

Some Next-to-Last Words

1 Corinthians 1: 1-13

Pittsburgh Presbytery

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Greetings, beloved in Christ. This is my last sermon with you as the Pastor to your Presbytery. I've titled it, "Some Next-to-Last Words" because while they are likely to be my last words to you, we all know that it is Jesus the risen and ascended Christ who always has the truly last word about everything and everybody.

There are a bunch of things I'd like to say as I get ready to go to a new calling, and they don't really all connect together exactly, So, I thought I'd follow Paul's example as he closed his letters—and offer you a kind of miscellany of thoughts as I close my ministry with you.

You may have noticed that we've been making the news recently—about some congregations that are seeking to be dismissed from us to another denomination that they find more pure than our church. It's all pretty tough stuff, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, I find. A few thoughts.

First, I want to say that there is ample reason to believe that our denomination's theology and practice are intact.

Our Christology is intact, even though we continue to wrestle about who Jesus is and what he means for the world. On the Presbytery website is the wonderful document "Our Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ." It was adopted by the 2002 General Assembly, to answer a very unpleasant debate at the 2001 Assembly in which many prominent leaders argued that Jesus was not the Savior for everybody. In that wonderful paper Jesus is affirmed, again, as the Son of God, fully divine and fully human, and says (page 11, "Jesus is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith and hope, and love in him." And, "No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ." Do some in our denomination disagree and lift up other voices? Yes. We continue to wrestle about our Christology, as we must, but it remains intact—both officially and in the huge majority of pastors and members.

With regard to the Trinity, the Peace, Unity and Purity report itself says this (lines 46-50): "As the Nicene Creed teaches, this God is the triune God: eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. . . .the renewal of Trinitarian conviction has been a major theme of theology in our time. The Task Force urges the church to continue to renew this core commitment of the faith." Is it true that the Trinity paper NOT adopted by the last General Assembly said some things that many regard as "goofy" if not shocking about the Trinity? Yes. Yes, we continue to wrestle about the meaning and language about who God is as three in one. But our Trinitarian theology remains intact.

With regard to the Bible as the word of God, the Confession of 1967 is as clear as the rest of our documents. It says, (9.27) The Bible is, “the one sufficient revelation of God I Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel.” Do we continue to wrestle about the authority of scripture; do some place it on a par with other authorities? Yes. But our denomination is clear about the authority of scripture.

With regard to our ordination standards, our denomination’s stance has been unremittingly clear since these issues first became a painful part of our national debates: Fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness. Do some advocate for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian folk in all the ordained offices of the church—as a matter of the justice of God? Yes. But our ordination standards are intact.

It’s not comfortable that we wrestle about these things that matter so much—not comfortable for any one on the various sides of the wrestling match, whether orthodox or progressive, or whatever term you think is apt. But, beloved, every generation has to wrestle anew with the meaning of the Gospel for its age. It causes pain in the church, but when was it ever not thus?

Sometimes I hear people say they just want to be part of a New Testament church. I always want to say, “Haven’t you *read* the New Testament? Which exact church did you have in mind?” Indeed, there would be no New Testament letters if the church hadn’t wrestled, and stumbled, over things that matter profoundly for the gospel—about Jesus, about standards of behavior, about relationships in the body.

To select just one example, let’s look at Corinth. Our scripture reading was Paul’s greeting and thanksgiving for the church. Let’s take a look at the issues by leafing through the paragraph and chapter headings added to the text by most translators.

A church divided over leaders—party spirit was abounding, something Paul called a “work of the sinful nature” in his Galatian letter (see chapter 5).

Christ crucified is God’s power and wisdom—Paul had to defend the cross which was foolishness to Greek and Roman believers and a scandal to Jewish believers.

The church and its leaders—more about the party spirit in Corinth.

The nature of true apostleship—Paul’s first serious defense of his authority as apostle, his right to speak with authority about who Jesus is and how we are to live as his followers.

Dealing with a case of incest—sinful behavior not even the Greeks and the Romans tolerated, and that no one in the PC(USA) would tolerate—was present in Corinth.

Lawsuits among believers—Paul shames the church for going to court and says they’d do better to be wronged than to damage their witness to Christ by going to court. This is a passage that has informed the dealings between presbytery’s

leaders and the leaders of Beverly Heights and Memorial Park as we've negotiated over their congregation's desire to be dismissed with their property.

Sexual immorality—again.

Concerning married life--a whole chapter wrestling with marriage in the church, especially in light of the immanent return of Jesus.

Concerning food sacrificed to idols—a very large problem the early church faced that we do not. It took more than a generation to wrestle this through.

Paul's rights as an apostle—another defense of his right to teach with authority.

Warnings from Israel's history—some scary warnings for God's people when they are disobedient, necessary for the Corinthian church in a way not necessary for the PC(USA), *whatever* you may think of us.

The Lord's Supper and Abuse of the Lord's Supper—some were drunk, some were starving to death, the worship was disorderly and disrespectful of the poor.

Three chapters on spiritual gifts tearing the body apart as people one-upped each other spiritually.

The Resurrection of Christ—58 verses defending the centrality of the resurrection to the members and teachers at Corinth.

And more.

So, what do you make of all that? Is that the church you want to join, want to be? How can it be that Paul opened his letter to *this* bunch by saying, "I always thank my God for you." And, "You have been enriched in every way," "you do not lack any spiritual gift"? Why didn't he write: "you bunch of reprobate sinners, you're giving Jesus a bad name and you're fired as a church!?" No, he corrects, rebukes, affirms, teaches and wrestles for the gospel among them. That is the nature of the church in every age. In each age there are new challenges, a new generation to interpret Jesus to, to call into the mission God gives in Christ. This *is* what it means to be the church.

Indeed, our special calling as Presbyterians is to wrestle deeply about the collision between the gospel and the toughest things our culture faces. In the middle 1800's we wrestled deeply over slavery—and divided over it. But we were right in the end. In the last century we wrestled over whether women ought to be ordained, and our denomination divided over that. But we were right.

Today we are wrestling about the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people, and the meaning of same sex. While I do not agree with those who say that this is just like slavery and women's ordination (because neither the scriptures nor the research really support that view), the reality is that we are wrestling deeply about something our culture is wrestling with and we are called in Christ to do it deeply. More deeply than most denominations can manage.

It's painful to do this, we are suffering for it. But, I believe that this is our sharing in the suffering of Christ for the church, and for the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, knew something about the suffering of the church in conflict with the dominant culture. He died as a martyr of Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer

said that Christian community is not something that we do, not something we can make. Christian community is a reality created by God in Christ. Our part is to participate in the community Christ has created—or decide to create something that we like better. The problem is this: It is *Jesus* who creates this community, and he calls into it some people that we are not comfortable with. We think we have better taste than Jesus, and if it were left up to us, the church would be made up of the right kind of people: people who see the truth about justice, purity, Christology, the Trinity, and sex the way WE see them!

I believe that what we have in the PC(USA) today is precisely what we find the church to be in the New Testament, and exactly what the Lord Jesus has in mind: a bunch of people saved by his grace, called by the Holy Spirit, who don't agree about crucial gospel things, who need correcting and rebuking, who don't always like the authority of the apostles, and who have a hard time getting along and staying together. That IS the church, and always has been. And, it's enough.

I get it that that's tough. I get it that some people aren't up for the ongoing struggle and I can even imagine that the Spirit can call some people to leave this denomination and go to another one.

I must say, though, that I don't get why this is the time to do that. I want to be careful about saying this, because I know it may seem more than a little political. But my considered opinion is that there has not been a time in the past 40-50 years in this denomination when evangelicals were more fairly represented at every level of the church. I know many feel that for years evangelicals were effectively kept out of the leadership of our church. But today the denominational staff in Louisville is a fair cross-section of the church. The Executive Director of the staff is Linda Valentine, a very gifted person from a church known to take strong justice stands. Tom Taylor, her Deputy Executive Director for Mission—to whom all the denomination's mission and ministry staff reports is an open evangelical, whose last church was a Confessing Church that didn't pay all its per capita. Other evangelicals on our denominational staff include the directors for: the office of theology and worship, evangelism, Hispanic ministries, world mission, and new church development. Every presbytery in our synod—all 16—is working on church renewal, and our synod staff gets it about what we are working on here in Pittsburgh.

This seems like an odd time for evangelicals to be leaving. And a very good time to be giving money to the things you'd like to see our denomination, and your presbytery, be doing more of.

I have to say that I think there is a kind of vying for victimhood status in our church—and in this presbytery at times. Different groups experience frustration, and a sense of being marginalized, and feel overlooked by the church in general. Over the years I've discerned a kind of cherishing of the status of being oppressed and victimized by the church. Let me say this: whoever you are, your voice needs to be heard by the church—every voice does. But victimhood as a status is damaging to those who claim it, even when it's an effective tool to create enough guilt in the body to get what you want, and it's damaging

to the whole body. Let's fight for the high demands of the gospel—justice and purity and the respect for every race, gender and group. That's good for the church, and for everyone. Victimhood is not good for the church. Jesus *died* at the hands of the powers that be and was never a *victim*.

Now, to some quick, concluding remarks.

Every expression of the body of Christ, including a presbytery, has to decide who it's going to be by what it does. You are doing that and will do that partly by what you allow and disallow. Let me ask: What do you want as you debate painful things? What behaviors are allowed and disallowed? And who does the allowing and disallowing?

Here's a concrete example. A few meetings ago we were debating something painful, and a pastor from a well-known justice-oriented congregation went to the microphone. As the pastor got to the mike, a person sitting nearby hissed. What do you make of that? Is that who you will be? Let me tell you: whoever hissed at a member of this presbytery did not learn that behavior from Jesus. If you were seated next to the person who hissed, did you say something that would disallow that kind of behavior among us? If you didn't, whose responsibility did you think it should have been?

Every body produces viruses—but only healthy bodies produce antibodies to attack what's unhealthy. What kind of body will we/you be? Disallow things that come out of the works of the flesh, that are not fruit born of the Spirit.

I have noticed that under pressure there is a new emergence of party spirit among us. There are lots of things that threaten to push us apart, and there are signs that we are dividing up into teams again, or are at least tempted to. Please resist that—it's a work of the sinful nature, the flesh, not the Spirit. It's one thing to work with others to make sure your calling about the gospel and the peace, unity and purity of the church are well-represented in the body. It's another thing to demonize those who see things differently from you in Christ.

I beg you, please evaluate people on the fruit they bear, not on where you think they are theologically, or how you observe them voting on a few issues. Err in the direction of respecting other members of the presbytery—assigning to them love and loyalty to Jesus. Get to know people who vote differently from you—find out about their love for Jesus and for the fruit they are bearing in ministry.

Refuse to follow leaders whose fruit is enmity, party spirit and anger. And, keep such people out of power—out of office. Put into office and leadership those who have borne fruit in the mission God gives in Christ—and in the mission of this presbytery to the 143 communities through our 156 congregations and new church developments.

And, finally, a few comments on my new calling. Some people are asking my friends and colleagues, "Why is Jim *really* leaving?" The subtext is, surely it's over all the controversy among us. Beloved, I am *really* leaving for the reason I've said: God's call to

family. Nine years ago God called Carolyn and me away from our families and to this mission in Pittsburgh. Now, God is calling us back to our families—and to a wonderful ministry for me as an associate pastor who will mostly focus on strategic leadership in the congregation of a dear friend—the very church where my children are members.

I want to introduce my wife, Carolyn. Here is a key part of my witness to what God in Christ has done for me. God gave me a woman who loves the Lord and who puts Christ first in her life. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for who she is in Christ. She knew we were coming to Pittsburgh before I did, and we wouldn't be here if she were not willing to put God's call to mission ahead of our family's needs and very energetic expectations about where we ought to live and serve—i.e., near them. She is the unseen partner in my ministry, the one who makes it possible for me to bear the costs of it. I would not have been here without her.

And so it is with many of you. I know that presbytery seems irrelevant to many, and in Southwest Pennsylvania especially with our lack of respect for and suspicion of institutions. But many of you know that the best way to impact communities is through churches, and the best opportunity to help churches matter for Christ is missional work by a presbytery—in calling pastors, setting vision, holding people accountable, making partnerships between congregations and more.

Paul's words to the Philippian Christians have always been in my mind about you, Pittsburgh—especially the staff and the leaders. I have never worked with more gifted, Christ-centered, and brave people. Listen (Philippians 1: 3-11)

As Paul would sometimes write at the end of his letters: “SEE WITH WHAT LARGE LETTERS I AM WRITING TO YOU IN MY OWN HAND.” Here is what is written large in my heart about you, beloved: I always give thanks for you, praying with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel.” I will always have you in my heart. Imagine yourself the recipient of a holy kiss.

The Lord is with you.