

A Three-Legged Stool - Part 2

The past few weeks we've been talking about how, over time, we can take something and add more and more tradition and cultural baggage to it to the point that we lose sight of the original. Our first example was Christmas. We've piled so much onto Christmas that the simple story of a wondrous child born to a peasant family can get lost. In all of the well-marketed greed, in all of the obligatory giving, and the frantic partying, receiving the gift of God's love for us, love made flesh and lived in our midst can get completely overlooked.

Last week, we began to think about how that child grew up and lived a life that was itself an example of the way of life that he taught. The early church talked about The Way. It's a term that implies a pathway, a journey, a manner of living. These days, we talk more often about the church. We understand that the church is the body of Christ here on earth and that various people with various abilities are metaphorically the various parts of that body - the hands, the feet, the eyes, the ears, etc. - all necessary and valuable parts of the body of Christ.

But, along the way, we accumulated a lot of baggage, some useful, some just burdensome. And so, whether we admit it or not, we've come to think of church as having three major components, three legs of a three-legged stool. There are the buildings, the worship services, and the people. Last week we considered how we can fall in love with the buildings. For the first three hundred years, the church grew, it endured persecution, and it spread all over the Roman Empire without ever having a building to its name. But our buildings have become very important to us and we can't imagine Christian faith without structures.

Let me tell you about two churches. One is just north of here in Virginia. When their old wooden building in downtown became so deteriorated that it couldn't be repaired, they went a few blocks away and built a new brick church that was exactly the same as the old wooden one. They moved their pews, pulpit, communion table, stained glass windows, pipe organ, and steeple to the new brick structure. Three years ago, they were down to ten members, all of very advanced years. Out West, there's a small congregation that has no building and no staff. Retired pastors lead the worship services and over seventy-five percent of the offering goes to local, national, and foreign benevolence and mission. One church is already dead, they just don't know it. The second is full of life and vitality and living in the kingdom of God.

We can surely get sidetracked with structures. We can spend a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy on buildings. In fact, that can become the entire focus of a congregation. A building campaign can get everybody moving in the same direction, working hard and giving generously. On the other hand, a building campaign can divide a congregation and burn out a pastor. Either way, it tends to occupy all of the available time, energy, and money. But in some ways, changing the building is the easiest thing to do because you can see the results - and there's a clear beginning and ending to the process.

Last week we also gave some thought to worship. On a Labor Day weekend eight years ago, Cathy and I invited a couple of seminary students out to our house for hamburgers and homemade ice cream. I'd like to claim that my motives were completely unselfish and based on Christian hospitality, but that's not entirely true. You see, the only time we make homemade ice cream is when we have folks over to eat during the summer - and I really like hand-cranked ice cream. One student was a brilliant young woman from Hungary who had just arrived to study for two years. The other was a tall handsome pastor from Ghana who had also just arrived to work on a Master's degree in Theological Studies. So we cranked ice cream and talked about worship in our three different cultures. Seth Agidi told us about the twenty-four congregations that he pastored. He would go from village to village and the worship services would last for two to three hours and then he would dash to the next village. Eموke, the Hungarian student, looked very surprised and she asked, "What do you do for two to three hours?" In his booming James Earl Jones voice, Seth replied, "We worship God!" Well, that pretty much said it all. The focus of worship was on God, not on the people. Joyfully, fervently, enthusiastically - they worshipped God.

They came to worship their Lord and drink the living water - and such was their hunger and their passion that time was of no consequence.

But we can lose that purity of worship when it becomes centered on us. We can lose that purity when we mistake style for substance, and ritual for relationship. It's no wonder that we can get to the point where an hour is as big a dose of worship as we can tolerate.

Worship is a harder change to make. I'd rather rip out the pew cushions than try to clap and sing at the same time. Trying to clap and sing makes me that uncomfortable, because, you see, I can't walk and chew gum at the same time. I'm glad for those who can. I enjoy worshipping with congregations who do that because I get caught up in the joy of worshipping - but don't expect me to find the second and fourth beat!

We can really get stuck in ruts when it comes to worship. When worship isn't familiar, it can quickly become awkward and uncomfortable. We are creatures of habit. We can be driven to change worship, but it's much more difficult than changing the building.

But in sheer desperation, we'll change the building - or the worship service - before we'll change ourselves. That's the absolute hardest change to make and we'll frantically search for anything else to change before we'll change ourselves. Jesus talked about this. It's so much easier to find the speck of dust that needs to be wiped away than it is to see and change the heavy clod of clay that's a lump in our own life. Not only is it easier to see somebody else's faults than it is to see our own, it's even easier to talk about tweaking the worship service or sprucing up the hallway.

When I was a child, you could count on the preacher quoting the last two verses of Matthew's Gospel with great frequency and fervor. **Matthew 28:19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." We call those verses "The Great Commission." It's interesting to see what gets emphasized, though. A lot of times we overlook the words of comfort and reassurance about Christ being with us always. Sometimes we mostly hear the parts about all nations and baptizing, and so we hear a stirring command to send missionaries to strange lands to convert folks and baptize them.

But Jesus also said make disciples and teach. Before you make a disciple you have to be one yourself. Before you teach, you have to learn. Before you have students you must be a student. Rob Bell tells a story about what it was like to be a disciple in the time of Jesus. A rabbi, a teacher, would choose his students. They would literally follow him around, walking behind him from place to place. They would spend years with their teacher, soaking up all of the knowledge that they could. A great blessing of that day was, "May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi." It took the physical situation and made a metaphor of it. If you walked closely behind someone, the dust that they kicked up on the trail would land on you. So, to be a good disciple was to be close follower in the teaching, to be second in wisdom to your rabbi, to be covered in the dust of his teaching. Are you covered in the dust of Christ's teaching?

This image of journey and pathway is found throughout scripture. In Acts 9:2 we read that Saul was sent out to look for those who belonged to The Way, so that he could throw them in prison. By the time we get to the end of the book of Acts, Saul, who is now known as Paul, clearly declares that he follows The Way. The Way is the way of life that Jesus taught. It's the way of life that Jesus lived. It is a journey, a becoming, a life of constant change as we grow into the life that Christ would have us live. Paul talks about it as growing up. He says, **1 Cor. 13:11** "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." Earlier in that same letter to the Christians in Corinth Paul wrote,^{NRS} **1 Corinthians 3:1** "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,³ for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?" Do you hear the clear expectations? You begin as infants in the faith, but you are expected to take nourishment. You are expected to learn and study. You are expected to be students, to be disciples covered in the dust of your rabbi. As you are nourished, the lessons will become meatier. You will progress to solid food.

This isn't always easy. Did you notice how Paul said that they weren't ready for solid food yet because they kept behaving according to human inclinations? So much of what we are called to do is counterintuitive. We're told to fear not, but we live in fear and apprehension. Our intuition is that it's all up to us, but we're told, I'll always be with you. Our intuition is to hold onto all that we can, but we're told to give all that we can. Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." (Rom. 12:2) Paul is saying that we shouldn't fit too comfortably in the culture around us. We're to renew our minds, we are to study and learn, we're to be transformed - changed! Knowing how much we resist changing, G. K. Chesterton once said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

We'd like for Christianity to be something that we could complete, that we can finish. The idea that all we have to do is believe that Jesus is the son of God, be baptized, and then we are saved – signed, sealed, and delivered – has great popularity. In that view, you've arrived and all that's left is to sit around and enjoy covered dish dinners with folks that you like. But salvation isn't a certificate that you achieve and hang on the wall. It's a trip, a lifelong journey. And that requires effort.

If we want this congregation to grow, we need to change. We need to be on the journey ourselves. If we do what we've always done, if we only know what we've always known, if we believe what we've always believed, then we will be where we've always been, no further down the path of faith than we were years ago. If we sit by the pathway, going nowhere, we won't get anywhere. But if we're headed someplace, if we're alive and growing and learning and doing, then others will want to join us on the journey.

Here are some new brochures about this community of faith. I'd like for everybody to take a couple of them. Please take a few minutes this afternoon to read it. Reflect on whether you feel that this brochure is an accurate, but not necessarily complete, description of First Presbyterian. Think about whether this is the sort of journey that we are on. Is it the journey that we're called to be on? Is it the journey that you want to be on? If it is, then pass the brochure on to someone you know. You don't have to tell them that their soul is in danger. That's not your call to make. But you can say, "I'm glad I'm part of First Presbyterian Church. I'm finding food for thought there. I'm finding meaning and fellowship and important things to do. See if this is of any interest to you."

Meanwhile, we must be about the most difficult changes of all – the changes in ourselves, changes that reflect growth in our trust in God, changes that involve growing in knowledge and understanding, the changes that move us away from our human inclinations, changes that take us further along the path toward a more Christ centered and Christ-like way of life. Amen.