

Sermon: Sep 20, 2009

50th Anniversary of the first Worship Service of Newport Presbyterian Church

## Why Bother

2 Corinthians 5:14-20

Introduction: On the third Sunday in September, 1959, a small group of neighbors gathered for the first time in the gym of Sunset Elementary School to worship God. And here we are, 50 years later - their direct descendants! A few of us around here are our own descendant. A saved bulletin (we now call them "Worship Aids") from that service reminded me that my sermon that first worship was entitled "Why Bother", and noted the scripture reading from 2nd Corinthians.

Now, I'll be honest with you, I have no idea what I preached that day. I can remember a bit about who we were. We were mostly new to the community, many having just bought our first home. However we were older than you might suspect. Our largest Sunday school class that first year were Jr. Hi. age young people. At 28 I was younger than most. Doreen and I were married four years earlier while I was still in Seminary, and now had two boys; Steve just out of diapers, Dan still a young man of the cloth.

Most of us had very full and busy lives establishing ourselves in our work and in our homes. Half the men worked for Boeing, many of the wives worked outside the home, almost all were in families with multiple children. Yes there were "soccer moms and dads" even back then.

So why were we bothering to try to start a new church? Well, there were probably as many reasons then as there are reasons why you are a part of this church now. But there were also some pretty basic shared reasons that gave focus and strength to our efforts.

We somehow sensed that what we were about would make a difference in our lives, our kids lives, and the lives of lots of folk to come.

One thing we shared was a desire for a relationship with God. Some of us were quite clear about the need for worship to be central to all that we did as a church. Thank goodness we were not real pious about that but it was a ground of our coming together. In the scripture I picked for the day (that was before we were following the lectionary) and read this morning, Paul talks about our being reconciled to God and to each other. That's about relationships. In this I think the seeds were planted for a church that is far more concerned about the quality of our relationship with God and each other than the fine points of creeds and doctrine. It is far more important and interesting to be a follower of Jesus in loving God and serving others than than it is getting hung up on how ancient doctrines and creeds relate to our world and our lives today. Christians were called followers before they were known as believers.

How we worship has also had an impact on how we understand the Bible. Scripture has always held an important place in our services of worship and in our preaching. We have for many years used the lectionary so that the selection of scripture is free from the whims of the preacher. We who have had the privilege of preaching have had to deal with some pretty tough parts of the Bible. As important as the Bible is, however, we do not worship the Bible. We are follower of Jesus in worshiping God. The Bible is a vital aid in knowing Jesus, and an indispensable signpost pointing us in the right directions. But it is a very human book, a product of the people of God, Jewish and Christian. Knowing this the Bible becomes a much more exciting book. We can seek out the meaningful within ancient stories without having to swallow limited or outdated world views. We can let the Spirit speak to us today without straining to accept the unbelievable.

One additional thought about our worship of God. We worship God as followers of Jesus. In and through Jesus we know of God's love, forgiveness and gifts of new life. Jesus, during his earthly life, worshiped God as a Jew, in and through the religious life of his community. His Bible was what we call the Old Testament. We more and more are living with those who worship God through different traditions from our own. It does not lessen our commitment to following Jesus to respect these other traditions, to learn from them and to seek to enter into loving relationships with others who worship God in ways differing from us.

A second shared reason why we bothered to try to start a new church was a sense of the need for a community of friends who cared about each

other. Many of us had recently moved away from friends and family. We were new residents in a growing suburb of a rapidly developing metropolitan complex. We early on decided to be as open a community as possible. The only essential that would bind us together and determine our identity was a common commitment to follow Jesus and the desire to be together. Now, we are a very human community. Living up to this inclusiveness has been a challenge. We were founders of the Eastside Council on Religion and Race and one of the first organizations to promote open housing on the Eastside. But we remain a predominately Anglo congregation. We have allowed ourselves to be held back by our denomination's unwillingness to grant full membership to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers in Christ.

But I must not pass by the quality and depth of our community life. Again, we are a very human community of course. We have hurt and alienated each other - we don't have a time of confession in each worship service for no reason. But most of us here have experienced the care and love of this community. There are many for whom this congregation has literally been a life saver. Most can testify that the quality of our lives has been enriched by the care and challenge this church has given to us. One measure of this is your acceptance of the loose clergy - those of us, neither fish nor foul in the ark which is the church. While we may have some little to offer to the life of this church, I can not tell you how important it is to us that you have made possible a church home for us. That is a gift beyond measur.

The third shared reason we bothered was the insistence by many that our relationships with God and each other were incomplete unless these relationships prepared us and sent us out into the world as Christ's servants of love and justice. Very early on a cooperative preschool to meet our neighbors' needs was housed in our building. Under the leadership of Nancy Ellingham and others, we assisted a grassroots mothers' association in central Seattle to form a preschool. During the coming year we will celebrate the many mission involvements of members of this congregation.

These three things have been hallmarks of this church from the beginning: the centrality of following Jesus in worship of God, commitment to community, and service in the world. We bothered to start a new church because these things mattered to us.

Now, this all did not just happen. It took hard work, sacrificial giving, long hours in committee meetings, countless days dedicated to the maintaining of these grounds and facilities. It took the work of four wonderful succeeding pastors, eight associate pastors, and many, many faithful staff. It took the gifts of elders and deacons, church school teachers and choir members, bell ringers and child care givers. It took leaders of women's groups, adult study teachers, youth advisors, and Steven Ministers. And it took the stewardship of money: faithful giving, careful accounting, thoughtful spending.

Why bother? Look around you and give thanks to God

We celebrate, not ourselves, give thanks to God.

All glory be to God.

Will you bother to keep it going?