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First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 8:26-40

“Who’s Really Being Converted?”

Since we’re recognizing our Jubilee members from the years 1972, 1973, and 1974, I went digging through the church archives and the monthly editions of “The Church Paper” to see what was happening in the life of First Church . . . as it was called back then.

In the 1970s the church was quite involved with spirituality and contemporary society. A study group discussed topics vital to parents of teenagers; and other classes, like Trends, explored social and political trends and their implications for the church. The Enquiry class used Biblical resources to springboard discussions of the church in contemporary society. And in what would have been very cutting edge for the time, in March 1972 the CBS-TV film “The Homosexuals”, depicting discrimination, both legal and social against homosexuals (using the words of the Church Paper) was shown in the youth lounge.

In February 1972 the Long Range Strategy Committee of the Session requested each member to register attendance at communion, thus beginning the keeping of attendance at all services.

And in 1972 some young whipper-snapper of a seminarian by the name of Mr. Michael Lindvall started his internship here. In 1973 the Church Paper noted that upon his departure, a reception was held in his honor where he was given the gift of a pulpit robe by Dr. George Mather, the Senior Pastor, and I quote: “returned to Princeton Theological Seminary (on September 10), taking with him his new bride, the former Terri Smith.”

In 1973 the theater produced “All My Sons” by Arthur Miller; Rev. Scott was called to the position of Associate Pastor, a sacred dance group was formed! And 51 9th graders were confirmed in that year’s class (one of whom is recognized today as a Jubilee member).

The staff organist, Mr. Jack Ruhl, wrote a short sermon for The Church Paper (he was also the editor of it) titled “How to Avoid the Draft”. No, not **the** draft, but

the draft in the sanctuary. He suggested that worshippers may wish to dress accordingly on Sundays to avoid being chilly and could get their blood circulating better if they enter into congregational hymn singing with more gusto. "If necessary," he wrote, "rhythmic hand-clapping on the more spirited hymns might also prove helpful. If all else fails, those who are really uncomfortable might resort to joining the choir and sitting in the rear balcony, where temperatures are always 4 to 10 degrees higher than those at the sanctuary floor level."

Moving on to 1974 . . .

While the Child Study Group #1 met, the husbands decided to get together on their own for occasional social outings while the wives well . . . learned how to be a better parent by attending the Child Study Group #1.

The West Central Neighborhood organization (now Wellspring) moved to Broadway, new members gathered at the home of the Mathers, 48 students were confirmed, Rev. Bruce Langford was called as an Assistant Pastor, William McKay's obituary was noted with a special announcement in the mid-February church paper, and Dr. Jack Meister's memorial service was held in the sanctuary on May 11.

Also in 1974, John Tolley was named the new drama director in September . . . his first production was "Our Town"; and the church hosted a new study-action program called "Project Education" that focused on issues arising from the controversy of desegregation.

This is only a snippet of what was happening in those 3 years.

Fifty years! I'm not going to sugarcoat it. Fifty years is a long time. In this day and age, it's nearly unheard of to stay with something that long.

But what difference does it make? Let's kick that question around. What difference does it make to stay with the church for 50 years? For that matter, if you've only been here a few Sundays or you've been here more than 50 years, what difference does it make? At a time when church membership and attendance has hit a record low . . . when membership in houses of worship has fallen below the majority for the 1st time on record; when 1 in 8 Americans have stopped going to church in the past 25 years; and when more than a quarter of Americans now identify as atheists, agnostics, or religiously unaffiliated – what

difference does it make that you all are here bucking that trend, and some of you have been doing it for more than 50 years?

Today is a good Sunday to consider this question, especially since we're still in the Easter season and thinking about the resurrection, and wondering what difference it makes in how we live our lives. Was Easter just a blip on the screen for us to briefly enjoy some great music, or does the resurrection – and our bearing witness to it – make a substantial difference in the world?

Spoiler alert! The answer to that question is “Of course it makes a difference!” And we could have no better of a story to answer with a resounding “yes” than the one we heard today about Philip baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch because everything Philip thought he knew about who was in and who was out, or who belongs and who doesn't and walls being torn down *not* being built up and obstacles to God's endless, boundless, gracious love being permanently removed on a road from Jerusalem to Gaza -- how fitting is that? Come to fruition in this crazy story. And I don't know about you, but all of that . . . sounds world changing to me.

So what's going on?

Philip, who has quickly emerged as a leading evangelist, has seen great success baptizing a large number of Samaritans. But his evangelistic career takes a turn when an angel of the Lord – which is always a sign that something big is about to happen – dispatches him to an isolated, desert road running from Jerusalem to Gaza.

And who does he happen to meet on that desert road? Well, of all things he meets an Ethiopian eunuch. But not just any Ethiopian eunuch. This one is wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he's reading without help. He's also hospitable. When Philip speaks to him, he invites him to hop into his chariot. For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Washington DC inviting a street preacher to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study. Because this Ethiopian eunuch was in charge of the treasury for the queen mother. Which makes him rather hoity-toity.

He and Philip get to talking. “Do you know what you’re reading?” Philip asks him, likely disbelieving his eyes and ears at the sight of an Ethiopian eunuch reading from a Hebrew scroll. “How can I,” the eunuch answers, “unless someone helps me?” Now the eunuch was reading the prophet Isaiah who proclaims, among other things, that “God will recover the remnant that is left of his people . . . from Ethiopia” and promises that “eunuchs who keep my Sabbath” will be welcome in the house of God and will receive “a name better than sons and daughters.” Not too shabby, and definitely good news for the eunuch who, shall we say, occupied an unusual place in society.

Philip, without missing a beat, proceeds to tell him all about Jesus and the good news. Well, that was enough for the eunuch to ask, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Now I want to pause here and consider his question. Because he doesn’t say, “I want to be baptized and be a follower of Jesus, too” or “May I be baptized?” but what is preventing me from being baptized? It’s almost as if he expects something to prevent him from being a recipient of all the good news he just heard. And why would he feel that way? Because there were things in his life that had prevented him from being included. His sexual status could have prevented him. His national affiliation could have prevented him, or his ethnicity or even his social status. All of this, under normal circumstances, could have and would have prevented him from being included in many circles.

But this isn’t a normal circumstance, nor is it a normal circle. It’s God’s circle. So when the chariot stops, he and Philip hop out, go down to the water, and Philip baptizes him. No questions asked.

What a remarkable story for the church to remember and live by.

I don’t need to tell you that it’s common these days to hear that the church in America is slowly slipping into irrelevance. I shared with you earlier the statistics.

But these studies and statistics do not tell the whole picture. First Church (I kind of like that) and other congregations, large and small, aim to be Christian communities of meaning and purpose rooted in ancient biblical values like inclusion, grace, love, hospitality, humility, and generosity.

And there will never be a time when those ideals will not offer hope and direction and make a difference in the world. As someone else said, "If the church becomes a minority voice, a minority presence in the future, so be it: we still have a good word, an important word, a life-giving word for a chaotic and suffering world.

Long ago the church got used to the idea of being at the center of it all, the center of social, political, and economic life in the West – first when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and the entire empire followed suit. Then in the rise of the power of Rome over many centuries. And in more recent times, with the ascendance of Protestantism. Fifty years ago, the church was still riding those coattails.

Today, we likely are witnessing the dis-establishment of the church from the center of privilege and control. But I don't lose heart: this is God's church, not ours, formed by the Spirit at Pentecost and borne through history by the power of unconditional love not beholden to principalities and powers and cultures. Today's tale about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch prove that. Frankly, whether we're in the majority or not is irrelevant to how we choose to live as a community that follows Jesus.

In reading through those Church Papers what struck me the most was not the size of the confirmation classes or the numbers of people joining. It was the faithfulness of the church, of all the people, bearing witness to the resurrection. There were dialogues on hunger and public education, and funds collected for medical aid for North Vietnam in 1972. There were book discussions of both fiction and non-fiction that were selected for the sole purpose of exposing the congregation and community to relevant political and social, religious, and personal issues. There was an afternoon program for children called "Free to Be" with the aim of helping children to become free: free to learn, free to be friends with peers and adults, free to try new opportunities without concern for success or failure, free to be a part of God's creation. And summer Sunday School for children focused on learning about India, Southeast Asia, and Spanish Americans. The Church Paper noted "They know the US has been involved in a long war involving these areas. To help children understand how the church will help these peoples heal wounds, reconcile their differences, and help themselves, Southeast Asia study has been included in the summer curricula."

Through all of this and moer the church has helped move the world a little closer to the justice for which God longs.

For years, the Church, this Church, has participated in God's joyful post-resurrection work. *It has made a difference. You have made a difference.*

So let us rejoice today that God has called this church to bear witness to the resurrection, to be the body of Christ in this neck of the woods, and to proclaim in both word and deed that nothing and no one can ever prevent us from stepping into the water. So let us put aside questions of what's permissible so we may ponder what's possible.

Amen.

Sources:

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