

January 11, 2015  
The National Presbyterian Church  
**A Vision for God's Future: "Moving on...Together"**  
1 Corinthians 12:4-20, 27; Mark 3:13-14; Matthew 25:31-46  
David A. Renwick

In our sermons over the next four or five weeks we're thinking together about the five major themes that provide the framework for the new strategic plan that our elders adopted for our congregation this past October (see <http://nationalpres.org/strategic-plan>). In the coming weeks we want to look at the biblical basis of those five major themes, which are as follows:

- We are committed as a congregation to growing spiritually together.
- We are committed as a congregation to worshiping God together.
- We are committed as a congregation to proclaim and embody the gospel together.
- We are committed as a congregation to demonstrate the love of God together.
- We are committed as a congregation to sustain this congregation and the National Presbyterian Church together
- And we are committed to do all of this under the umbrella of an overarching mission in which we have been called to *"Lead people to become faithful followers of Jesus Christ together in God's world."*

Now I don't know if you heard it, but in each of those themes one word has been repeated. The word "together" is there again and again. Growing spiritually *together*, worshiping God *together*, proclaiming and embodying the gospel *together*, demonstrating God's love *together*, sustaining the ministry of National Presbyterian Church *together*, leading people to become followers of Jesus Christ in God's world *together*.

And "*together*" is there repeatedly and on purpose for a reason, and that reason is just this: that with the passing of years since the early days of the Christian church many people, including many Christians, have either forgotten or never realized that by its very nature Christian faith is not merely an individual activity but a community activity; not merely an individual "sport" (if you like) but a "team sport," something that we have been called, at the very foundation of our faith, to do not just by ourselves but to do *together*; something that Jesus himself taught not just to individuals but to and through groups of people.

Though I suppose that forgetting this, or not remembering, or not making a big deal out of this thought or approach, might be more or less understandable in our society, given where we are at this particular point of history in the Western world. Here in the United States, for example, there is a great deal of evidence that the sense of community which was a part of our nation, and indeed part of almost all societies, from generation to generation— this sense of community is on the decline, and very seriously so; particularly in the last decade or two. And

this decline has (among other things) affected people's general understanding of spirituality, so that when we think of spirituality even in the broadest sense, including Christian faith, we tend to think of it not first of all in terms of community but in terms of the individual, and in terms of individual spiritual experiences.

About 12 months ago now in a sermon I referred to the work of Harvard professor and sociologist, Robert Putman's book called *Bowling Alone*, in which he pointed to the decline of people's willingness to be associated integrally with one another in voluntary organizations. He looked at all kinds of organizations from PTAs to Women's Clubs to leadership within the Boy Scouts to unions – many other organizations, and he pointed out a serious decline of involvement, and especially committed involvement in such organizations: organizations many of which have been a part of our heritage from the beginning of our nation. And then in 2009, I said, Notre Dame professor, Christian Smith, added to this picture when he published his research in a book called *Souls In Transition*, focusing in particular on people in their late 20s and early 30s. Smith pointed out that many (not all by any stretch of the imagination), indeed a sizable number have a very low sense of social cohesion or a sense of the need for social cohesion. So he writes this particularly disturbing paragraph (p.68). He says this,

The majority of those interviewed stated that nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people. Most of those interviewed said that it is nice if people help others but that nobody has to. Taking care of people in need is an individual's choice. If you want to do it, good. If not that's up to you. Even when pressed, "*What about victims of natural disaster or political oppression? What about helpless people who are not responsible for their predicament or their disabilities? What about famines and floods and tsunamis?*" No, they replied, if someone wants to help then good for them. But nobody has to.

So here we are at this particular point in history within Western society where the tendency to think individually and individualistically rather than corporately is very great indeed. And in some sense there's nothing really wrong with this at all. Indeed quite the reverse.

When we turn to the pages of the Bible one of the outstanding things about the Bible is that it's not as some people think, merely a book of rules. There are rules in the Bible. There are many rules in the Bible, but it's not primarily a book of rules. It is a book of stories. And in particular it is a book of stories about individuals whose names we know even though they lived hundreds, in fact, thousands of years ago; stories of their particular encounter with the living God; one-on-one encounters with the living God. Sometimes we take this for granted – but it is a stunning part of the story of Holy Scripture that we hear of these encounters between God and individuals who for the most part are named. Not all of them are named but many of them are named.

So, even if it is not a good encounter, we begin with Adam and Eve. Not good, but yet a spiritual encounter with enormous consequences. Or Noah and Abraham; or Miriam and Esther;

or Moses and Joshua; or David and Solomon; and Isaiah and Jeremiah. And there are many more! All stories of individuals and their encounters with God, recorded for all eternity in the pages of Holy Scripture.

Or you move on from the Old Testament (and all those names are in the Old Testament, from before the time of Christ) to the time of Jesus himself, and to the stories in our New Testament.

- You find Jesus meeting with a man called Nicodemus (John 3), a spiritual encounter of enormous proportions in which Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about being “born again.”
- Or Jesus encountering a woman at a well in Samaria (John 4), one of the few people whose names we do not know; but Jesus spent time with this woman, probing deeply into the spiritual issues of her life.
- Or, Jesus and his friends Mary and Martha (John 11)
- Or Jesus with his followers, Peter and Paul

All are singled out, most of them by name, as if God is saying that *every one of us is known by name by God, and needs to have a one-on-one relationship with God, an experience with God, an encounter with God, that is in some sense life-transforming*. None of the encounters are the same. All of them are different. Some of them may be spectacular. Some seem very ordinary, often merely a part of a conversation between God and an individual. But in each case, the **individual engagement** is vital. And this is a theme which goes through the whole of scripture.

And if you haven't had such an engagement then let me suggest to you that God gives us a gift by which we can enter into a one-on-one relationship with God and that gift is called prayer. Where we speak and we have the gall to believe that the God of the universe hears us and we believe that he really does. So if you haven't had that experience try this out and see how transformative it is.

So here they are, in the pages of scripture: individual people named repeatedly from the beginning all the way through, having one-on-one encounters with God. The individual is vital to God!

But having said that, we also have another side to the story of scripture that many people miss, including those who read the Bible faithfully day after day. And we miss it in part at least because when we read the Bible we tend to do it, well, individualistically. We live in a culture in which we can have the Bible in our homes and pockets and cell phones, whereas for most of history that was not possible. Even reading the Bible was a community experience for most of history because there was only one Bible in each community – chained to the pulpit in the local church. Who could afford a hand written copy, or carry a large printed copy?

But even those who know the Bible and read it day by day often miss the presence and significance of the other side of the picture: the one-on-one relationship with God, or the fact that God, when God speaks with these individual people whom God knows by name, calls them together, calls them repeatedly into community; calls them to meet a group of people to function within an organization, and not merely just one-on-one. As if our faith, as if God wants to point

out to us that Christian faith isn't merely a one-on-one activity with God, but is a team sport, something that we are to do, and can ONLY do fully, together, with others.

So we see Jesus going down to the Sea of Galilee (as we read in Mark 3) and there he calls out followers to join him. And individuals have this remarkable encounter with Jesus. And we know their names – James and John and Peter and Andrew and Matthew and the others. Jesus calls them by name. He speaks to them and that speech changes their lives. They listen. They turn around. Their lives begin to head in a direction that they would not have taken were it not for that conversation Jesus had with them one-on-one – an encounter which changes everything in their lives, immediately.

He calls them individually and immediately calls them together; and so we read of the formation of what we call “The Twelve,” the 12 disciples. There were many disciples but this is an inner core. This is the essential team that Jesus came to establish who would take over the mission after he was finished, after his life on Earth was done.

- After his death, Jesus is still not finished, he's alive again, and he's directing things from Heaven – but, from the very beginning of his ministry he establishes the team that will take up the baton when he is gone. He gives to all his followers different kinds of instructions. Some of the instructions we can follow and obey “one-on-one.” Indeed some of them are intensely personal. So Jesus says to his individual followers (Matt.25), “You have a talent, individually and you must use it for me. Nobody else can use your talent. You have it one-on-one.” Jesus speaks directly to our lives individually.
- But he also says things that we cannot respond to, at least adequately respond to, unless we are with others; unless we respond in some sense together. So let me read to you a story which may be familiar to many of you which Jesus teaches to his disciples and challenges them with what they are supposed to do with their lives, how they are supposed to help others in need as his followers. It's in Matthew 25, beginning at verse 31.

When the “Son of Man” (a title that Jesus uses to refer obliquely to himself) comes in his glory and all the angels with him then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left and the King will say to those at his right hand *‘come you that are blessed by my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’* And the righteous answered him, *‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’* And the King will answer them, *‘Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.’*

Now there's a challenge. The world is filled with need, and Jesus says to his followers, 'You take care of it. Spiritual, physical, it doesn't matter. The need is out there. You take care of it.' And that summons should inspire us . . .

But, I have to tell you, that even though I'm inspired by this it also makes me weary to think about. It makes me weary to think about. And it leads in some senses to a sense of despair. To ask, "How in the world can I do this? All that Jesus asks me to do? *I was hungry you gave me food. I was thirsty you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger you welcomed me. I was naked you gave me clothing. I was sick you took care of me. I was in prison you visited me . . .* Am I to do all of that by myself? I can't do it Jesus! Just cannot do it!"

BUT, what if Jesus isn't surprised or upset by the response? What if Jesus intended that very response to be the response of those who heard him? What if my despair is, in a sense, exactly what Jesus wants as he shares this story with his disciples? Forcing us to say '*I can't do it by myself? But with others, maybe it's possible we can make a dent in all of this that would not be possible otherwise?*' What if Jesus' intention was not merely to turn me or you into nicer people than we are (!), but actually, from day one, to build us into a team, build us into a community, build us into a network – name it what you want – a cohesive unit where we could accomplish together what we could not accomplish by ourselves? Turn us into a life-transforming community, to accomplish the will of God in the name of Jesus Christ together.

Of course I think that this is precisely what Jesus has in mind. Not as an afterthought but as the first thought, from the beginning of his ministry: to touch individual lives but then, immediately to summon treasured and known individuals into community together to create a unit, a team, a family, a kingdom, a flock a body that will reflect his life on Earth.

Actually let me read you that passage of scripture again and show you what I mean, using this very passage of scripture, translated this time from the original Greek, with one word specifically translated literally. This is what Jesus says. He says:

"When the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the *nations* [DR: a community!] will be gathered before him. He will separate people one from another" [DR: that's individuals] "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on the left." [DR: Ah, here are two flocks.] "Then the King will say to those at his right hand," [DR: and this is where the translation changes] "come you all that are blessed by my Father inherit the kingdom prepared for you all from the foundation of the world for I was hungry and you all gave me food. I was thirsty and you all gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you all welcomed me. I was naked and you all gave me clothing. I was sick and you all took care of me. I was in prison and you all visited me. Then the righteous answered him, 'Lord when was it that we saw you hungry?' [DR: They actually respond corporately. We tend to miss that.] 'And gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that

we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” “And the King will answer them truly I tell you all just as you all did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you all did it to me.”

That’s 11 times. English obscures it because there’s no distinction between “you singular” and “you plural”; but in the original Greek language it’s “you plural” (you all) the whole way through; “You plural,” “You together,” the whole way through.

This is one clear indication among many others that Jesus intended his followers to know him one-on-one but to form a team as quickly as they possibly could from the beginning. There are some things you can do by yourself. And there are other things that cannot be done by yourself.

You cannot play football by yourself. You can dress up in a football uniform but that does not turn you into a football player. You can’t say “Look I’ve got all the gear, I’m a football player”; unless there is somebody who plays with you and somebody in this case who plays against you. There is no game until there is another. There are some things you cannot do unless there are others with you. There are some things you can do without others. I suppose you can play golf by yourself. You can play video games by yourself. You can go swimming all by yourself. But when one of my children was involved in year-round swimming what my wife, Currie, and I came to realize very quickly is that though swimming is an “individual sport” it becomes a team sport very quickly; and that the kids involved in it begin to know each other’s times and to help each other do the very best they can, to increasingly work on best performances. So the team, even when the initial focus is individual, really matters.

The same is true, not just as an add-on, for Christian faith but from the beginning with our Lord Jesus Christ.

He knows us by name and we should always, every day, be stunned with that. We should leave here saying ‘You know me individually! You know me by name. You love me; you want me to engage with you. You want our lives to intersect.’ We should never lose a sense of awe and wonder at that. But immediately, we should also know that Jesus calls us together! . . . together with others to be his witnesses; together with others to serve him effectively; together with others to grow spiritually.

And “together” not just in the sense that we have a church, an institution, to which we belong and we’re grateful that others run it for us. That’s a top down view of “togetherness”! Remember that there were no church organizations like this in the early days of the Christian faith. No, Jesus’ words were bottom up not top down. The church that he came to establish, the connection that we need, is grass roots. It’s at the bottom as a flock, as a people, as a group, as the apostle Paul says, as a body. So our Scripture reading today was from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12, a truly critical passage of Scripture for this understanding of Christian faith: *where the church is described not*

*as a building but as a community of people bound together like a body.* There are two things that need to be said here about this passage, which are absolutely critical.

- One is this: that every part of a body matters. The fingertips matter; the eyelashes matter; the earlobes matter, no matter how insignificant they may seem to be. They all matter. That's the first thing.
- The second thing is this: that if we cut them off, any part off from the body they die. They die! They cannot perform whatever function they were intended to perform and they wither away and die. So "fingertips" (unfortunately, not mine!) can play instruments like the piano beautifully. How amazing! Right there in the fingertips this power – they can do remarkable things. Fingertips can tell people who you are. It's incredible, right there in the fingertips! BUT cut them off, and they'll wither away and become useless before you know it. Without an integral connection to the body they cannot function. "We are the *body* of Christ!" says the Apostle Paul. "And *individually* members of it."

Of course in some sense we can grow spiritually alone: we can worship God alone; proclaim and embody the gospel alone; demonstrate the love of God alone. We can. But our calling, our greatest effectiveness and the most pleasure that we can bring to Jesus Christ is when we do this together, when we: -- worship *together*, grow spiritually *together*, proclaim and embody the gospel *together*, demonstrate God's love *together*, sustain our congregation *together*, lead people to become faithful followers of Jesus Christ in God's world *together*.

When we do these things together . . . well . . . we cannot even begin to imagine what God can do with the church which Jesus came to establish, for which he gave his life and for which he lives and reigns in glory even now.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2015 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>  
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800