

THAT PRUDENCE AND FORBEARANCE OF SPIRIT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Worshipping with the Second Presbyterian Church after 250 Years of Separation

September 24, 2006

Scripture: Psalm 122:1-9, John 17:11-23

Dear brothers and sisters of Second Presbyterian Church, it has been a long time since we have last been together as one and shared the Lord's Supper and sung a psalm or two together. We at Old First have mended our ways a bit because of you good Scots at Second Presbyterian. We've elected a Session which we did not have when you left 250 years ago, angry that there wasn't a Session.

We've moved uptown, about a hundred and sixty years ago, and you have too. And all the old fussbudgets and stiff backed types that so irritated you in those early years at this church, well they're dead and gone. The coast is clear. Many of them are buried in the grounds around the north and south lawns here. We've remembered a few of them on the plaques in the vestibule and sanctuary. We hope you won't be reminded of the bad old days as you notice them.

That black slate tablet out in the lobby written in Latin commemorating the enlarging of the sanctuary in 1748 down on Wall Street was executed just about the time the unpleasantness between our two congregations was starting to warm up.

And there's also a plaque remembering Dr. John Nicoll of Edinburgh out in the vestibule that recalls his role in the founding of this church. A wonderful old Scot.

But it was those liberal forebears of ours at First Church, the ones from South Britain and New England that were so hard for our Scottish forebears to stomach. We Firsties were a stubborn and self-righteous crowd. We refused to elect a Session. Instead, we let the Trustees run everything, including the spiritual as well as temporal matters of the church. So when the issue of hymnals came up, whether to introduce Dr. Watts' new psalm book or to stick with Rouse's "Old Scot's version" you were rightly incensed that the decision came not from the non-existent Session but from the Trustees.

Table etiquette may have been the burning issue in Paul's day, whether to eat meat offered to idols, and sexual orientation may be the great dividing issue in the Presbyterian Church today, but in the mid-eighteenth century in New York City the great divide was based on, "Whose hymnal shall we use?" It was the last straw when Watt's version was selected. The Scottish members of Old First went to the presbytery to complain, and the presbytery asked the help of the synod, and the synod sent a commission and they reprimanded the Trustees of this church for not consulting the congregation about what hymnal it wanted to use, and it ordered that a Session be elected.

It was such a testy time that the pastors finally asked to leave, Rev. Cummings and Rev. Pemberton. They had had enough of contention and bickering. And it was hard

to find a pastor after that. The church offered the job to a succession of candidates and they all turned them down until finally David Bostwick of Jamaica, Queens accepted. Just about the time he came, many of the Scottish members of the church, unsatisfied about Watt's hymnal and the unhappy state of affairs at the church, left in September of 1756, and went to Cedar Street and formed the Scotch Church, to be known eventually as the Second Presbyterian Church, and joined the Associate Scotch Presbytery. (I know, "scotch" is a drink and "Scots" are the people, but in the eighteenth century that's the way it was.)

A lot of time has passed since then. The old reasons for leaving are long gone. You've moved uptown and so have we. You've joined the PCUSA and so have we. We're in the same presbytery now. And both congregations' pastors are friends.

We're worshipping together today, I might add, because you good people at Second asked if it wouldn't be nice to do this, to worship together after all these years. It was your grace and generosity of Christian spirit that made it possible to lay aside any historical impediment that stood in the way of our joining hearts and minds and spirits to sit at table together once again, and hear the word preached, and sing from the same hymnal as a sign of our oneness in Christ Jesus.

Dr. Samuel Miller's history of First Presbyterian describes our split this way. He says, "Animosities... continued, and were occasionally increased, as circumstances turned up, by the want of that prudence and spirit of forbearance towards each other that the Gospel of our Lord prescribes."¹ It was a sad chapter in this church's life that somehow we were not able to work it out.

"Time makes ancient good uncouth,"² the hymn says, and the passing of time heals many wounds. It was a good idea, it was a graceful idea that the Session of Second Presbyterian Church asked if we could worship together today, to reverse the march out of the old sanctuary in 1756, and walk back in again as a congregation, in procession, 250 years later. A very good idea, indeed. It is a sign of hope for a battle weary denomination that has gotten itself embroiled in a never ending battle over issues that divide rather than unite.

It is a time when as a national church we are lobbing hand grenades at one another, and conservative pastors and churches and presbyteries are threatening to leave the denomination and take their buildings and property with them, proving once again that for want of prudence and that spirit of forbearance towards each other that the Gospel of our Lord prescribes we Presbyterians have not learned much about either prudence or forbearance since our congregations split in 1756. Maybe our two churches have something to teach the larger church today.

In truth, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church meeting in Birmingham last July was a gathering of people who seemed as if they were preparing to enter the ring of some blood sport, wanting to evoke the worst behavior from each other in order to have something bad to say later on.

The fact that we held our assembly in Birmingham at the same time as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was holding its General Assembly, and that we held

several joint worship and celebrative events together, seemed almost like an after thought, a nice idea, but not substantive.

Our Birmingham hosts could not have been nicer, and their hard work to prepare a warm and welcoming environment was not the problem. In that, they succeeded. It was all the other people, not from Birmingham, the commissioners and advocacy groups and radical partisans who squeezed into the Assembly from all around the country that made it a disappointment.

The Assembly did some good things. It approved the report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the church that presented recommendations that offered the first crack in the door, allowing light into a previously darkened room on the issue of gay and lesbian ordination. In essence it said that sexual orientation alone need not be the singular disqualifying category to forbid ordination to church office, but that the national standards of the church must be applied locally and Sessions and presbyteries must use judgment in interpreting the tenets essential to faith and required for ordination. Candidates for church office will now be considered on an individual basis, not as a category of person.

The Assembly rethought the issue of divesting the denomination's portfolio from corporations doing business in Israel, and it apologized to the American Jewish community for the pain caused by the actions of the 216th General Assembly.

And, finally, it received a report on the Trinity, which widened the discussion around the imagery and language that we may use to describe the infinite and indescribable being of God.

All three were controversial stands taken by the Assembly, but all three were progressive steps forward and the right thing to do.

None of them has drawn more fire than the Theological Task Force report and the responsibility that was reaffirmed as the work of the session and the presbytery to examine candidates for service and consider carefully all that a candidate brings of faith, and frailty, giftedness and humanity.

The reaction among a small but vocal element in the church has been off the chart irrational, and utterly unjustified. The radical right fringe of the church is arguing that the General Assembly has declared itself apostate by approving the Task Force report, that it has abandoned the historic faith of the church, that it has forsaken the Bible's teaching, and that the time has come for faithful congregations (meaning those who agree with them in discriminating against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons) to leave the denomination and fight uncivilly in civil court to take the property of their churches with them. It is a most unfortunate response to a carefully considered policy written by conservative and liberal Presbyterians alike, and one which was approved by a majority of the Assembly.

The church is divided over sexuality and ordination and we are not the only church to be so. The trials and tribulations of the Anglican and Episcopal churches and the Roman Catholic Church, are as great as are ours.

The Christian community is no stranger to controversy. Jesus was accused of eating with prostitutes and tax collectors, raising a question of table etiquette and whether

one could be ritually pure and consort with such low life. In the early church, Paul faced the question of whether meat offered to idols could be eaten by the faithful or whether moral contamination occurred as a result.

In the eighteenth century our two congregations divided over which hymnal would bring you closer to God. Today, we fuss over ordination issues and which sins are so horrible that they disqualify a person from serving in ordained office, and whether sexual orientation is even a sin at all.

As a preacher and pastor, I consciously choose not to speak very much about our denomination's trials and tribulations, even though I am co-moderator of the Covenant Network, the largest and most trusted affinity group in the Presbyterian Church which is working to change the constitution so that gay and lesbian people may be able to serve more openly and affirmatively in our denomination.

I don't speak about these internecine battles of our denomination because I believe that they are not where most of you live your lives; not even those of you who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Most of you are interested bystanders to some extent, curious but not engrossed in the topic. My hunch is that you don't live and breathe ecclesiastical scimmages like these, not that the issues are not important.

I don't bring these matters to the pulpit because there is so much good that the church does locally, nationally and globally that to focus on the points of disagreement is to focus on something that misses the forest for the trees.

I also sense that most of this ordination issue is *settled* in this congregation. Long ago we recognized the calling of GLBT persons in the church and we are well past dismissing anyone solely on that basis.

Most of us come to church thinking about other things, wanting to hear about other issues in our lives. We worry about our jobs, and the economy, about our nation and the wars in which we are engaged. We think about the upcoming election, our grades, our relationships with others, dating, children, commitment and fidelity, money, our health, our sanity, loneliness, the challenges of being a widow or widower, the larger questions of where our lives are going, our relationship with our parents and siblings, our family, our divorce, our spiritual wholeness and where we stand before God, and that strange mole that seems to be changing on our shoulder.

Those are the things that press on us each day and each Sunday, not the issues that consume the in-house squabbles of the denomination. They may be important squabbles but they do not meet us at the point where our lives are lived, unless, of course, you are a seminarian, or are invited to serve as an officer in the church. Then the church's debate may have very important meaning to you.

In 1928, in an article in *Harper's* magazine, my predecessor, Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "People do not come to church with a burning interest in what happened to the Jebusites but with their own questions and problems." Fosdick was right. While I have no doubt that people want to know their Bible better, they want to know the Bible better so that they may live a better life before God, not so that they may collect esoteric theological and scriptural trivia.

I have an enormous respect for the forbears of this church, for the Scots who so much wanted to have music be simple and godly, and therefore wanted to use Rouse's hymnal. I have respect as well for those who wanted a more modern Psalter edited by Dr. Watts, because it represented the new nation and its tastes, the one they were bringing into being. And we now recognize that both forms of music had their place.

But all in all those battles of the eighteenth century seem quaint and odd to us who have other theological and ecclesiastical fish to fry these days, and I mean that with no disrespect to a matter that divided two important congregations in Manhattan 250 years ago. We look back and wonder why this was so controversial in light of today's challenges.

Some day the larger church will look back at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st Century and shake their collective heads in dismay at the painful way in which we handled the question of whether gay and lesbian persons should be ordained as elders and deacons and ministers of word and sacrament, and how disgracefully and inhospitably the radical right in the church behaved. They will look back and wonder how Christian people could have been so mean spirited and wrong. They will do that in the same way in which we look back now and wonder at the callousness of so many congregations in the civil rights era, and in the days of slavery, and in the debates over whether women should be ordained.

Coming together today after 250 years of separation reminds us that there is a long view of where we have been as a church, and where we are headed, and how history, and, more importantly, how God, judges what we do and why.

Somehow God made of that march away from this congregation a goodly company of saints at Second Presbyterian Church. Bless you for coming today, for gently reminding us of a time when our forebears at First Church were less gracious to you. Thank you for allowing us to come together again after all these years and look back and wonder about why it was that we ever had a difference anyway, and think about how we might not allow such a thing to happen again, and pray that the whole church, our Presbyterian Church, may some day have the same joyful experience of looking back and wondering what the fuss was all about on this ordination issue and why we let it get to us the way we did. Lord willing, it won't take another split in the church and the passing of 250 years for us to get to that point. Lord willing.

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¹Rev. Dr. Samuel Miller, *The Early History of The First Presbyterian Church*, N.Y. 1796, reprinted 1937. 14.

² Hymn: "Once to Every Man and Nation."