

Signs and Seals

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Third Presbyterian Church
May 3, 2015
Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-8

We pray for the world, O God – for the people and nation of Nepal, for the people and city of Baltimore, for those who died a century ago in the Armenian genocide. We pray for our witness in the world, for our calling to share a vision of hope and justice and peace.

We pray for all those who church and culture place on the outside of the circle, especially because of their race or ethnicity, their gender identity or sexual orientation. As you welcome us all, O God, allow us to do the same for all your beloved children.

We pray for all those who mourn, and grieve, and miss loved ones. Comfort them with your presence and give us good and blessed memories.

We pray for the church, O God, for bread we break and cup we share, for our new leaders, for worship and symbol that draw us closer to you.

Open your word now to us, and transform us by its hearing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are in the commencement season, controversial and otherwise.

The late author David Foster Wallace gave a now legendary commencement speech some years back. It included two stories worth telling again as we gather, for what is our weekly commencement exercise. In his words:

“There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What is water?’”

And this one...

“There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God... And the atheist says: ‘Look, it’s not like I don’t have actual reasons for not believing in God. It’s not like I haven’t ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn’t see a thing, and it was fifty below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out ‘Oh, God, if there is a God, I’m lost in this blizzard, and I’m

gonna die if you don't help me.'" And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. 'Well then you must believe now,' he says, 'After all, here you are, alive.' The atheist just rolls his eyes. 'No, man, all that was was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.'"

At a seminary board meeting two days ago, we were presented with a list of proposed graduates and voted to confer degrees on them. The vote itself was pretty routine. As I looked at the list, I thought about my own experience, and all that led to it. I thought of that list of women and men; the journey they have taken; the work they've done; their successes and failures; the pathways that lie ahead of them.

The diploma they receive in a week, the cap and gown and pomp and circumstance, echoed by thousands and thousands of others across the country, is not their life. It is not even their education. Their life is more than their education, and their education is so much more than that piece of paper. But still, something important happens in these moments, walking across the stage.

The same is true for weddings, another season in which we find ourselves. I tell couples all the time who come to see me that they would be well benefitted to spend much more time and energy – not to mention money – on all the days following a wedding rather than the day itself.

A marriage, a relationship, this strong covenant, is not a wedding, and a wedding is so much more than a piece of paper. But still, something important happens in those ceremonial moments, as vows are exchanged.

Two important acts of the church happen today. At 8:30, we will celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. An ancient liturgy will be rehearsed, the words of institution will be said to indicate this bread and this cup stand for something unique. Communion, like its partner sacrament baptism, carries all sorts of meanings, some very theological, some very personal, some very emotional. Many meanings, and we Presbyterians have staked our understanding somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, between believing that this is a simple memorial and that nothing particularly spiritual happens and believing that the elements themselves are transformed fully and really into the body and blood of Christ.

Faith is more than bread and cup, and communion is too. But still, something important happens, the spiritual presence of Jesus, as we enact this meal in remembrance of him.

At 10:45 we will ordain and install new officers, elders and deacons and trustees. We will rehearse a very old liturgy that appropriates Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church. We will read through a long list of questions. We will lay hands on the newly ordained. It is one of the best things we do. We have battled in the Presbyterian Church over these vows and over who may answer them. Leadership, servanthood, discipleship, the conferring and use of spiritual gifts is not bestowed as we share the ordination prayer. No magic happens as hands are laid upon those who kneel down.

Leadership and service is more than the liturgy we will share, and the liturgy we share is so much more than the words on a page. But still, something important happens, does it not, something powerful, as those words are shared, as contact is made, as we pause for a formal moment to think about how God equips all of us to serve, and calls people to extraordinary tasks of leadership.

A stop sign does not make you stop. A yield sign does not make you allow a car to enter the Thruway before you. You are still driving the car. And yet a sign has power to indicate, to direct, to remind, to guide.

We have called our sacraments signs and seals, signs that point to something else, seals that confirm what already is. Grace and hope and joy don't happen when we engage in these rituals. Yet they are important benchmarks and signposts.

The story we've just encountered from the book of the Acts of the Apostles teaches us that.

An angel tells Philip to get up and go. There's a sermon. Get up and go.

He encounters an Ethiopian, and the circle of God expands ever more racially and culturally and ethnically. There's a sermon, too.

But it's the encounter itself this morning that intrigues me. The Spirit of God prompted Philip to go to talk to this Ethiopian, (a sermon on evangelism, perhaps) and Philip discovers him reading the Bible. They chat. Do you understand what you are reading? It's a good question. Do you understand, not, let me tell you what this means. Do you understand? How can I, unless someone teaches me?

And what happens next is remarkable, a prolonged and profound conversation about who Jesus is. You could make a case that the content of what Philip said was more important, or you could make a case that the relationship and connection were more important, but I don't really think it matters. Both matter.

But something happens there, something holy and important as a connection is made and faith is shared and fruit is borne, as teaching and learning happens, I bet, on both sides of the equation.

They travel along on the road, and they come upon water. Something was in the air or on his heart so the Ethiopian said stop. They went down to the water and Philip baptized him. It was an important moment. It wasn't the content of faith and it wasn't the relationship. But it marked both, both content AND relationship, and it was important to point to that faith and to seal all that had happened. Philip immediately disappeared and landed somewhere else, proclaiming good news. The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing.

Beverly Gaventa reminds us that the central character of the story is neither Philip nor the Ethiopian. The Spirit tells Philip to go. The Spirit tells Philip to speak to the Ethiopian. The Spirit snatches Philip away to his next assignment. (Texts for Preaching, Year A, page 308-309) Without the Spirit's support and leadership, Gaventa says, Philip could not have, nor can we, do the work of God to which we are called.

We attend the commencements of our children and grandchildren.

Couples prepare to be hitched.

Water falls over a fidgety baby's head.

We taste a morsel of bread and imbibe the slightest sip of juice.

We lay hands on our new leaders.

As all of these things happen, perhaps we can remember that to which they point, that which they confirm. Perhaps we can remember the power of connection and the joy of sharing and the faith that brought people together.

We are called to abide in God that we bear fruit. Love your neighbor. Heal the world. Demonstrate justice and compassion and hope. That is our calling, given by and fully reliant on the Spirit, and the faith that makes all of that possible needs moments from time to time to re-set, to re-boot, that we might continually glorify God by loving God's world.

Pay extra attention to what will unfold in just a few moments, but more than that, pay attention to all it points to, the God who is vine and vine-grower, the God in whose Spirit we abide that we might serve. Amen.