

Operation Identification

There are days in the life of everyone of us that we will never forget; graduation day, our wedding day, the birth of our first child, perhaps our first job or when we accomplished a goal we worked for and dreamed of. One such day in my life might sound rather strange to some of you, it was my very first staff meeting at a PC(USA) church. I had served several Catholic congregations but never a Presbyterian church. It was the second Tuesday in April 1993. The senior pastor had introduced me to all other staff members. Each person took turns welcoming me and telling me a little about their role on the staff. The meeting continued with calendar checks, information about worship, up-coming all church events, etc. When the meeting was about to conclude I was asked to close with prayer – not a problem. Then the senior pastor said to me; “So you’re going to be ready to preach in about a month, right?” What else could I say but, “Of course I will.” At the same time I was praying he was only joking.

Over the years that we worked together he often would tease me about preaching for one occasion or another. One particular afternoon as I was leaving the building he informed me that he had taken the liberty of volunteering my services to fill the pulpit on Good Friday. This time he was quite serious. This *would be panic time*. I had absolutely no experience in the pulpit. Then there was the *small issue* of my not attending Good Friday services because of the violent, filled with hate images this holy day projected for me. There didn’t seem to be many choices so I started asking colleagues for opinions and help. The people I shared my panic with were gracious and helpful, yet nothing felt right. I couldn’t use the words others gave me and was totally uncomfortable using the designs and formats others had suggested. Picturing the audience in their under garments didn’t seem as if it would be useful either.

Finally a revelation – it had to be what God was calling me to do and say - God’s message with my voice as the medium. Each one of us learns, experiences and grows in our own way. There is no one way that is correct for everyone. The same is true for our faith growth. Each of us has our own personal perception of who God is; we also have our own personal relationship with God. My trying to borrow a way of being present in the pulpit from someone was like trying to insist that my perception of God was the only true perception God had room for. My sense of God is just that – mine. It is based on my faith journey, my understanding of and personal relationship with God.

First Jesus questions his disciples about what others are saying. People saw Jesus, according to spokesperson, Simon, among other things as a prophet – God’s spokesperson. The general population was not describing a ‘warm fuzzy’ Jesus who loved little children and was a friend to everyone, *except* the politically powerful of the day. Certainly that was a dangerous position to take. If you were someone that was seen as a threat to people in power that wouldn’t make you very popular with the authorities. When Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” he was wondering about their personal perception. Many Jews of Jesus’ day (and some still today) believed God would send an anointed king who would lead a movement to free Israel from oppression and bring peace and justice to the world. Did the disciples hold this belief?

The answer Simon gave was, in a very real way, his confession of faith. It was quite comforting to Jesus. Although the disciples didn’t have the whole picture, they did know that Jesus was God’s Messiah. The one Israel had been waiting for. Tom Wright, in his book *Matthew for Everyone. Part Two*, tells us that because Simon makes this faith statement Jesus gives him a new name: “...in his native Aramaic, ‘Cephas,’ means ‘rock’ or stone’. If Simon was prepared to say that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus was prepared to say that, with this allegiance, Simon would himself be the foundation for his (Jesus’) new building. Just as God gave Abram the name Abraham, indicating he would be the father of many nations, so now Jesus gives Simon the name Peter, the Rock.”

We Presbyterians are sometimes known as the “people of the books.” Indeed there are many books we pay close attention to as we attempt to live our Christian faith together. First there is Holy Scripture, the many and varied stories that tell of our faith journey in the words and experiences of our ancestors in faith. It is in Word and Sacrament together that we worship God. Secondly we use our PC(USA) Constitution which consists of two parts. Part I is The Book of Confessions. – our collection of 11 documents that through hundreds of years have been the words and ideas we have used to remind ourselves and the world what we believe about God, Jesus, Scripture and the Church. Part II is our Book of Order which is a document of guidelines that explain how we order our life together in practice, Worship and discipline.

As an elder and an educator I believe there should be one more instrument for us to use as we live out our faith: our own personal statement of faith. A statement in our words that expresses what we believe about God, Jesus, Scripture and the church. I strongly feel that not enough of us take the time to seriously consider what we really – in our heart of

hearts – believe about these very important matters in our lives. Call me a cynic but I'm willing to bet that most of us spend more time considering what type of vehicle to purchase than we do examining our own faith beliefs. We know right from wrong and we know what we believe and what we don't believe. I can't help but wonder when *was* the last time most of us took a long, honest look at who our Savior is and what our beliefs are calling us to do with our lives. We are all so 'calendared' that making time for much more may seem nearly impossible. There is an exercise I do with our confirmation candidates that they really enjoy. Individually they are each asked to write three words or short phrases they believe about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. On newsprint we list all the words for each category using no duplications. Then, as a class we create sentences to link their words together. The finished product becomes their class statement of faith which we share with the congregation on the day of confirmation. The students really enjoy the exercise and are usually amazed with the finished product.

2006 Statement

We believe God is our amazing, forgiving creator.

The selfless love God gives us is never ending.

The priceless love of God fills us with joyful and thankful hearts.

Our merciful God nurtures and cares for us. God is the reason for our faith.

For us, God is our heavenly Father. God is everything.

We believe Jesus is our Savior and teacher.

Jesus is God's Son and ultimate gift of perfect love.

Jesus is proof of the forgiveness we all share because of his selfless sacrifice.

Jesus is our healer and Messiah.

We believe the Holy Spirit is God's uncontrollable, indestructible, invisible gift.

The Holy Spirit is here, within us and everywhere.

True to Christ's promise the Holy Spirit is the One that is with us always.

There are many ways for us to say what we believe. There are many ways for us to describe who Jesus is in our lives and what our faith in God is calling us to do. Things like music, poetry, a beautiful sunrise, a baby's laughter or the sticky hug of a three year old. I suspect the people that mean the most in our lives sometimes get lost in the litany of chores and expectations we face each day. I know that none of us intend for life to be so busy that we forget to express our love for those closest to us. Unless we are careful that is what happens. Remember to say, "I love you," to those closest to you. Remember to take time for that personal relationship with God. We are not charged with keeping the secret of who Jesus is in the way the first disciples were. Spread the message by your living. Encourage one another and act justly in all things. Celebrate that fact that you are a child of God.

