into hell for a crash landing of epic proportions, God is still in control. That gives me hope—enormous hope. When justice is denied or delayed, when falsehood tramples truth, when love is battered by hate, when greed overwhelms generosity, when kindness is numbed by apathy, when things that make no sense appear to prevail, it is reassuring to know that the powers of evil do not have the last word, God does. God is in control. The hymn reminds us: “God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year; God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near; nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

Related to this central affirmation of the sovereignty of God is an emphasis upon salvation as a gift and not a reward for good works done or bad works left undone. We are saved by grace through faith, which is to say that there is nothing that we must do to save ourselves; indeed, there is nothing that we can do to save ourselves. In Jesus Christ God has done all that is necessary to wrest us from the grip of sin and death, filling us with the gift of eternal life. Ordinarily, when we think of eternal life we think of something that begins with death; it may be more appropriate to think of it as something that begins when life begins. Salvation/eternal life is being made right with God, being made whole, moving from emptiness to fullness, from darkness to light, from mere existence to life. It is a quality of life that knows more of satisfaction than emptiness, more of hope than despair, more of joy than sadness; it is life lived in and with God and with God’s people in Jesus Christ; it is life that strives to conform to God’s will and purpose; it is life that continues for ever. God does not let us go. God’s love keeps us for an eternity. So the, the certainty of our salvation rests not upon our fidelity to God, but God’s fidelity to his word and to his love for us in Christ. We may stumble; we may fall; we may turn and walk head-long away from God at some point or points in our lives, but God’s loving hold upon us in Christ is firm and he will never let us go. We need not fear “falling from grace.” We need never to be saved again.

Presbyterians recognize that we are not only saved *from* something, but we are also saved *for* something. In the first place, we are saved *for* a way of life. Together and individually, we are the embodiment of the kingdom of God, the sphere of God’s

gracious rule on earth. Our lives and our life serve as examples of life as God intends it to be lived and enjoyed—not perfectly to be sure—but at least in part. We are the living, breathing example of life that is shaped primarily by the values and standards of the kingdom of God rather than the values and standards of this world. When you think about, it that is not only rather humbling but, to be honest, frightening as well, at least to me. Secondly, we are called not merely to model the life of the kingdom but to seek its realization on earth as we work for reconciliation and peace in human relationships, as we strive for justice, and as we reach out to the weak and the marginalized in deeds of compassion. From the very beginning of our tradition, Presbyterians have taken this calling seriously. John Calvin, the principle architect of our tradition, working in Geneva, embarked upon an extensive program of public works that cleaned up the city, saw to it that food sold in the public market met certain basic health standards, instituted efforts towards full employment in the city, established a hospital and a poor house, and began a full system of education from primary through university schools under the control of the church. God's care for the people of his making reaches beyond the spirit to the whole of human life.

There is so much more that could be said about who we are: our emphasis on education and the service of God through the service of the mind; our penchant for doing things decently and in order, even if it does take longer; our understanding of a proper stewardship of the gift of life and the gift of God's creation; our insistence that Christ alone is the Head of the Church; the primacy of the role of Scripture in the church's life and the life of believers, but, perhaps most important of all is that we understand ourselves to be a people who are not only reformed but always reforming "according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit." We recognize that we do not have all the answers, that we don't have it all right just now, that we have a long way yet to go. God isn't finished with us. We are still in process. "Tradition is the living faith of dead people," wrote John Leith. "Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people. For this reason tradition is the source of the church's vitality and traditionalism is the occasion of its death." By God's grace may we always be open to what God is doing within us and among us and in the world, and drawing upon the best that is in our long-established tradition let us give ourselves to God's purpose with renewed zeal, faith, and commitment.

To be a Presbyterian is to stand within a tradition that honors its past and looks forward to the future with hope and confident expectation, realizing that we are but one expression of the body of Christ in the world, an important one but only one. Several years ago our denomination embarked upon a kind of unofficial public relations campaign with the release of bumper stickers, coffee mugs, aprons, etc. that carried the logo: "Have you hugged a Presbyterian today?" I'm not sure if it was in effort to make us appear more warm and fuzzy than our "God's frozen chosen" reputation, or if it was an effort to remind us that we really do need one another. The latter, I expect, may be closer to the truth. Whatever the case, it might well apply to our ecumenical relations as

well. Have you hugged a Baptist, a Roman Catholic, a Methodist, or Lutheran today?  
We need each other—we really do need each other—for our life and witness to whole.  
By the way, I think I would ask permission before hugging a Baptist!

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