

# **“The Greatest, the First and the Second”**

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 26, 2008*

Presbyterian Heritage Sunday

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 22:34-40

Our denomination has designated today as “Presbyterian Heritage Sunday.” This is the day when we claim our part in the nearly five-hundred years of church history which follows the Protestant Reformation. And yet, this is also a day we approach with humility; realizing that this brand of church – this denomination – is neither better nor holier than any other. As the Apostle Paul said to the people of Corinth, the church body is made of many different parts. This is an accurate portrait of individual members who make up the church body; it is true of congregations that together comprise a denomination; and it is also a good description for the varied denominations which make up the church universal – the complete Body of Christ.

We all share a heritage that is marked at least in part by our present participation in this type of the church. It does make a difference what denomination you claim, just like it matters what particular congregation you attend. But it’s also true that today, less than half of all Presbyterians were born as part of this denomination. More often than not, our members have a personal story about having been somehow led or placed here, but also one that ultimately reveals some moment of having chosen to be here.

I have been nurtured by the Presbyterian Church since I was two years old. That was when my parents moved back to Kentucky where they both had been raised in the old German Evangelical Reformed Church, which is now a part of the United Church of Christ. In an effort to strike out on their own, and to find a vibrant church that was closer to home, they visited a few churches, finally discovering they identified with the theology, people and style of worship of that particular Presbyterian Church.

From the age of two until I began seminary, I belonged to that same Presbyterian Church. Although I grew to develop a strong personal faith, the church and denomination of my childhood had been selected for me. Then, during and after seminary, I worked in Lutheran and Methodist churches, at a Baptist hospital and for an interfaith community ministry group. Through these varied opportunities, I was exposed to a wide range of theologies and church bodies, and have chosen for myself to remain in this denomination. Not because it is better than the rest, or even more familiar than the rest, but because I have claimed its heritage – despite its particular imperfections – as an ongoing part of my heritage.

A while ago, several versions of an e-mail circulated among church folks with jokes about how many people from a particular denomination – Episcopalian, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Pentecostal, etc. – it would take to screw in a light bulb. If you saw this list, you might remember the answer for Presbyterians: it takes ten, eight to comprise a committee to study the problem and two more to tally the votes. Presbyterians are

renowned for being thorough, for taking a long time to make decisions, and for doing all things “decently and in order.”

Caricatures like this exist for just about every denomination within the body of Christ. Although we belong to the same Christian family, members of the body have tendencies to speak, act, think, pray and worship in unique ways. Some similarities within denominations can be attributed to common history, but others result from shared experiences in the present. Not all of our heritage was determined by past generations, but continues to be formed by who and what we see, hear and do each new day.

Still, the story about how I was placed into and chose to be part of the Presbyterian denomination does not tell you everything about my heritage. There is also the cultural aspect: that my parents both came from a Swiss-German heritage. As a result of growing up in this cultural context – for example – our cheese always came with holes.

But, ethnicity doesn't tell the whole story about heritage either. The fact that I grew up in Kentucky also contributes to my self-understanding, as have all the places I have lived since then: upstate New York, Washington, DC, Pittsburgh, Utah and now Cleveland. Each community has its own character which adds to the makeup of its residents. The Presbyterians of this part of the country are a little bit different from those of other parts of the country, and other members of Christ's body in different places.

As Presbyterians in this particular time and place, we share a common heritage: we profess some common beliefs and follow a shared form of church organization and governance. What, then, is distinctive about the Presbyterian Church? Our denomination's name comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*, meaning *elder*. The Presbyterian denomination is defined according to the way that its congregations are managed: by elected leaders of the church who – despite their age – we call elders. Ours is a church in which the body chooses representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Unlike other denominations, Presbyterian congregations are not under the direct control of an outside authority: there are no bishops directing who goes where and when. And yet, the Presbyterian denomination differs from congregational-based churches who trust that all decisions are best made in purely democratic, majority-rules way.

The structure of our church denomination also seeks to foster a connectionalism between different members of the body. For not only are the elders responsible for decisions within a congregation, they are expected to participate in the activities of the Presbytery and, if elected, to represent the local body at the national gathering of the church, the General Assembly.

While much of what goes on at the General Assembly goes unnoticed, some of it has lasting impact. At every gathering, what we claim to believe and consider to be the highest priorities for the church could change. In addition to being a connectional church led by elected elders, Presbyterians are also a confessional church. As a denomination, we stress the importance of both asking for forgiveness and, in response to God's mercy, stating our common beliefs. Most churches in other denominations are less likely to

emphasize the need for public and corporate confession of sins as well as claiming that our belief in God has been nurtured by and with one another. For, in addition to a reliance on Scripture for guidance in our lives, we also seek a common understanding of faith through the Confessional Statements of the church. From the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds dating from the second and third centuries to the PCUSA Brief Confession of Faith which was adopted in 1983, we believe our faith can be informed and strengthened by our heritage, but also that these human writings periodically need to be changed so that they more accurately and more clearly reflect our faith.

Whether it's because I'm a minister or because the world has so many questions or a combination of the two, I'm often asked what Presbyterians believe about this issue or that: about the authority of scripture, or about gay marriage, or whether I think the face of Jesus could appear on grilled cheese. I usually begin my response by saying that there likely are differences between what I believe and what other Presbyterians believe. For, even though a theological and social issue might have previously been addressed in our heritage, not every member or every congregation is expected to profess the same opinions.

Another on-line version of the "how many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?" joke gives this answer: none, because God has already predestined when the lights will go on and off. For almost five-hundred years, the doctrine of predestination – that God knows everything about us (even the presence or absence of our faith) even before we were born – has been heavily debated and often misunderstood. In humility, how could any mortal know the answer to this question for certain? On these more controversial issues – such as predestination – considered to be non-essential to the faith, a diversity of opinion is tolerated and even encouraged, with hope that ongoing dialogue will eventually lead us closer to the truth.

"What commandment – which of the 613 that comprised the Jewish Law – is most important?" Jesus is asked. The greatest – loving God – is also the first. It is the command upon which all others follow. But, the second is like it – not the foundation, but also important – love others as well. "Pick one," was what the Jewish leaders required of Jesus, and he told them, in effect, that's not a requirement at all. There is not just one simple answer. The fullness of God is not limited by our finite imaginations.

Therefore, to return to Paul's analogy of the church as the body and members as its parts, we must hold a healthy respect for the other constituent parts. For a diverse church to remain connectional, there needs to be a compassionate understanding among members. The Presbyterian Church has not always succeeded in remaining united – we have had our share of schisms and reunions – but unity endures as one of the highest goals for the church not only within, but also among denominations.

We celebrate our Presbyterian heritage not because it has been perfect, and not because it is better than other varieties, and not because it wholly defines who we are as individuals or as Christians. We celebrate our denomination and its heritage because it has contributed to the formation of our faith and the proclamation of the gospel in and for

the world. We share this distinct heritage because it offers us a theology and church structure that hopefully allows us to be fuller disciples and apostles for God; to proclaim the power of Jesus Christ in the world; and to love one another as God has loved us.

A third version of the light bulb joke goes like this – the answer is thirteen: one to do the work and twelve to grumble about how the old light bulb was better. The inherent risk in celebrating our heritage – whether it be religious, ethnic, cultural, or geographic – lies in the blind belief that what has come before us cannot be improved upon. Traditions have value, but only if we evaluate what has come before and modify it to apply to the present day and on into the future.

The church is a living body comprised of many members. Loving God is the foundation of this church, but loving others is also important. God loves us and knows how we follow these first and second commands. And so, being Presbyterian and understanding our unique might help us to know ourselves and know one another a little better, which can lead us to a common purpose and a common faith: unique and individual, but woven together by our connection to Jesus Christ, who is the head of the body and the Lord of our lives. AMEN.

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak...Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

(Isaiah 40:28-31)