

## Getting Back to the Business of Being the Church

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beast I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” Amos 5:21-24 (RSV)

“Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own.... There was not a needy person among them....” Acts 4:32, 34 (RSV)

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Romans 12:9 (RSV)

“.... For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, ... I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers (sisters), you did it to me.” Matthew 25:35-40 (RSV)

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” Isaiah 58:6, 7 (RSV)

For many years I saw these passages of scriptures along with other passages from the holy unit that deal with love, justice, advocacy and hope lived out in the Presbyterian Church (The United Presbyterian Church – Northern Branch).

I am third generation Presbyterian from Gable, South Carolina and the product of the Goodwill Presbyterian Church and the Goodwill Parochial School. I, along with my parents and their parents before them, were all Presbyterians. So when I speak about how the Presbyterian Church, my denomination, has lost sight of its mission in recent years, I do not speak as an outsider – I speak as a member of the family who has been raised, and educated in the Presbyterian Church, having attended Presbyterian Parochial elementary and middle school, a Presbyterian university, a Presbyterian seminary, and have been a minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church for forty-three years.

I remember when the Presbyterian Church, my denomination, was socially conscience and justice oriented – sending home missionaries to the South to organize churches and to establish schools for the freed persons – those coming out of slavery. It was the Presbyterian Church – Northern branch - that stood against the institution of slavery, and had it not been for the

Presbyterian Church, I, and many persons who look like me, would not have believed in education.

I remember how the church, through the Board of National Missions, sent what was called “the barrel”- clothes and other supplies for poor sharecroppers and tenant farmers to help them during hard times when there was no other help. I remember the Board of National Missions ensuring that ministers who pastored in poor rural communities and small towns had their salaries paid so that they could proclaim the gospel and stand for truth and justice without fear. I remember the Presbyterian ministers empowered and compelled by the gospel to go on the picket lines, to organize boycotts and sit-ins and demonstrations for justice, saying with the prophet that, “Justice must roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream;” singing all the time the old negro spiritual – “Before I be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.” These men and those women also marched with Dr. King and encouraged their congregations and their communities to have a sense of dignity and to live in hope with the understanding that they were not alone, but that they had the Presbyterian denomination behind them.

I remember men and women such as Eugene Carson Blake, George Todd, Bill Thompson, Gayraud Wilmore, Bryant George, Thelma Adair, Clarence Cave, Mildred Brown, Edler Hawkins, Robert Pierre Johnson, and many others continuously calling the church to its sense of responsibility and obligation to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world – an advocate for those who had no voice – a friend to the friendless – giving food to the hungry and clothes for the naked.

Those were the days when we were proud to be Presbyterians, for we were lifting up the blood stained banner of Jesus Christ. We were making disciples as food evangelists and we were not ashamed or afraid to stand for justice and truth, locally, nationally, and worldwide.

In recent years something has happened to this Bible believing, justice seeking, loving denomination that we call the Presbyterian Church (USA). Instead of transforming the world - instead of being salt and light, the church has become conformers. Instead of changing the world, we have gotten like the world – we have allowed ourselves to be changed by the world and we need to get Back to the Business of Being the Church.

Let me tell you what I see; I see a church that, like corporate companies, is seeking to balance its budget by calling out justice ministries and ministries that empower women and ministries with marginalized people. When cuts are made we cut ministries that affect the “least of these.” Is not that the way of the world? When the times get tough and things get tight, we cut the education budget for inner city schools and programs that help the elderly and people are made to decide, “Do I buy food, pay rent or buy my medicine? I can’t go all three.”

In secular society we cut programs that feed the hungry and guarantee health insurance, while we spend billions of dollars perpetuating wars that we never should have been in and, as a result,

babies suffer and people in this wealthy nation go to bed hungry every night. But I have come to tell us tonight that **God is not pleased** with the direction the denomination is moving, and we must get Back to the Business of Being the Church – we must lead the way as light to a dark wine and we must be salt to a world that has lost its taste for justice and righteousness.

I am still convinced that there is power for positive change in the Presbyterian Church (USA) – The church of Jesus Christ. There is a power gathering here in Atlanta under the Big Tent and among PHEWA. We must use gatherings like these to draft the docket for the next General Assembly. We must say to the Assembly, “He has shown thee, oh men/women, what is good and what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.”

I will close in a very few minutes, but let me tell you what else I see in my beloved denomination – I have noticed that in recent years we have become a “single issue” denomination that believes that the only sin in the world is homosexuality, and that homosexuals should not be ordained. It’s all right to have Levites stealing, cheating; racists, sexists in ordained positions – some may even say it’s all right to ordain Rush Limbaugh, who spews poisonous venom through the airwaves – but don’t you dare ordain a homosexual.

Well, brothers and sisters, **we** are the justice arm of the church – and now PHEWA and the Caucuses must call out the church. Just as they cry out against homosexuals, we must cry out against murder, racism, warmongering, illegal guns in poor communities, corporate executives who make millions of dollars and put poor people out of work, and “sell the poor for a pair of shoes.”

Who knows that we, PHEWA and people of justice and people of color, are not still in this denomination “for such a time as this.” You see, we have not yet assured; we have an African American President and it appears that we will have a Latino woman on the Supreme Court, but we have not yet assured – there is still need for some “Balm in Gilead.” So we must go from under the Big Tent and from the PHEWA gathering determined to fight for justice, determined to help somebody, determined to call this beloved church back to the Business of Being the Church, singing as we go; “I’m going to Live so God can use me.....”

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