

What Church Looks Like

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

May 7, 2017

Acts 2:42-47

Yesterday in Washington, D.C., a memorial service was held for a colleague and church friend, the Reverend Jeffrey Krehbiel. The circumstances are heartbreaking – a 57 year old man in the prime of his ministry who lived for five weeks following a cancer diagnosis. Jeff was several years ahead of me in seminary. We didn't know each other well then but came to know each other across the subsequent years – attending the same meetings, sharing the same commitments for the church. I saw him just a week or two before his diagnosis at a conference, and we shared a friendly embrace and a few words of collegiality. I am very sad about his death, as are many, many others.

My point in telling you about Jeff is, at least in part, the premise of the sermon title – “what church looks like.” Jeff's ministry told the story of the gospel of Jesus. It baptized and broke bread. It nurtured the life of the soul and the life of the mind in community. It organized in cities for justice. Jeff modeled that, and his good works go before him as gifts to the church.

This week I attended two sets of meetings. One was in San Diego – where it wasn't raining. An informal group of 14 or so, Presbyterian leaders of various kinds. We are roughly half and half in terms of “liberal” and “conservative,” though those labels are very fluid. We study the Bible, pray, share papers, read a book together. Mostly, in community, we discuss the future of the church. Then in Chicago, I attended the board meeting of my seminary. An entirely different context, but the discussions are very nearly the same – the future of the church. Do we have one? What will it look like? How will we get there?

It is an important question, the question about the future of the church. It is important, not for the maintenance of the status quo, not for institutional preservation or survival. It's important in that we are called to find ways to live into our calling to be faithful witnesses to the risen Christ, for meaningful service to the world God loves.

And the truth is – though a thousand books at least, and a million web postings, claim they do; and countless conferences and gatherings seek the answer – we DON'T know what the future will look like. It is evolving, at various speeds, with new forms and echoes of what has been.

Despite an uncertain future, the good news is that we have plenty of ingredients of what it will look like, to help give us shape and form, our future, vision and values. And some reminders.

As we head toward the end of our Year of Reconciliation and a deep dive into the Confession of 1967, I've included today perhaps the least liturgical and poetic section imaginable. It kind of reads like an owner's manual for my parents' 1974 Gran Torino station wagon! But it's on point.ⁱ How we order and organize ourselves is an instrument of mission, and not its end. If how we organize this congregation – session, deacons, trustees, committees, staff – serves the gospel, then good. If not, then we need to look at how we do things.

And note the use of the word presbyterian, lower case “p,” and its emphasis on responsibility of all members for our ministry, and how that ministry must continually be open to reformation. The core of our mission is reconciliation, in all its forms. Vision and values that take root here and then transcend our particular context.

Today we ordain and install church officers. In those ordination vows, did you detect further elements of our vocation? Trust. Peace, unity and purity. Energy, intelligence, imagination and love. Leadership that is service, rather than leadership that is status and success.

And we encounter most profoundly in the book of Acts what church looks like. A community gathered following the resurrection, culturally on the fringe, finding their way in terms of what they believe and how they will live together. Now I know some 2000 years later Third Presbyterian Church is not the church of Acts. Yet listen to the portrait, and see how we might be at least an echo of that first church...

- Teaching – nurturing the mind.
- Fellowship – nurturing the soul, in community.
- Breaking bread and praying – worship matters.
- Adding people to their number – evangelism, often a scary word for us, yet a clear call to share who we are and to invite people to join us.
- Selling possessions and distributing the proceed to all – this is not just a reminder from the Stewardship Committee; it is a reminder that faith asks us to look at what we have and how we share it, both in the church and in the world, differently.

Then this summary: “with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

Gladness. Generosity. Goodwill – within the church and beyond. We don't know what the future of the church will look like. Every generation asks that question. We ask it in our particular ways, with our particular realities, with our particular pressures and our

particular opportunities. Yet a day like today reminds us that a vision has been set before us – from Acts, from our Presbyterian tradition, and that God continually calls people to help lead us into that vision. And until God tells us otherwise, we have work to do – hopeful, joyful, justice-seeking, reconciling work to do, and all the gifts and graces we need to get the job done. Amen.

ⁱThe church orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends on themselves. Different orders have served the gospel, and none can claim exclusive validity. A presbyterian polity recognizes the responsibility of all members for ministry and maintains the organic relation of all congregations in the church. It seeks to protect the church from exploitation by ecclesiastical or secular power and ambition. Every church order must be open to such reformation as may be required to make it a more effective instrument of the mission of reconciliation.