

One Foundation

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Acts 4:8-13 and Matthew 16:13-19

In life and in death we belong to God. The rose in the chancel commemorates the death of Anne Steele Young, who died this past Monday. A memorial service for Anne will be held on Sunday, February 22 at 1:00 p.m. in the Sanctuary. As we celebrate her life and mourn her death, we lift up Anne and William's sons, Peter and Tom, and their families. And we lift up our brother William, who mourns the death of his partner in life for more than 65 years. We also give thanks for all that Anne meant to this congregation, for her steadfast faith and friendship over so many decades. We will miss her and we give thanks for her life, holding fast to the faith, as she did, that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When I was a child living in Zanesville, Ohio, the local ecumenical consortium held a week of services at various churches. My father drew the Saturday night slot, and preached at a Roman Catholic Church. I remember singing in a mass children's choir that night; we sang "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." I don't remember much else about the service, but I remember my dad saying, as he began his sermon, "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Several hundred people crossed themselves. I was impressed first with how much influence my father seemed to have. I was impressed second by that many people engaging in such a ritual, as we are mostly a tradition lacking in such things. I was impressed third by sensing how much bigger was the Christian experience than my own, but, at the same time, how much mine mattered as an important element of a larger story.

Several of you asked where I was last Sunday, thinking I still might be off somewhere celebrating Ohio State's AWESOME victory in the national championship game. Not quite. I was actually just a few minutes up East

Avenue, preaching at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. I had been invited by the new rector, Robert Picken, to preach on the occasion of the week of Christian unity. I was honored to be invited and I had a wonderful time, and bring greetings from that church. The Episcopal Church is a liturgical one, which means in part that there are assigned readings for any given day. Rather than the readings for last Sunday, Rob assigned to me the readings for the feast day of St. Peter, which you have now heard this morning. It seems to me that those themes, not just for that day at that congregation, resonate with us here, and perhaps more widely.

One of our iconic theologians, Robert McAfee Brown, said that to be Presbyterian is to be ecumenical, and I believe that. I also know that Jesus prayed for the church, that they all be one. These matters – the church, its unity, ecumenism – seem particularly timely as all of us, and especially what historians rightly or wrongly call mainline Protestantism, discern who we are and what we are becoming as we move deeper into the 21st century. Twentieth century theologian H. Richard Niebuhr asserted that denominations are one of the chief scandals of the American Christian story – a manifestation of our brokenness. I agree in part. That is, at our best, our unique and distinct groupings represent the very diversity of the body of Christ itself, different cultural and theological and liturgical approaches to our one Lord and one faith and one baptism.

We are not always at our best, of course, and denominations can serve as silos or worse. A friend of mine, a seminary professor, once said that Episcopalians fight about liturgy and Presbyterians fight about the Bible, but that we both fight. That is another blot on the American Christian story, our propensity for conflict, but perhaps even now we are moving into something new – individually as denominational families and together as a more united body of Christ. I hope so.

In December 1960, Eugene Carson Blake, then the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, preached a sermon at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco, invited by Bishop James Pike. In his sermon, Blake proposed a union, a full, official union, between not only the Episcopal and Presbyterian Church, but the United Church of Christ and Methodist Church as well, a kind of super

united American Protestant church. He said: "...I am moved by the conviction that Jesus Christ, whom all of us confess as our divine Lord and Savior, wills that His Church be one. This does not mean that His Church must be uniform, authoritarian, or a single mammoth organization. But it does mean that our separate organizations, however much we sincerely try to cooperate in councils, present a tragically divided Church to a tragically divided world. Our divided state makes almost unbelievable our common Christian claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and that He is the Prince of Peace."

Blake's sermon received great attention – some positive, some not so much. This moment is not that one. America is different, and American religion is different. We have endured conflict, much of it within our own ranks, much of it focused on matters of human sexuality but not exclusively. We are smaller, with less so-called cultural influence. We are more local. People move to new places, and if they join a congregation at all, rarely join one because it is a congregation from the "brand" they left behind. We are emerging into something new, about which we are unclear and unsure. We don't believe God has given up on us, but we do sense that God is doing something new with us. That is true for Presbyterians, and as much as I can discern, true for the Episcopal Church, the Methodists, the Lutherans, the UCC's, and on and on. Anyone suggesting such a grand union would get no measure of attention were it to be suggested today. And yet the conviction of brokenness *and* the call to unity persists, like a slow and steady drumbeat.

An informal sampling of the people who have joined this congregation in the last decade would indicate that about half of you came from Presbyterian traditions, which means that about half of you didn't. At the last exploring membership dinner we held, all of the guests had some kind of Roman Catholic experience in their pasts, or the past of their family. You know me well enough to know that I believe tradition matters, that the particularities of Presbyterianism matter, as I would say about Methodism and Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism. They matter, and will matter. But they will matter differently as we move ahead.

I do believe that God is calling us to a different kind of unity, in each of our camps and across our borders. It will be local, and informal, and mission-oriented. It will acknowledge not only the permeable boundaries of our traditions, but embrace them. It will be contextual. It will be compelling, I believe, compelling for those within our congregations, who are hungry for something new, and compelling for those outside, who, if they pay attention to us at all, only see bad news.

So it will be all these things, but at heart, it will be Christian. It will be so not only because Jesus prayed that we all be one, though that is pretty important. It will be so because the work Jesus did, of preaching and teaching and healing, sought to break down barriers, sought to meet real human need while never allowing labels to get in the way.

In the book of Acts, Peter testifies to those observing the earliest church. Good things happen because of our allegiance to and alliance with Jesus. He is the cornerstone, and no one, and nothing, else.

For much of the twentieth century, American Presbyterians and Episcopalians held dialogues that would have led to merger, full merger. Two ongoing points of contention prevented that: the role of creeds – we have them, they understand them differently – and, the role of bishops – they have them, we don't. These are important matters, to be sure. But what Peter is saying, perhaps anticipating all of this, is that our unity, and more so, our authority, is found in this Jesus, and nowhere else. As we remember that, much of what divides us within and beyond our denominations will fade.

That is punctuated in an extraordinary way as Jesus interrogates his disciples about his identity. What are people saying about me? And then, what do YOU say about me? It is a turning-point gospel moment, for Jesus, for his followers. At times it has been a dividing point in the church's history. Peter says "You are the Messiah; you are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus commends Peter for his response – "you are the rock, and on this rock I will build my church."

We have debated what that commendation means, and, truth be told, we Presbyterians have at times been on the outside of that discussion because our ministry, my ordination, has not always been recognized as connecting to Peter adequately – apostolic succession, it is called.

But even that understanding is changing. Fred Craddock and Eugene Boring write that the text we read this morning “pictures Peter as playing a unique and unrepeatably role in the foundation of the church...For contemporary Christian life...the text need not have the polemical edge it has developed in the older debates...but can be heard again as the promise of Christ to build his church on the likes of Peter despite the forces of death arrayed against it. The church can take heart from its promise.” (*The People’s New Testament Commentary*, page 69)

Perhaps that means that the debate about the nature of my ordination, and our understanding of ministry, moves to a different place, allowing us to do what Peter does, focus on Jesus, who he is and what he calls us to do.

So much in the church is evolving, including our understanding of what the church is, and who we are in it. Around here, as we house homeless families in RAIHN, as we work on Habitat for Humanity, as we think about our public schools, we roll up our sleeves and work with people of many Christian traditions, liberal and conservative, black and white, with whom we would agree on some matters and disagree on others. We rarely have theological debates and we are certainly not working toward a national, organic, organizational union. But we share one foundation, Jesus, and one calling, to serve those in need.

“Selma” is a noteworthy film, all the debates about historical accuracy notwithstanding. It is a beautiful piece of art, with fine, fine acting that captures a moment in our history that reverberates still. One of the many lessons of the film and the history it represents is that while leaders matter, like Martin Luther King, Jr., like Ralph Abernathy, like Bayard Rustin, like Andrew Young, like Coretta Scott King, it takes a village to sustain a movement, and that village is, eventually, multi-racial. It was always ecumenical. That the church found its

purpose in its mission, cutting across other dividing lines, arm-in, arm, moving forward.

Perhaps we can remember that. It will take all of us, all of us, to make a difference. That is the rock on which we are built, the chief cornerstone, and I believe it is the only future we have - together, united, bound in heaven because we have been bound together on earth. Amen.