

Ordinary People Doing Divine Mission
A Sermon by Paulo Gustavo França
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
25 April 2004
Text: John 21:1-19

Prayer

Most powerful and most merciful God
You love, but with no storm of passion;
You are jealous, but with no anxious fear;
You are constant, yet incomprehensible;
Changeless, yet changing all things with your love.
Nothing comes nearer to your ears
Than a confessing heart and a life of faith.
So, Lord, we cast our care upon you this morning
And ask that you may help us to consider
The wondrous teachings of your law
So we may know and love you sincerely.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen!

How often do you ask yourself why you are Presbyterian?

I do not know whether any of you has ever given much thought to this kind of question or if any of you has ever stopped to think about the reasons why you have chosen to make the Presbyterian Church your Church home. In my case, being Brazilian and Presbyterian sounds like an oxymoronic combination to a lot of people in the United States, so I am frequently asked how and why I became Presbyterian in a country known for its strong Roman Catholic heritage. When people ask me why I am Presbyterian, sometimes, I feel tempted to say that I was predestined to become Presbyterian. That would be certainly a very Calvinistic answer, wouldn't it? But few people outside the Presbyterian Church would appreciate such a reply as much as we all do. Therefore, ever since I joined the Presbyterian Church in Brazil and became the first Presbyterian and, more recently, the first Protestant minister in my whole family, I have wrestled with this question many times and in many different ways. Over the years I have tried my best to explain to my family and most skeptical friends why I believe that this Church plays such a fundamental role in my life and in the world.

Some people thought that I had completely lost my mind when I made the decision to quit my job as a pharmacist at the Health Department in Rio to go to seminary. It was unthinkable for them to accept that anyone in sound judgment would choose to trade the security of a good job and the prospect of a comfortable life for a cryptic calling to become a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. It was particularly difficult for my father to comprehend what I was doing. As someone who claims to be agnostic, he still insists to say that if I really wanted to make any difference in the world, I would have stayed in

Brazil working as a pharmacist to help improve the quality of life in our own country in a real and more tangible manner, instead of going away to divinity school. After all, as he once asked me, “What is it that religious people do or say that is of any substantial relevance to the world?”

Well, thanks be to God, I do not think my father ever expected me to come up with an incisive, cogent, systematic and concise answer to his rhetorical question and, honestly speaking, I never did. But, time and over again, I have caught myself toiling with words in hopes of finding a way to describe how what we do and say in the Presbyterian Church can significantly contribute to making this world a better place to all humankind. Even though the Presbyterian Church (USA) accounts for less than 1% of the world Christian population,¹ I believe that God does call us to use our voice, gifts and resources courageously and prophetically to speak of God’s unconditional love to a broken world. And I have no doubts that our understanding about God and about human nature can indeed help us leave the world a little more truth, a little more justice, and a little more beauty than would have been there had we not loved the world enough to quarrel with it for what it is not, but could be. The real question is then, how does our Reformed tradition help us to make a concrete difference in the world?

Knowing Presbyterians as well as I think I do, I am sure that some of us would be very excited about the possibility of producing some verbose document to address this question. We would probably set up committees and sub-committees to discuss the best way to accomplish this job. And, hopefully, after a few years of internal debates we would publish a clear and detailed document to help our denomination understand the role of Presbyterians in the world community. Of course, all that would be done decently and in order following all our denominational conventions and protocols, as would be expected of good Presbyterian folk.

I confess though that what drew me to the Presbyterian Church in the first place was not our polity or form of government. And, please do not get me wrong, I can certainly appreciate the Presbyterian way of doing things and making decisions. However what gripped my heart when I decided to join the Church was the bold and aphoristic statement made by the Presbyterian Elder who taught the new members class I was attending. He said repeatedly that there was one thing we, new members, should never forget about Presbyterians and that is, “Presbyterians are Christians first and last.” I know that this statement sounds rather trite and uncreative to the highly speculative mind of most Presbyterians, but this seemingly innocuous and threadbare axiom has had a profound impact on my life. As a Reformed Christian, I learned from the very beginning of my faith journey that my religious calling and faith tradition are not so esoteric and abstruse as to become totally irrelevant to the world beyond the walls of the Church.

¹ Harber, Jack. *God Views* (Geneva Press: Louisville, KY 2001) p. 161. In fact the PC(USA) accounts for ¼ of 1% of the world Christian population.

By affirming that we are Christians first and last, I learned that Presbyterians believe and say “yes” to life in spite of the bloodstained face of human history. In other words, we are part of that GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES that holds tenaciously to the hope of life abundant promised to us in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in spite of what may happen around us.

And how incredibly great it is to know that the Risen Christ is persistently calling us to challenge the world’s way of looking at things and to proclaim a new and better way of being fully alive. It is our trust and hope in the promise of life that helps us to see potential, where the world sees impossibility. To find occasions of faith, where the world expresses incredulity. To celebrate the reality of a transformed life, where the world can only see death and destruction. This is how we make a difference!

I am thankful for the Paschal Mystery that we, Presbyterians, carry in our memories, hearts and souls. This mystery of a new life and defiant hope, which keeps us from plunging into the void of those denominational conventions, traditions and protocols that might cast a shadow over the reason why we are the Reconciling Church of Jesus Christ. Much like the disciples in the gospel reading for this Sunday, we are continually surprised by the Risen Christ who appears in our lives at unexpected moments to urge us to serve his people lovingly, openingly and sincerely. And if we love him, we will tend his sheep!

Now, Jesus does not tell any of his disciples, or Simon Peter in particular, who his sheep are. He does not give any specific guidelines as to whom the disciples must serve, because Jesus knew that if we truly love him we will follow in his footsteps. We will go with him to the dusty villages and cities of Galilee and Judea and around the world to speak of God’s unconditional love. We will feed the hungry and feast with the outcast and destitute of our society. We will serve the poor and will care for the sick. We will welcome into our fellowship those men and women held in contempt by the world as Christ invited a thief into his kingdom. We will confront the mendacity of a shriveled religious traditionalism that is only used as a shield against God’s all-embracing love and forgiveness. We will go with him to Jerusalem to face the horror of the crucifixion and will mourn his death. As we mourn the death of men, women and children who die before their time because of the madness of war or because and an unjust global economic market thus make the world good for only a handful of us. But Easter will come through bewildered and confused by this miracle of life, we will celebrate this resurrection and our own lives will never be the same.

And if along the way we get tired, discouraged and begin to doubt our calling, the Risen Christ will come to us. He will invade our ordinary lives and will call us once again to be his disciples, to love the world and to follow him. It is this living faith tradition that keeps all of us, Presbyterians, open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in the Church and in the world, because we never really know how, when and where we will encounter the Risen Christ.

It is somewhat disconcerting to live with these uncertainties. Some people would rather have a clearer set of rules to tell them how to be prepared to meet our Risen Lord or who are the people the Church is to serve. Happily, Presbyterians have a very different view of our faith tradition. As the reformed Church that is always being Reformed, we know that we cannot be stagnated, crippled and frozen by biblical interpretations and theological convictions that no longer speak to the reality of our day and time. Our doctrines, conceptions, thoughts, opinions and our relationship to God must evolve daily if we are to be a truly living tradition.

Our God is ineffable and inexhaustible; therefore we cannot limit God's truth and love to our partial and confined human intellect. As Richard Lovelace, a church historian, puts it, "the Presbyterian Church is and has always been an arena of theological recovery and discovery."² We do not claim to have the TRUTH all encircled, captured and fully contained in our tradition, doctrines and confessions. Since we believe that God is always calling us away from our comfort zones to teach us how to live more abundantly, we strive to be a community where people are not afraid of asking questions or providing answers that may stir the waters of the *status quo*. We do ministry and carry on with the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ knowing that our "tradition is the shoulder of previous experience on which we stand as we reach upward for what is new."³ Then we can make each theological recovery into a threshold to a more excellent discovery about how we can best serve God and our neighbors.

This is the reason why I am Presbyterian. Because we affirm that God is the God of life and, therefore, we cannot be isolated in a confessional enclave where our convictions and beliefs are safely guarded. Instead we struggle to be that community where our fears, prejudices, and even our theological convictions and belief all subside before the power of God's ineluctable love for humanity and for all creation. And like the first disciples, some times we are afraid and feel hesitant when we listen to that stranger's voice telling us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat. We wonder if he is the Lord. Sometimes, we are slow to recognize and accept that Christ's presence in our midst is real, because it threatens our preconceived ideas about the way things ought to be and look like. We resist the idea of doing something new and different from what we have been doing for so long. But Christ appears in our midst and tells us gently and lovingly to throw our nets on the other side and he shows us that there is still more life to break forth from God's word. And when we listen to our Risen Lord, the God of life, our lives are filled with God's good gifts.

My first year in seminary was very difficult. I had left my home country, my family, my career and went through a really painful time while attending a small seminary in North Carolina. At that time, I was also going to a Presbyterian Church in Raleigh and when the pastoral staff realized what I was going through, they immediately surrounded me with their love and support. I was a stranger to that congregation, but they embraced me as one of their own.

² Harber, Jack. God Views (Geneva Press: Louisville, KY 2001) p. 163

³ Holt, Bradley P. Thirsty for God (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1993) p. 7.

Eventually, they assisted me with my transference from the seminary in NC to the Presbyterian seminary in Richmond, Virginia where I thrived both intellectually and spiritually.

Their love and solidarity changed my life forever! It is no wonder that the opening sentence of their mission statement said, “Presbyterians are ordinary people doing divine mission.” And they were indeed God’s instrument to bless my life and many others. Because of their support, friendship and Christian love I am able to stand before this congregation today. What a great way to live in the hope of the resurrection and to proclaim God’s never-ending love for the world!

My prayer is that you and I may also be instruments in God’s hands, always open to hear Christ’s voice.

And if anyone asks us how what we do and say makes any difference, we can tell them that we make a difference by accepting Christ’s calling to live out the Easter faith in the world. We are just ordinary people who choose to live in the hope of a new life because we are followers of Christ first and last!

May it be so...Amen!

The Rev. Paulo Gustavo França