

What Does it Mean to Be Presbyterian?

FPC Marshfield

June 2, 2019

Sarah Moore-Nokes

5 words - Let us form a committee.

#####

Distilling “What it means to be Presbyterian” into a single sermon is, to put it mildly, challenging. But I thought what I might do is talk about a few of the things that I think are key issues. And take a stab at one or two of the hardest questions.

Perhaps it’s best to start with a disclaimer. I am, and always have been, Presbyterian. I am a seventh generation ordained minister in the PC(USA) and the first woman in our family. Lest you think though that I am the poster child for being Presbyterian, let me also tell you that I have always had a deeply conflicted love/hate relationship with the institutional church.

I tired of our tendency to move at a snail’s pace; I long for a day when we spend more time *doing* what Jesus said, rather than arguing about what he meant; I detest those who use Christianity (of any denomination) to justify violence, hate, war, abuse, and discrimination.

And yet, I truly believe that we are better together as the Church (big C – universal) than we are as a motley crew of wandering individuals. And the flavor of Church that I choose, imperfect as it is, is Presbyterian – specifically the PCUSA kind.

So what’s so great about being Presbyterian? The place to start is with Grace.

Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, “The great Christian revolutions come not by the discovery of something that was not known before. They happen when *some body* takes radically *some thing* that was always there.” (Yancy p. 14 *italics mine*)

I learned a lot about grace, as many of us do, when I had my first child. Three years into seminary is a fine time to have a baby. There are plenty of baby sitters, a flexible schedule and of course, the undying gratitude of the music director for providing a live baby Jesus for the Christmastime Lessons and Carols. My daughter Meg was born at the end of November. She debuted in her first ever role as the Prince of Peace on Dec. 5th. But her more significant role would come over the next months during many late night feedings when I had a visceral experience of what it meant to be a child of God. If you are parents, or have spent any time

caring for a very young child, you know the feeling of the weight of baby sleeping on your body. The heaviness of a child, who having fallen into deep sleep also falls into your arms trusting implicitly that you will catch and hold her forever.

That phrase, child of God wasn't new to me. But understandably, I had no memory of falling asleep in my own parent's arms. The heavy weight of my daughter sleeping with her head on my shoulder and her body draped on my torso – her complete trust that she'd be safe finally allowed me to understand *radically* what it meant to be child of God. The gift had always been there but I'd never been able to recognize it in quite that way before.

Another writer defines Grace this way:

“God's love and acceptance freely given and not earned. Grace is a gift not to people who deserve it or to people because they are particularly special. It is a gift given out of the generosity of God's love for all creation.

Grace is boundless and expansive, and, many believe in the end irresistible. Grace affirms that it is not humanity that saves itself but God, who has acted in the past, still acts today, and will act tomorrow. Grace is God's gift to undeserving children (regardless of each one's age!) (Foote and Thornburg p. xvii)

And God's grace is extended to us (1) whether we know it or not, (2) whether we understand it or not and (3) whether we accept it or not.

We reformed Christians are much more concerned about accepting grace and being grace filled than we are condemning sin. We view all that we do, from worship and mission to reading and interpreting the Bible through a lens of grace - and that sets us apart from some of our brothers and sisters in Christ and ~ can lead to some awkward and uncomfortable situations.

How did we get here? You might ask

The short answer is, of course, the Protestant Reformation, during which reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin led a movement (helped immensely by the invention of the printing press) away from the Catholic church. As I was writing this sermon, I had to make a list of topics for another sermon and the Reformation is one of those topics but it bears mentioning here because a key issue for us stemming from the Reformation is the way in which we interpret scripture taking into consideration the historical / political / cultural context that informed the writings of both old and new testaments.

Historical critical biblical interpretation and theology means we pay attention to context. Humans do not now and have never existed in a vacuum and we take that seriously. Was the Bible inspired by God - absolutely. Was the Bible influenced by what was going on culturally at the time?— without out a doubt.

Presbyterians are not the kind of Christians who check their brains at the door. And sometimes, that can be frustrating. Sometimes, when you are deep pain, or questioning your beliefs or life seems to chaotic, it would feel a whole heck of a lot better if someone would stand in the pulpit and give step by step instructions and clearly defined doctrine so that you wouldn't have to think too hard in order to know what's what.

Sometimes when Presbyterians go round and round on issues that deeply divide – say the definition of marriage or whether we should divest in corporations whose profit comes from fossil fuels as we have recently at our General Assemblies – you might long for more black and white and a lot less grey.

But that's not us. In fact one of the best examples of our understanding that context matters happens in this congregation every year. Every year when you ordain and install ruling elders and deacons to their offices (as we will do today) you ask a series of questions. One of those questions is: Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

I won't put any of you on the spot but I wonder what you consider the essential tenets of the Reformed faith. I also wonder what you and you and you think. Because there isn't a list. And because the confessions span a time period from the Nicene Creed of ancient church to the Brief Statement of Faith adopted in 1983 to the Belhar Confession adopted in 2016 as the most recent addition to our book of confessions. And because every one of these documents was written at a different time and place during which very, very different things were happening around the world. And because, I know that since you've all studied the confessions thoroughly you are aware of the translations issues, the multiple interpretations and also the outright contradictions. I DO wonder what you consider the essential tenets.

And so we attend to the Confessions and the Bible with a nuance that to some seems confusing. Our interpretations are not generally literal.

If you dig a little and look critically at the Bible you begin to realize that it would be difficult to take it literally for if we did there would be no eating pork (Leviticus 11:7) no wearing certain kinds of clothing (Deuteronomy 22:11) including this robe ... and no lending money to people in need and charging interest (Exodus 22:25) – might make it kind of hard to buy a house.

And then you have the conflicting creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Right off the bat – contradictions. How on earth do literalists manage that?

But perhaps the most convincing evidence or compelling reasons that a nuanced approach is appropriate is that Jesus himself was not a literalist of Scripture either. Remembering of course that Jesus was a Jew, it is reported to us in the gospels that Jesus said many times, you have heard it said.... but I say to you.... And then gone on to contradict the religious practices of his day. Matthew 5 starting at verse 27

And, we recognize that translations are imperfect documents handed down generation to generation and influenced by the Spirit of God among us. That is, the Bible is not simply an historical document but also a living one. One which invites us in every time we pick it up to a new conversation and new experience of the Living God.

So instead of literalism, we try to read scripture (and experience scripture reading us) with interpretations that include consideration of 1. What was going on when such scripture was first, and later, told and heard; 2. How the scripture being examined has been influenced by previous scripture; 3. Jesus' teachings on similar matters; and 4. What developments in and around us are related to the particular scripture being studied. Reading the Bible this way takes effort, prayer, research, study, thought and conversation" (Being Presbyterian... p.16)

In the long run I don't think a simplistic reading of several thousand years of religious practice would be particularly satisfying. Nor do I consider it a faithful approach.

Because I think that people are longing for an authentic experience of faith. One in which they are not asked to blindly believe but are invited to wrestle with deep mysteries. Our world is complex – so should our faith be.

When we are at our best, we are thinking people, rooted in history, who value wrestling with mystery over religious platitudes and who view and experience the world through the lens of grace.

Which leads me to our unique organizational structure. We are neither top down like our Catholic sisters and brother nor Congregationalist like our UCC friends. We are representative at every level. And we are connectional at every level – which means we have responsibilities to one another and are bound together by the work we do and the values we hold.

At its best, our polity provides for diverse representation. Decisions made by a diverse group allows for a breadth not available to one person. Our use of Roberts Rules protects the voice on the minority.

While frozen chosen and committee jokes in Presbyterian circles abound (How many Presbyterians does it take to screw in a light bulb?) there is wisdom to the way we do our work.

Which brings me to Mark.

Consider with me this story. Four friends concoct a plan to take a fifth paralyzed friend on a mat, up on top of a house that is filled with and surrounded by people. They dig through a mud and straw roof - a messy, labor intensive project that no doubt created a disaster below - in order to get their friend in front of Jesus. This isn't the kind of thing you do on your own.

Imagine the conversation among them. "Are you sure we want to do this? It's a bad idea. It's a good idea." Weighing the pros and cons considering the consequences. Building up one another's courage, sharing their belief that this man Jesus could heal their friend. And finally acting together.

We know nothing about these folks. They are not described; they do not speak in the text; we know only this – they were people of faith. Pistis (defined as faith, belief, trust, confidence; fidelity, faithfulness)

And in the end, even though they had considered all the evidence, they acted as people of faith and received a great gift of grace.

Our God is not the God of the dead but is the God of the Living (Matthew 22:32) and Life and all its wonder and possibility. Our focus then is not on sin/salvation and hell but rather the radical notion of Grace – that completely unexpected gift that, in practical terms, make absolutely no sense.

And for that I'm incredibly grateful to be Presbyterian.