

April 25, 2009

Greetings in the name of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We have passed through another season of debate and voting in our denomination. Once again the majority of presbyteries have voted to uphold the biblical standard of “fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness” as a standard for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Thus, the PCUSA continues to stand with the church around the world and throughout the ages in its witness that God has created marriage as the only place for the gift of sexual expression to be experienced. Thanks be to God!

While we *are* grateful to God for the outcome on this vote, we cannot completely rejoice. The margin by which the historic faith of the Church was upheld is itself a matter for ongoing prayerful concern. The culture is aggressively challenging biblical truth and values. That persistent struggle sometimes leaves us tired and discouraged. But as Christians we need to remain faithful in our witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ—the very real power of God to transform lives, communities, and cultures, that was being challenged in these debates.

During a recent meeting of the Presbyterian Renewal Network (leaders of the renewal organizations within the PCUSA), we noted that our current context is remarkably similar to that in which the New Testament letter to the Hebrews was written.

Hebrews has all the marks of a sermon. It is a “word of exhortation” (13:22 NRSV), a homily addressing a familiar problem. The recipients of the letter are discouraged and tired in *their* ongoing spiritual struggles. Metaphorically, their hands are drooping and their knees are wobbly (12:12).

The author of this letter does not sugarcoat the situation, nor does he “appeal to improved group dynamics, conflict-management techniques, reorganization of the mission structures, or snappy worship services.”ⁱ Rather, he preaches the truth of the Gospel and admonishes his hearers to be faithful to it.

What this ancient preacher offers in the face of challenging circumstances is—obedience! He challenges his tired, discouraged hearers to “...run with perseverance the race that is set before (them),” and to “consider (Jesus) who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that (they) may not grow weary or lose heart.” After all, “in (their) struggle against sin (they) have not yet resisted to the point of shedding (their) blood.” Therefore, they are to “lift (their) drooping hands and strengthen (their) weak knees, and make straight paths for (their) feet, so that what is lame may ... be healed” (12:1-2,4,14).

God has called us to faithful ministry. This may not be easy, comfortable, or “fun,” but it is obedient. Our current challenges can seem discouraging, but they do not compare to many of the great struggles in Church history or to the realities our brothers and sisters face in many parts of the global Church today.

Faithful ministry is both an individual and a communal effort. None of us can “fix” the problems facing our denomination, but each one of us can commit to faithfully live out our calling. The organizations that form the PRN provide a wide spectrum of ministries, programs, analytical studies and polity advice, but these are only tools to assist the church in maintaining a faithful, joyful witness. Unless each one of us commits to being personally involved in the ministry of renewal and reformation, embodying God’s transforming power and love in our congregations and our communities, in our presbyteries and beyond, the bad news of cultural capitulation will be the only news we have to share.

Now, in this season beyond the voting decision, we offer the challenge to recommit to faithful ministry: to running the race God has marked out. There is no time for weariness or discouragement. The living Christ is Lord of this part of his Church.

[Released by Bill Young, Moderator, Presbyterian Renewal Network]

www.renewalnetwork.org

ⁱ Long, Thomas G., *Hebrews: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997, p.3.