

“The Meaning of Membership”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, July 4, 2010
Scripture: Galatians 6:1-16

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *We stand amazed Lord Jesus that you have called people like us to do work like yours. We know the cosmic scope of your work and we know our limits! So one thing we pray: give us what we need to do the work you call us to do. Amen.*

As we gather here in worship today – the Fourth of July – I am sure there are many of you who are expecting, and maybe even hoping for, a sermon about the freedom and blessings to which we are accustomed here in the United States. And while I don’t in any way disagree with the fact that we need to remember and celebrate all the men and women who have worked to make our country great and free, I do need to remind you that our true loyalty belongs, not to the kingdom of the United States, but rather to the Kingdom of God.

Today we are beginning a new sermon series on the topic of membership. Whenever a pastor begins a new series, it is always useful to know “why this topic and why now”. For me the answer is simple. In the last several years the Lord has blessed and continues to bless our congregation with many new people from many different faith traditions. Whenever a church adds lots of new people and adds them quickly, there is always a chance for what I would term “a disconnect”.

Those of you who have been members of First Church since its founding and those of you who have been Presbyterian since before you were born may worry that these “new people” don’t know who we are or what we believe. And on the other hand, those people who have decided that First Church is the church family they want to join may have questions and

concerns. As your pastor, I am deeply concerned that all of you who are a part of the life of First Church be grounded in the basic truths of the Christian faith and where we as Presbyterians find ourselves.

Some of you know that one of my favorite living Presbyterian theologians is Jack Rogers. My appreciation of and my respect for him is long-lived but likely became stronger after having the opportunity to spend time with him at several of the General Assembly meetings for our denomination.

Those of you who have been ordained and/or installed as elders in the ten years I have served First Church know, too, that I usually begin our new elder training sessions by watching a video Jack Rogers created for just such a purpose. What I love most about Jack and this video is that he is so down to earth and easy to understand.

He begins by saying that “Presbyterians are people of three books.” I know that it won’t surprise you to know that the first book is the Bible. The other two books are the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. We Presbyterians, like most faith traditions, believe that the Bible is the “authoritative Word of God” and, therefore, is the book to which we turn for God’s direction in our lives. The Book of Confessions, the second book in our tradition, is made up of documents – affirmations, confessions, and statements – which have been written over the years in response to happenings in our world. All of these statements look at the Bible, God’s Word to us, and consider what God’s Word means in light of what is happening in the world.

The third book, then, is the Book of Order. The words and directions in this book have been written as guides to how we as a church should live and be based on Scripture and the Book of Confessions. When we get into trouble is when we reverse the order of the three

books and rely most heavily on the Book of Order. As Emilie M. Townes writes, “valuing institutions (*and rules*) above people it is bad for theology and dreadful for moral decision making.”

And while those of us here today who were born and/or raised in the Presbyterian Church, may continue to hold on to the past – to the way things have always been – and the structure of government, the order of worship, the need for order over ardor, in my mind and in the minds of many modern day theologians, none of that is written in stone. To quote Jack Rogers again, “Do you know what you have to say you believe to be a Presbyterian?” “All you have to say you believe is ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior”.

While that is the only question asked of us and the only belief we have to hold, though, when we make a public confession of faith – when we join a church – when we desire to become a member of the family of a particular church, there will be other things we come to believe, and things we will feel called to do, and people we will come to care for and care about.

So – as we are here – on this Sunday during Ordinary Time on the church calendar, it seemed as though it might be a good idea for us to look at what it means to be a member. And if we turn to the Book of Order – which is, as Jack Rogers says, Cliff Notes to the Book of Confessions, which is Cliff Notes to the Bible, we will get a sense of the meaning of membership.

The Book of Order under the title, “The Church And Its Members”, in a single, short paragraph gives us a brief and understandable meaning of membership and I quote:

“The incarnation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives to the Church not only its mission but also its understanding of membership. One becomes an active member of the church through faith in

Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life. Baptism and a public profession of faith as Jesus as Lord are the visible signs of entrance into the active membership of the church.”

And a little further on under the section on membership, the Book of Order continues,

“The congregation shall welcome all persons who respond in trust and obedience to God’s grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the membership and ministry of his Church. No persons shall be denied membership because of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason not related to profession of faith. Each member must seek the grace of openness in extending the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the gospel.”

I don’t know about you, it seems to me that there is more required of the congregation receiving new members than new members becoming a part of a congregation. And I kind of like that. It means that those of us who have been a part of the family of First Church need to invite, welcome, include and involve all of our new brothers and sisters in the life of the Church.

When I was reading Paul’s words to the church in Galatia, I wondered if they were in Ordinary time and if Paul wanted to make sure all the members of that church were on the same page, too. In the passage we read this morning the focus is on how to live as strong and faith-filled individuals in a loving and trusting community as the Israel of the new creation.

In the New Testament version called “The Voice”, by Thomas Nelson the words in verse 15b read like this, “God’s new creation is what counts, and it counts for everything.” Things don’t get much plainer than that, do they?

And who is the new creation? We are. The Galatians are. Everyone who seeks to live in Christian community is a part of this new

creation. Paul is writing here to that church in Galatia and to this church in Dunedin about new community and our responsibility within that community. As members of Christ’s Church we have an obligation to watch out for one another and to hold one another accountable for faithful living. Over the next three weeks, we will look more closely at some of the responsibilities and activities of the church in which you are each invited to be involved.

But, in the meantime, remember as Paul reminded the congregation in Galatia, we are not to focus on the law, but, instead on living God’s spiritual law. Because as he says, trying to live in obedience to the law will result in failure, but with faith in Christ, we can live up to God’s high calling and strengthen the communities to which we belong. For Paul, the choice is obvious.

May it be so for you and for me.
Amen.

Thanks to King Duncan for his commentary on Galatians 6, Jack Rogers for his video, “Basic Tenants of the Reformed Faith”, Emilie M. Townes for her article, “Washed in Grace” in the June 29 edition of The Christian Century, The Book of Order G-5.0100; G-5.0103, Donald Schmidt’s sermon, “Being a Person in the Family of Faith”, and Thomas Nelson’s version of the New Testament, “The Voice”.

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The First Presbyterian Church
of Dunedin
455 Scotland Street
Dunedin, Florida 34698
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297
WEBSITE: fpcdunedin.org
E-mail: officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com
Victoria ByRoade, Pastor