

“It’s About Being Presbyterian”

Scripture: Luke 15:25-32

William C. Pender

OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 10/15/06

If you have been around the church for any length of time, Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son is a familiar one. You may recall the story: the youngest son asks his father for inheritance before the father is dead—it takes a bit of gall to do that. After receiving his inheritance, this son heads for the far country where there is wine, women, and song. The money runs out, the son hits the bottom and he has to take a job tending pigs to survive. Finally figuring out the pigs that he feeds are better off than he is, he returns home to confess his sins and to beg for a job as a servant in his father’s household. His father’s servants had it better than being a pig feeder.

The father’s response to the son’s return is completely unexpected. The father sees him coming from afar, will not listen to the son’s confession, and throws a great party—kills the fatted calf and all that! In fact, some have argued that this not the parable of the prodigal son at all...it is the parable of the loving father. Most sermons that I have ever heard on this text have either been about the “coming to maturity” of the prodigal son or about the expansive love of the father. Well, today you are not going to get one of those sermons. We are going to concentrate on the end of the story. Here is the setting: the father has thrown a party for the youngest son. We are going to pick up the story where the Presbyterian enters. That’s what the Greek says: the *presbuteros* shows up. *Presbuteros* is the Greek word that gives us the word, “Presbyterian.” It literally means, “elder.” In this case, the *presbuteros* brother shows up, the elder brother. If you had much experience around Presbyterians, you will probably find that this elder brother is really quite Presbyterian in many ways. So, here is our text for the sermon entitled, “It’s about being Presbyterian.”

Luke 15:25-32: ²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”

It is about being Presbyterian. How do we sum up what it means to be Presbyterian that could fit on a bumper sticker? I am not complete a fan of bumper sticker theology—that every thought should be able to be narrowed down to statement that could go on a bumper sticker. Faith, life, and God cannot be captured in such brevity—there is more mystery and more complexity.

However, that being said, I do read bumper stickers, billboards, and church highway signs. So, here is the question: what would be a Presbyterian bumper sticker?

The usual suggestion, which has actually been printed up on tee-shirts and sold at big gatherings of Presbyterians is this: Presbyterians do it...decently and in order. That fits Presbyterians...that fits the *presbuteros* brother in our Scripture today. Decently and in order...this is the brother that stayed at home, who did his homework, who followed the rules, who knew the right way to do things. He was decent and in order. He does not understand all the celebration for a person who broke all the rules and should be suffering the natural consequences of his actions.

Some of you may recall my story of several weeks ago of disobeying the sign that said: No exit. We ignored the sign and exited anyway and we ended up with three flat tires. To add to the irony or humiliation, that very evening the fellow Presbyterian who was driving the car and I had an extended conversation about how life was so much more pleasurable and less traumatic if you just follow the rules. If you drive the speed limit, you do not have the adrenalin rush as you frantically check your speedometer and try to slam on the brakes without appearing to slam on the brakes, even though the nose of your car sort of lurches down with that fast foot on the brakes! If you pay your taxes, follow a healthy diet, exercise, get plenty of rest, and write your thank you notes, why, life will just be better! Presbyterians do it decently and in order. The sign said, "No exit"—it was there for our benefit and we ignored it. Decently and in order would have saved us some trouble.

Each Sunday for the past several weeks I have tried to have some visual aid to focus our attention in the sermon. Today my visual aid is the constitution of the Presbyterian Church. That sounds rather impressive, doesn't it? Our constitution is much, much longer than the Constitution of the United States and all its amendments. We have two books: The Book of Confessions and The Book of Order (years ago, called "The Book of Church Order"). The Book of Confessions is a collection of statements of Christian faith over the past 20 centuries that we as a church have said are faithful witnesses to what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The Book of Order is the church law for how we are to be organized and run. Yes sir, we do it decently and in order!

Presbyterians have found that faithfulness works best this way. Now maybe we will not stand outside the party when the prodigal comes home, but we Presbyterians will at least wonder: what is going to happen the next morning? Who is going to get up and go to work? Who is going to get up and go to work next week, and next month, and next year? Is the prodigal home for good or just for getting enough to run out again? The elder brother is concerned about the "proven track record." What is sustainable, workable, and tested

It is about being Presbyterian. We don't get real excited in our worship service with shouts and waving our hands. We understand that people can be changed, transformed, and converted...we just want to see it over the long term. The old Aesop's Fable about the race between the Tortoise and the Hare fits us. Remember that story: there is a race between a turtle and rabbit. It is laughable that there would be race between these two. The rabbit has all speed but no

boundaries on attention and focus. The turtle is so slow and boring. Like the turtle, we get there by plodding along rather than by making great leaps and bounds. Remember the turtle won the race.

By and large, Presbyterians are the elder brother. Too many times I have heard a person say to me: "I am just good enough to be part of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church." We have unspoken and spoken standards about being disciplined and orderly, focused and attentive. You follow the rules and your life will be good. That is so absolutely true; ninety-five, maybe even ninety-nine percent of the time. Because it true so often we get steam-rolled by those times it is not true. We get flatten by the times that do not fit our decency and order.

The elder brother stood outside the party. This party did not fit his expectations and his understanding of how the game is played. He says, "I have done all the right things and I have never had a party like this! It is just not fair." Here, in part, is the dilemma: prodigals seem to have more fun than we Presbyterians do...prodigals seem to get away with breaking the rules. The word of the father is "Son...or daughter, you have been with me always."

You have been with me always. Perhaps the "alwaysness" fools us, makes us not see it. Sometimes what is so close to us is what we no longer see. It like one of my favorite movies of all time: Frank Capra's movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The story is about George Bailey who gets stuck doing his duty...being responsible...doing what needs to be done. He has dreams of being wild and daring, of breaking new ground, of being carefree and having no responsibilities. He is given his wish: he can shuck all his responsibilities and be carefree and bold. He can live as if George Bailey were never born. Here is what he finds out: his brother died because he, George, was not there to save him as 10 year old. Ten-thousand men die in World War II because this brother was not there to save them. The sweet town of Bedford Falls is swept up by the greedy work of Mr. Potter and gets renamed Pottersville. In fact, most of George's problems have something to do with the villainous Mr. Potter. George, by doing his duty, kept getting in the way of Mr. Potter.

At the end of the movie, George Bailey can even say, "Merry Christmas" to the great villain in the movie, Mr. Potter. There would have been fewer problems in George Bailey's life if someone had just taken out Mr. Potter. The problem, then, is trying to fix the Mr. Potters of the world...it can't be done. What George Bailey discovers is that you cannot beat the Mr. Potters of the world...but we can be find joy...something that Mr. Potter cannot find at all.

Here is the twofold test for Presbyterians. First, can we let go of worrying about whether the prodigal gets his just desserts or just punishment. Can we let go of trying to impose our fairness on others? Can we just enjoy the party even when we think it is not fair? Second, can we find in our lives the joy in living responsibly? It is a wonderful Life. Each of us has a part to play, a role that will be fulfilling, a duty that is ours.

Presbyterians know about responsibility...what we forget is how to enjoy responsibility. Duty is not just for doing the right thing. Duty is for learning practices that lead to joy. Some have

asked if I enjoyed not preaching for over four months during the sabbatical, Let's see, over four months of not feeling the pressure to be fresh and inspiring...over four months away from giving it your best and having folks say, "Can't you do it better?" Over four months of not having to struggle with confusing Biblical texts and more confusing life situations. Over four months of going to bed on Saturday night and not worrying if I had listened to God.

Did I miss it? I surely did! Preaching is a duty for me, a responsibility...but it is also a challenge (and I like challenges); it is a struggle (and I like to wrestle), it is a never-ending quest (and I like to learn). God continues to surprise me with words of grace, forgiveness, endurance, and hope. Once again, I am looking for the joy in preaching.

It is about being Presbyterian. We know the practices: regular worship, regular prayer, regular service, regular giving. Sometimes we quit doing them because we no longer see the joy...we no longer look for the joy. We forget the loving word of the Father: Son...daughter...in these practices you have been with me always.

Back in our colonial days, a New England legislature was meeting when a full eclipse of the sun occurred. The unanticipated darkness in the middle of the day frightened many folks and several legislators moved that the assembly close because this was the end of the world. But one of legislators jumped up, and in good parliamentary procedure, addressed the Speaker of the House. "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move to you, sir, that candles be brought to light the hall and let us continue."

Here's my bumper sticker theology for today. It is not so much that Presbyterians do it decently and in order. Here would be my bumper sticker: The secret of faith is not doing what you like...but to like what you are called to do. To find joy in the "alwaysness" of the practices of our faith.