



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Re-Thinking Church: Part One

I Corinthians 12: 1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

The television show, *The Sopranos*, was not merely a show about the New Jersey mob. It was about an institution, (in this case the mafia) caught up in social change. In the first episode, the boss, Tony Soprano, is in a psychiatrist's office and he says, ""It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that and I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over." I hear colleagues in ministry saying much the same thing, perhaps a bit more elegantly. Things have changed in the world and whether we want to acknowledge it or not, those changes have affected the church.

During the next three weeks, I am going to share with you the changes, challenges, and opportunities that exist for the 21st century disciple. Ironically, one of the realities of the changing world is that that there will be substantial difference between who is here today, next Sunday and the following Sunday. If you miss, I encourage you to read the subsequent messages online.

Four points: What? Why? Where? And How? 1. What is going on? 2. Why is this happening? 3. Where is God in this? 3. How can we be the faithful church?.

What is going on? Our resources are shrinking. Churches across the country have fewer members and diminishing financial resources. It is a universal phenomenon: the financial resources that all churches, (large and small), enjoyed for generations are shrinking. Four years ago, while serving as the moderator of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, I visited the congregations within the presbytery and learned that diminishing financial resources were universally experienced by every congregation, no matter what size. The larger congregations had enough critical mass to adjust by eliminating staff positions or reducing hours, cutting back on maintenance of buildings, or reducing mission support. Many congregations were spending the principle from their endowment funds. Smaller congregations found themselves unable to call a full time pastor. Some contemplated closure. Many did. The same is happening here in Ohio.

Lest we think that this is only happening to Presbyterians, the Southern Baptist Church has experienced 8 straight years of membership decline. Churches that were vibrant and held up as examples a generation ago have fallen on hard times. The Crystal Cathedral in California was sold two years ago. It was bankrupt and had a worshipping congregation of only a few hundred. Between 2008 and 2011, 200 congregations had their building repossessed.

PPC has not run into the severe hardships that many congregations are experiencing, but we have been affected. The staff is smaller than it was a decade ago. There are fewer children among us. We are dependent upon the income from the endowment for 25% of our ongoing ministry.

II

Why is this happening? It would be nice if there were a single cause for the changes that we are experiencing. There are multiple causes. Many, over which we have little control. Let me list a few:

- a. **The World War II generation is leaving us.** Tom Brokaw referred to them as the "Greatest Generation". They were the backbone of the churches during the 50's and 60's when we experienced growth and expansion. This generation approached life in terms of "duty". They gave generously, just as they sacrificed during the war. They were builders, building not only the post war infrastructure of our nation, but also our churches. Their faithful stewardship was the backbone of the church's financial resources. Their volunteering staffed committees, Sunday Schools, and sessions. They were present every Sunday.
- b. **Christians are a diminishing percentage of the general population.** But it is not limited merely to the number. The depth of faith is also eroding. Recent studies reveal that the depth of identification with Christian faith is weakening. Those who regard their faith as primary in their lives are 9% of the population. Those who regard family as the most important thing are 45%. Please do not misunderstand. Family is extremely important, but Jesus had something to say about what should be first in our lives.

- c. **The economic recession of 2008 has had its effect.** I have ministered through at least four recessions. 2008 was the first to adversely affect stewardship. While this is one factor in the changing church, it is not the primary cause.
- d. **Our buildings are expensive.** The bill for deferred maintenance of our buildings has come due. Our buildings were built when energy was cheap.
- e. **Charitable giving patterns have changed.** Giving to a single “general fund” is declining quickly, (i.e. United Way). People, now, tend to give to specific programs or needs. The idea of a general fund which was the financial foundation of the 20th century congregation has eroded and is now being replaced by a host of special offerings. Also, the traditional patterns of church giving, the check or cash placed in an envelope, have become dinosaurs. My daughter’s generation does not write checks and seldom use cash, yet we still pass offering plates like we have for a hundred years.
- f. **Voluntary institutions are eroding.** Service clubs, veteran organizations, fraternal clubs and organizations are all shrinking rapidly. Their decline parallels the church. Ten years ago, Harvard professor, Robert Putnam wrote a book entitled: *Bowling Alone*. In this book he chronicled the decline of these important institutions in our society.
- g. **We are inundated by options.** Basic cable has 215 channels! We are able to screen calls. We have more options on Sunday. Stores are open. Amusements and entertainment, sports and other events are regularly scheduled on Sunday.

It would be nice if there was a single cause for the decline of the church, but there is no single factor to blame for what is happening.

III

Where is God in the midst of this? The foundations are literally shaking. One of the great sermons of the last century was entitled, “The Shaking of the Foundations” by Paul Tillich. “Why were the prophets able to face what they knew and then to pronounce it with such overwhelming power? ... They did not speak of the foundations of the earth as such, but of Him Who laid the foundations and would shake them...”

We need to have to courage, in the midst of these times when the foundations of our lives seem to be shaking apart, to look not at them, but to our God who created them. I believe we will see that it is God who is shaking them. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “Thus says the Lord: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted—that is, the whole land.” Why? So God can once again plant and build. Ours is a faith built on the resurrection.

IV

How can we be faithful when the foundations shake: I have two conflicting responses to what is happening in the world and the church. As a pastor whose well-being is dependent upon the health of

the church, I am frightened. But I am also excited. I believe that God is doing something new. I am excited by the challenge of God's call, "Behold I am doing a new thing." (Revelation 21:5)

What is God calling the church to do and to be now. I believe that it begins with realism about the age we live in, but also realism about the resources that we have.

Reality: The Body of Christ, the Church has fewer resources to consume, and if we are to thrive, members will need to be more active. They need to be places where our discipleship is actively lived out. The days when clergy and staff provide the program and members pick and choose what to attend are over. We need to rethink what it means to be the church.

The New Year is a time for making resolutions about our bodies and health. The two most popular resolutions are to eat less and exercise more. This is borne out by a visit to a health club or gym. In January there seems to be about a 50% increase in the number of people who working out. If you visit a restaurant, you might notice that daily specials will feature a "post-holiday low-calorie special". The idea is to consume fewer resources, and exercise more with the promise of being healthier and happier.

In this new era for the church we need to consume less and exercise more. God is putting His church on a diet and calling us to exercise harder, because we have gifts and resources that we have never used. Each of us has been given gifts to build this body up (Corinthians 12). We need to prayerfully discern what those gifts are in ourselves and others, and then get to work. The days of the comfortable pew are over.

Let me conclude with these words: We are blessed to be living in this time. God is at work in the world and in the church in a powerful way, just not the way we expect. I also believe that the church will continue. People need to hear the good news of the Gospel. People are hungry for meaning, for purpose, for hope, and are looking for these things in empty holes. These are hopeful times for the church, if we can summon moral courage. I believe that God is calling the church in new and different ways. We need the courage to adapt to circumstances. We need the imagination to envision faithful responses. We need the wisdom to hold onto our essence while letting go of the past. We need to pray, in the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage... for living of these days; for the living of these days." Not yesterday.... "these days." Amen.