

“INTO THE FUTURE”

Date: October 7, 2007

Text: Luke 9: 23 - 27; Romans 14: 1-12

I have thought a great deal about the topic for our last sermon together. Peacemaking is a very important part of the Gospel message as you are aware and since it is peacemaking Sunday I was strongly tempted to move in that direction. Then, I had another idea and even announced the text last Sunday. However, it seemed most appropriate to try to lift up what I regard to be key foundation posts for the ministry we have shared and what lies ahead.

We need to ask as we have done more than once in worship and study what it is that God would have us be about in looking ahead. This congregation has a great history as a faithful witness to Christ's ministry on Main Street. What will be required to keep that vision and commitment alive as this congregation moves into the future?

Jesus told his followers “to take up the cross and follow me.” In principle we all agree but when it comes to practicalities there are many different opinions in every congregation: differences regarding worship styles, mission programs, social issues. Thus, a key factor is any church's willingness to really be open to God's activity and guidance in 2007 and beyond. You might be thinking – “of course, we are open” – but what I am suggesting involves earnestly wrestling with what is going on in the world, always seeking God's direction while not being certain where one will end up. The theologian Paul Tillich was on the right track when he said in a quote I have used so many times: “the real Christian is not the one with all the right answers but the one who asks the right questions.” It isn't easy to discern God's way in 2007 especially when it means dealing with issues and individuals with whom we have differences but this openness, which involves much soul searching and risk taking, is at the cutting edge of our faith. It always has been so going back to Biblical times. God's people had to learn how to live with foreign cultures in the Promised Land. Jew and Gentile Christians clashed over cultural differences in the New Testament. Somehow while dealing with such issues the people of God grew in faith and love and hopefully it will be the same for this church.

Would it surprise you if I said that an example of this open stance comes from the Apostle Paul? He usually is regarded as quite opinionated and rigid in his thinking but in the 14th chapter of Romans he wrote, “welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do.” That's Paul's suggestion in dealing with all the differences found in the early Church: disparity in eating practices, keeping the Sabbath and much else. He made it sound as though there were almost as many differences in the early Church as there are in congregations today!

Openness to God's future and to one another has to be predicated upon a deep level of trust, trust in the Almighty and trust in others in the community of faith. A teenager in a church I once served was preparing to dance in worship before a congregation of three hundred people. I asked her if she was nervous. She replied, “No, why should I be. This is my church.”

Let me quickly add that openness should not be equated with “going along with everything” or “wishy-washiness.” That is a danger and that's why we constantly need to take seriously the intent of the words of our Lord “to take up the cross and follow me.” Thus, commitment is the other building block for the church of today and tomorrow. Make no mistake, Jesus still is calling us to live out our faith. It isn't any different than in New Testament times: following Jesus means “swimming against the stream.” In a book entitled “Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down”, the author makes this point: “When a church's theology holds up a vision for swimming upstream – and most of the church members are floating downstream on yachts –something's got to give. Usually it's theology that gets sold away and not the yachts.” The challenge always is to take seriously the words of our concluding hymn, which comes from Isaiah 6: ““Here I Am. Send Me.”

Our response to Christ's call is to share his brand of love by moving out and serving others. One thing I have rediscovered in serving five churches beyond metropolitan Rochester since retirement is that the needs outside the urban area are just as real and just as great. Hence, every congregation needs to look around and see where there are places to serve in Christ's name. There is a prison in Batavia, migrants all over Genesee County, the aging and single parent families are more common in this area than normally assumed. What an opportunity to be set on Main Street as God's ambassadors!

It's a tragedy when people separate "saving souls" from helping those suffering from societal injustice. I always am pleased that the Peace Offering is received on Worldwide Communion Sunday. The Sacrament provides the inner spiritual substance so desperately needed in our world; the offering reminds us of all of those in God's universe who need our help. If we keep our focus on God's love pouring out and our response, then, the future looks pretty exciting. There is so much to do, so many people in need of divine love.

Openness and commitment. The image I would focus on is this: picture the church as a body up in mid air but with feet firmly planted. Does that imagery make any sense to you as First Presbyterian looks to the future? I can't promise you that the road ahead will be perfectly smooth, without any bumps or turns. It probably won't. What I can say is that you have had ups and downs in the past and always God has guided you and will continue to do so. The church as I have experienced it and as I see it in the future always exists in mid-air as it tries to sort through all the changes around it. But if that church is firmly planted at the same time in the love of God so that even though it bends in the winds of time it continues to be faithful, then, that church will be a joy to God and a signpost for the Living Christ.

There's an old story that says a great deal about the status of all too many congregations. Do you remember General Custer and the massacre at Little Big Horn during the Indian Wars? The general was an elder at a Presbyterian Church. It seems he told the session before leaving for Little Big Horn and his death, "Don't do anything until I get back." And the church hasn't." Fortunately First Presbyterian is not that church. You have been open and committed, anxious to be guided by God in moving forward in ministry.

I leave you with a few words that touch me deeply.

WHEN YOU SING, SING JOYFULLY

WHEN YOU SPEAK, SPEAK COURAGEOUSLY

WHEN YOU DREAM, DREAM BOLDLY.