

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Who, Us????

Mar 8, 2015

**Ps 19 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 – Sermon Text = 1 Cor 1:5-6
(205, 471, 476, 472)**

It's been an amazing transformation to watch.
When I started to work with Brentwood over five years ago,
that transformation had just begun,
with the help of Jim Smith as Interim Moderator
and Don Hill as Interim Minister.
It was a transformation from feeling small, poor, and dying
to feeling large, wealthy, and flourishing.

As you will see in the annual report this morning,
much has changed for the better at Brentwood over the past seven years.

Let me just mention a few highlights:

- in 2008, the average Sunday attendance was 15 – this year so far it is 28 – in addition, we are averaging 22 for Jazz Evensong – so that's 50 people being nourished to flourish by the grace of Jesus Christ in worship every week.
- in 2008, the total revenue generated for all church purposes was about \$60,000 – this past year, it was \$131,000 – over the past four years, we have put \$60,000 into our facilities for the missional purpose of making the space available to the community as an arts centre.
- in 2008, we were looking over our shoulder to see who was going to try and close us down next – this year, we are moving confidently into a bright future of lively and diverse worship, stimulating learning, warm fellowship, and focused service, all to the glory of God and in mission with Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As a very good friend of mine and a close colleague in ministry,
Jim Czegledi, would say, "It's a matter of perspective."
It's all about how you see the church and its prospects.

Are we focused on our weaknesses and fears of failure?
Or are we focused on our strengths,
on the spiritual gifts that God has given us for our mission in the world?

This congregation, certainly since the days of Jim and Don, have been very good at keeping the focus on our strengths, good at developing a positive perspective on a flourishing future.

Paul would have been pleased with what we have accomplished and would be encouraging us to continue to improve, with the mind of Christ in the Holy Spirit as our companion and guide.

Now, Paul confronted some serious problems in the churches he had founded. As someone said at Bible Study on Friday night, the Corinthian church was a mess!

Here's just some of the messiness he encountered:

- factions within the church headed up by various cantankerous individuals
- sexual immorality tarnishing the reputation of the community
- confusion about the nature and value of marriage
- actions that debased and abused the intent of the Lord's Supper
- bitter rivalry over which spiritual gifts were most important and prestigious

A similar messiness has plagued the church throughout its history. We can too easily point to contemporary examples of all these controversies and conflicts. But we won't take time to do that this morning.

The focus of my attention this week, as we have been putting the final touches on the reports to be presented at our annual meeting right after lunch this morning, has been on the way Paul saw his fellow Christians in Corinth at the beginning of the letter.

This is not unusual for Paul. There are versions of this perspective at the beginning of all his letters.

Here's the pattern that I see:
first, there's gratitude to God for the grace given to these people;
second, there's a clear description of what those gifts of grace are.; and
third, there's a reminder that God is constantly strengthening the people to live in the power of that grace, to live lives increasingly full of faith, hope, and love.

Listen again to the words highlighted in the two verses
of our sermon text this morning:
“every way” – God approaches us in a multitude of ways
with a comprehensive love;
“enriched” – our capacities and abilities are empowered and expanded
by God’s gifts of grace to equip us for the mission of blessing;
“in speech and knowledge of every kind” – our voices are tuned
with a deep and broad understanding
of God’s loving purpose revealed in the work and witness of Jesus Christ; and
“the testimony of Christ has been strengthened” – with the help of the Holy Spirit
we become the agents of Christ, parts of his body, in the world,
to work with him in completing the salvation of all creation.

So, we are all significant people in God’s plan for the well-being of the world.
That’s what Paul is saying in this introduction,
long ago to the Corinthian Christian community and right now to us.

I’ve used this quote before from this pulpit,
but it came to mind again in my ponderings this week.
It’s from Marianne Williamson and was made famous by Nelson Mandela
in the speech he gave in 1994 at his inauguration
as the first black president of South Africa:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful
beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask
ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you
not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is
nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of
God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own
light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are
liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

We people of Jesus Christ at Brentwood Presbyterian no longer play small.
We have heard Paul’s perspective.
They have inhaled the spirit of Nelson Mandela.
We will continue to grow into what God intends for us,
enriched and strengthened in every way to flourish
in the grace of Jesus Christ
through worship, learning, fellowship, and service.

Thanks be to God for this mission.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can
ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*