

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Jesse Garner

February 12, 2017
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Working Together

*For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.
1 Corinthians 3:9*

As many of you know this year marks the quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation, though for an event that played such an important role in shaping the modern world, there has been remarkably little notice taken of this anniversary, at least thus far. Perhaps most of the observances will take place later this year on or around October 31, the date that is universally though somewhat arbitrarily taken to mark the beginning of the Reformation, that being the date when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Certainly it was from that date onward that the movement we now call the Reformation gathered considerable momentum.

So I wasn't surprised when I saw a new book on the Protestant tradition reviewed in the most recent issue of the Presbyterian Outlook, the journal incidentally, where a little over sixteen years ago I happened to notice an ad for a church in Philadelphia that was looking for a minister. But when I saw the title of the book, I was more than a little taken aback, given the fact that we are celebrating such a milestone anniversary this year, since the title was "The End of Protestantism," a rather discouraging thought in this anniversary year. Once I'd read the review, however, it was clear that a more accurate title for the book would have been "The End of Denominationalism," meaning the tendency sadly endemic among most Protestant churches to splinter into ever smaller entities to the point that there are now over 10,000 Protestant denominations in the U.S. alone, including dozens of Presbyterian denominations, many of them offshoots over the years of the PC(USA).

I would certainly agree that the tendency to splinter which is so common among Protestants, and more these days than ever before, is frankly a scandal. For all the virtues of the Reformation and its undoubted achievements, achievements that have proved of enormous and lasting significance, still it is very clear that the Reformation unleashed in the church a very dangerous virus of the very sort that Paul lamented in Corinth nearly 2000 years ago, the tendency to form factions of the like-minded who are then reluctant to worship with anyone who does not think *exactly* like them. Sadly, it must be noted, this has been all too often true of Presbyterians since the early days of our history in this country. Indeed, this congregation experienced just such a split itself in the 1740's, leading to the founding of Second Presbyterian Church, which was not simply a new congregation but one allied with a different wing of the church in this country (New Lights vs. Old Lights).

Such divisions have continued to occur over the years, most recently over issues such as women's ordination and same sex marriage, resulting in a myriad of new denominations generally known by their acronyms, among them the CPC, OPC, BPC, PCA, EPC, and so on. In fact, I have just this week been appointed to chair an administrative commission in our presbytery

to negotiate with one of our congregations which has petitioned the presbytery to be dismissed to the newest one of these groups, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, who simply call themselves ECO, which I have a sneaking suspicion is as more a branding move than anything else, ECO having a nice ring to it these days. Several of us from the presbytery met with the Session of that church to hear their concerns, concerns which focused on a handful of issues they had with the PCUSA, disregarding the vastly larger number of issues where we are in complete accord.

But that's what it's come to all too often, where the Protestant impulse seems to have led us, in the process creating ever more and ever smaller denominations, and making a mockery of the prayer of Jesus the night before he died that his follower be one, just as he and the Father were one. We Presbyterians can't even be one. In fact, when I checked out the author of the new book on the "end of Protestantism" that I mentioned earlier, I discovered he belongs to a Presbyterian denomination I'd never even heard of, a denomination that consists of the grand total of 78 congregations. I think it's pretty clear that this is not what Martin Luther and John Calvin had in mind. It really does have to end, otherwise there are going to be as many Protestant denominations as there are Protestants, each with one member, though no doubt even then, we'll find some way to split.

Well, after thoroughly depressing myself wading through this sordid history of schisms of which our tradition as much as any other should be utterly ashamed, I then happened upon some much better news in that same issue of the *Presbyterian Outlook*. It was a brief article about a new movie that's just come out and which I suspect many of you have seen. The movie is *Hidden Figures*, the true story of three young African American women who played a critical role in the early years of the American space program, though not without considerable resistance. The heroes of the story, and I mean heroes in the best sense of the word, are the three young women, of course, as well as a couple of administrators in the NASA hierarchy and even one of the astronauts, who supported the efforts of the women and stood up to the entrenched racism in NASA, both institutional and personal. It turns out—this is the good news—that two of the heroes of this story, one of the young women, Mary Jackson, and the astronaut, John Glenn, were, and in Jackson's case still are, Presbyterians, as was Glenn till the day he died last year.

Now I'm sure, in part, that's just a coincidence, and they might just as easily have been Methodists, or Baptists, or Roman Catholics, as indeed others of them may well have been. But I'm just as sure, it's not a complete coincidence that two of these folks were Presbyterians, because their actions illustrate what is in fact a classic Presbyterian character trait, that being a stubborn, and at times a *very* stubborn insistence on standing up for what they think is right, no matter who or what the opposition. Tom Wolfe, in his classic story of the seven original Mercury astronauts, *The Right Stuff*, called it Glenn's "pure unreconstructed Calvinism," a trait which did not endear him to his fellow astronauts. While I don't doubt but that similar traits can be found in many other religious traditions, it is distinctively Presbyterian, in large part because of our history in the early years of this country.

In fact, there's a slogan that goes back to the earliest days of Presbyterianism in America, a statement which is called one of the "historic principle of church order" in the original Book of Order adopted in 1789, and is still there today. That slogan is "God alone is Lord of the

conscience” and if you don’t remember anything else today, I want you to remember those words. For that conviction—that we are ultimately answerable to God and to God alone—is part of our DNA as Presbyterians. In practice that has meant taking very seriously the right of conscience and preserving a place for conscientious dissent. It explains a great deal about who we are and why, both at our very best and at our not so good.

The best, in people like Jackson and Glenn and many others over the years including the Rev. Albert Barnes, pastor of this church in the 1830’s who held the Presbyterian Church’s feet to the fire over slavery. But unfortunately, also the not so good, because all too often, standing up for what we think is right leads to our thinking of ourselves as the judge of what is right and wrong for everyone, and when that happens you end up with a church that splits at the drop of a hat, because whenever there’s a disagreement, it’s obviously because you’re wrong. God alone may be the Lord of my conscience, but I’m the Lord of your conscience.

It all goes back to what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians, that when we make ourselves the judge of right and wrong for others, we’re thinking like human beings and viewing the world and everyone in it from the perspective of what he calls the “flesh,” meaning our own mortal experience, our own tiny little slice of the entire human experience which we think has equipped us to be the judge of everyone else. Which is why it’s so important, Paul goes on to say, for us to listen to the Spirit, which in practice means keeping our eyes on the big picture and listening to others, and certainly not just the ones we agree with. Which is why, of course, it’s so dangerous for us to listen to others only if and only as long as they agree with us, because that’s just listening to ourselves and the ever-smaller number of people who think just like us. Which tragically is exactly what’s happening in the church today, and even more so in the larger society, which is why it’s so important, indeed, vital, that we preserve a place where we can worship and work with people who don’t think just like us, but who with us share a common purpose, a common goal. Because it is only by working together, by listening to each other, and constantly learning from each other, that we will ever be the church that Jesus Christ died for, that city upon a hill that is a beacon for all the world to see. The church where I can stand up for what I think is right, and you can, too.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*