

Memorize & Ponder

**Brentwood Presbyterian Church
December 1, 2013**

Provocative Presbyterians

**Hebrews 10:23-24
(670, 29, 530, 556)**

It's easy to be discouraged these days,
especially if you are a member of a mainline church
in the province of British Columbia.
The statistical projections are not promising.
They indicate a steady decline in numbers
and a troublesome aging of those remaining as members.
More and more British Columbians
are not connecting with any kind of spiritual community.
They are, in the language of the social commentators,
choosing and composing their own spirituality,
usually without the discipline of any regular communal gathering.

Not much hope, then,
if you rely solely on the statistics.

But things may look different
if we delve deeper into what God is doing
in and through many congregations throughout BC,
among which I would include Brentwood Presbyterian.

That's the thing about churches –
when they answer God's call to be their best,
they rely on the stories of the saving power of God in Jesus Christ
rather than on the stories told by the statisticians.

God's faithfulness to his covenant or promise
to be with us so we can be blessings
is the source of our hope.

That, and that alone,
enables us, empowers us,
to love and do good deeds.

This is what holding fast to a confession of hope
is all about.
It is consenting to agree with God's estimation of us,
then living that dignity and worth out in the world.

The ideas of 'confession' and 'hope' are worth some reflection here.

The Greek word used in this passage by the Preacher
is *homologia*.

It points to being in a consenting relationship,
promising to be faithful,
being in agreement and taking action accordingly.

What we agree to, consent to,
promise to act out
is hope – in Greek, *elpis*.
In the Judeo-Christian tradition,
hope is central because it is promised by God.
God's faithfulness to his covenant promise
to Abraham and Sarah –
I will be with you so you can provoke love and good deeds –
is the foundation of our hope.

Our hope arises from our trust in God.
Our hope is patient because of our confidence in God.
Our hope sustains us in the midst of adverse conditions
because we know in every fibre of our beings
that God is calling us forth to engage in good loving.
Hopeful attitudes flow into loving behaviours,
all through the continual work of God's Holy Spirit.

So, the church will flourish
when it tells stories about itself
that are filled with its confession of hope,
when it tells stories about itself
that are filled with provocations to love and good deeds,
when it tells stories about itself
that are filled with confidence in the faithfulness of God.

Let's take Brentwood Presbyterian as an example.

There was a time, not so long ago,
that people in the Presbytery and in the congregation
were telling stories about the death of Brentwood.
Numbers were declining, finances were dwindling,
the congregation was in conflict,
and other possibilities for the facility were emerging.

Presbytery actually moved to close the church three times.
In terms of a statistically-driven story, closing made sense.

But in terms of a story driven by faith and determination,
closing did not make sense.

The people at Brentwood understood that.
They showed up en masse at those Presbytery meetings
and convinced that court that they still had work and witness to do
in North Burnaby.

They were a multi-ethnic neighbourhood congregation
that could still nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.
Numbers were low – at that point, perhaps the lowest in the Presbytery –
but the Spirit was willing to give them an opportunity
to sort out the conflicts, refocus on God's purpose,
rediscover the joy of worship, learning, belonging, and serving
as companions of Jesus, the Christ, in his redemption of the world.

And I think that we have seized that opportunity,
with God as our helper.

I was delighted and encouraged
that our recent congregational consultation over lunch
identified two key strategic priorities for 2014 –
1) make Brentwood better known
so 2) more people can enjoy what God offers here.

It sounds simple. In many ways, it is.
We continue, with God as our helper,
to offer the hospitality of the Gospel
to all who come into this sanctuary, for whatever reason.
That hospitality shows people that they are dignified and worthy.
With that sense of confidence,
a gift of God as we see it,
people go back into the world with a renewed sense of possibility,
a renewed sense of hope
that their love and good deeds can make a difference.

I'm convinced that we are what God is calling us to be
here at Brentwood –
provocative Presbyterians
who call forth people's best in the service of God's hope.

*May God fill you with the Spirit of LAFter this week,
with the joy of love, aspiration, and faith,
as you go forth to bless the world.*