

**First Presbyterian Church – Salt Lake City**  
**Rev. Catherine Putnam-Netto**  
**July 21, 2019 9 am & 11 am**  
**Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (The Shema) & 1 Corinthians 2:2-5**

### **It's Not About You**

Has it ever occurred to you when we read the Epistles - letters written to churches or people that are included the NT - that we're really reading somebody else's mail? Looking over their shoulders we hear juicy gossip about how the neighbors are behaving, and if we're fortunate, we find food for people hungry for God. Today's NT mail is from the Apostle Paul. There are days I'm sure this zealous tentmaker Jew, turned total servant of Jesus Christ, was a direct conduit from God to us. And while we wouldn't be who we are as people who embrace the way of Jesus, without him, sometimes I wonder if the poor guy drank too much coffee and probably drove his scribe nuts pacing the room and repeating himself! He's intense.

What we read today comes from a letter he wrote to the Corinthian fellowship. They're in trouble. *And Paul isn't in great shape either.* He's just come from flopping as a preacher and evangelist in Athens, and is probably preaching as much to the Corinthians as to himself. Evidently in Athens, atop an outcropping of rock - what's known as Mars Hill near the forum, he was confronted by Greek Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who wanted him to explain himself and the message that he'd been going on AND ON about in the synagogues for weeks. According to scripture he'd brought "strange things to the Athenian ears" about the 'Unknown God' they worshipped and he told this cadre of intellectuals about Jesus; explaining as rationally as he could to be sure to appeal to their minds. When he got to the part about the resurrection of the dead, some believed, but the powerful mocked him as a 'babbler'. And he beat it out of town for Corinth.

Paul's beloved Corinth... a fellowship he'd started three years earlier now embroiled in a power struggle between the folks who think their charismatic gifts are so fabulous that they outshine any need for the teaching and leadership of those set out by apostolic authority over them. And then there's the part about someone in the fellowship sleeping with his step-mother and other icky stuff.... It has been noted, ironically, that the distance between Athens and Corinth is approximately the same as the distance between Stanford, CA and Disneyland.....

Chastened and sincere, Paul writes, *Friends remember, when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, (that is Eugene' Peterson's term) I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did – Jesus crucified, alive and with us. I was unsure of how to go about this... **But the Message came through anyway. God's Spirit and God's power did it**, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God's power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message, 1 Corinthians 2* - p. 2067

For all his brilliance and intensity, Paul's sermon strategy wasn't very interesting. No six steps to salvation, no surefire way to riches and happiness; no smooth words and big hair needed.<sup>2</sup> Instead he's laying out for the Corinthians, using his experience as an example, that the only reason for a community of believers to exist, is to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. That there's power there, not so much in the words spoken, but in the truth to which they point. And he doesn't want the Corinthians to get it all gummed up with lofty words of wisdom, fancy spiritual stuff and highfalutin theology and light shows!

The touchstone for the church (*though that term isn't used yet in history*) and all her members – for everything thing they do and how they do it, is simply sharing, fostering and celebrating the relationship people have with God whom they know in Jesus Christ. The one whom we proclaim this morning who loves and forgives us, (without our having to earn that love), who is present with us always and if we will let him, will transform our hearts. The outlandish, holy and invisible One is working just as much in this sanctuary this morning with your hearts, as it did with the Corinthians 2000 years ago.

We all know the 'church' isn't this building. In fact, the Greek word used in the New Testament, that we translate as *church* - means, "a community of people called out". A community of people called out.... Our gathering this morning and anywhere Christians get together acknowledging Christ, that's the church; people called out to tend to, and live into, and from a relationship - *not with the world or it's ideas* - but with the power and love of a living Lord.

Think for a moment about why you came to worship this morning? I suspect for most of us it was because we are seeking something of a connection, some relationship, some revealing of a living God into what ever is going on in our lives. We are a whole mix of folks bearing a range of curiosity, and belief, we're rich and poor, none too powerful and some competent, each of us could stand some revealing of a living God into what is going on in our lives; and the wonderful thing about the mystery of God is that Jesus is right there for each of us just where we are.

Today begins a new sermon series on relationships within the Church – who and how we are called to be together in this seeking after the face of God. But to begin and never forget, it all centers around coming to know, grow, and serve in relationship with Jesus Christ. A Christ focused – a "Christ centered" church if you will, uses its words and energies and programs and people to point to the power and love of Jesus Christ. As Paul vividly reminds us the church is not about me, or about you. It's not about our super duper-social programs or cool bulletin font; they don't transform hearts and lives. It's about the wisdom and power of God at work in the gospel; so we shouldn't get too hung up on our own ideas.

Paul's heart was captured and he was captivated by God's amazing 'master stoke". He knew the glorious work of God in Jesus Christ to free and bring human beings to wholeness, even him - and he loved God back with all his heart and mind and his soul and with all his strength. He didn't give up his life for a cause or an idea, or some new philosophy – he gave it up for Jesus who loved him in his brokenness and hopelessness

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<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, *First Sermon* -March 3, 1974.

and saved him by grace alone. If we're a faithful gathering of people called out, that's what we are to proclaim.

Most of us read the story of Jesus as the story of God coming among us revealing himself to us, calling us, saving us, being faithful and present to us always. Yet, it's not uncommon in the life of a church to imagine that we've got it all handled *we've heard it so many times...* and the powerful reality of Jesus slips to the background; our plans and new ideas about what people need come to the fore and before you know it, we are in charge. We have Jesus' commands, we have Jesus 'example. But somehow imagine it's up to us to take responsibility for the church in this day and age and imagine it needs more. We become like a good veneer, we make an appearance of it being about God, as we show off our piety or spirituality, but actually go chasing after new ideas or cults of control.

Leonard Sweet, a culture scholar and theologian – and pastor said “The American Stereotype of church is that salvation is God's business. It's what God does. And then he turns it over to us to cast God in whatever image we need him to be. God who loves all, having given himself to us in Jesus, now retires to the sidelines and we take over. Oh, there's the occasional consult – but basically we are the action and it's about us and our saving ideas.”

Eugene Peterson in his book, *The Pastor*<sup>3</sup> describes his formation as a Christian Minister (it was a surprise to him) and the process by which the church he started and served for 29 years came to be. In the beginning... the church's new church development umbrella organization provided Peterson with a thick red loose-leaf notebook full of guidelines and instructions on how to go about organizing and developing a congregation. He studied it meticulously and they followed it enthusiastically. It had everything in it about organizing session, and finances and architecture, and how to set up worship and church school. All designed to create a welcoming and winning atmosphere and program of what Peterson came to call, “continuing to do the work of Jesus - in his absence.”

By then he discovered the man who'd prepared the manual, had never organized a church himself and Peterson and the 30 congregants that had gathered, soon found themselves wondering at the value of their work alone to create what Peterson said seemed to be nothing more than a successful 'religious business franchise'. As time went on they learned that folding chairs, the urn of coffee, and financial reports are all part of the operation. But that they weren't ends in themselves but serve a larger purpose...to create a space - literally and figuratively - where the community could reflect and contemplate and celebrate the reality of Jesus in their lives.

After studying the book of Acts the congregation arrived at something of a Copernican Revolution. A paradigm shift from understanding the church in terms of what we plan and accomplish and take responsibility for with all of our eloquence and cool programing, to understanding church as what God plans and accomplishes through meager tools (like us). For what changes lives is not our entertaining winsomeness or cleverness; fads come and go - but the Spirit of God let loose with lavish love to reach and change people's hearts when the gospel is proclaimed. Peterson said it was amazing to watch the Holy Spirit work. The red new church development binder was

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, Chapter 16 - p. 109-129.

used less and less, but more and more they were learning about how to talk about and tune themselves to the intangibles of God's power at work in Jesus Christ not just on Sunday mornings, but in their lives and the lives of people around them every day of the week.

There are dozens and I mean dozens and dozens of articles and how-to manuals on what it means and how to be a Christ-centered church; things to DO to get out of the way so God (with the master stroke plan) can get on with us. But the very best counsel may from the Apostle Paul himself. In Colossians 3:15-17 he advises: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

First there is an invitation to go deep in our own hearts – to enter into the fullness of a sense of God's love and presence with us: let there be peace there before you DO anything. Next: Be down and lavishly grateful to God – perceive, look for and celebrate all the places you witness the Divine's faithfulness and transformation in your lives. Tell each other! Third: In all preaching and teaching discussing and debating, be about the Word. Take time to reflect on it's mystery, and instruct each other using compassion and common sense. Next: worship! Someone said that the chief difference between us and secular organizations is that we worship! Sing with your voices, with your art, with your hands and feet. Amazing things happen here as we make room for the spirit. Finally, let God into every detail of your life (actually understand that God is already there with you) and commit what you do, speak, whatever – to the glory of the one who loves you without measure.

The first question of the Westminster Catechism of our church is, 'What is the chief end of Man?' What's the reply? "To know glorify God and to enjoy him for ever. " Perhaps that's the test for anything we do in the church. Will what we do and say contribute to glorifying, knowing and enjoying God? Does anything in the letter we overheard from the Apostle Paul today have anything to say to you and to First Presbyterian Church?

While the church isn't about you, the question is yours to answer.