

One Foundation

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

August 23, 2020

Romans 12:1-8 and Matthew 16:13-20

Let's do a little word association...

When I say the word "Church," what comes to mind?

Let's try it..."church" – What comes to mind?

- Was it a building?
- Was it THIS building, with its stone and wood and beautiful landscaping and clear windows and shadows and light?
- Was it a little country church, or a big European cathedral?
- Was it the church of your childhood, or the church where you got married, or the church where a grandparent's funeral was held?
- Was it a building at all, or, rather, a person, or an activity? A Sunday school teacher or choir director?
- Was it a memory, fidgeting next to your parents in the pews, unable to wait for coffee hour, doodling on the bulletin?
- Was it singing a hymn, or having a sort of spiritual moment during a creed or prayer?
- Was it a smell, or a taste, or a sound?
- Was it a disagreement you had with the church, or a failing in its ministry?

It is all of those things for me, and so many more, a unique combo platter of personal history and family history and faith history and vocational history. Yours will be yours just as mine are mine, but at some point – and more than over the internet in these moments – your images and mine intersect, our stories intersect, as they intersect with those who have gone before us, and those who will follow.

For some of you church means believing something, or wrestling with a set of beliefs. For others of us, church means belonging to a community. For most of us, I bet, it's a beautiful and complex mosaic of belief *and* belonging, of relationships

and experiences, what happens in worship and what happens before and after and the other six days.

We say that the church is not a building, just as a family is not the house you live in, yet we also know that place matters. That's one of my biggest wrestlings in COVID 2020 and my thinking about the church and our calling into it. Lots of "yes...and."

- Yes, we worship God and not a building, AND, we miss the place where we gather.
- Yes, we are able to connect online and in some ways more deeply, AND, we miss seeing each other in person.
- Yes, we believe that Christ calls us to serve in the world, AND, Christ calls us to gather together.
- Yes, COVID provides a time for great creativity as we think about the future, AND, there are certain moments, experiences, that we miss greatly.
- Yes, the church is the body of Christ in the world, AND, because we are incarnational, we miss the opportunity for this part of the body to gather in the flesh.
- Yes...and.

We know, from our very particular experience in this place and from broader experiences, that the church was already experiencing great change. Some of it numerical, as mainline Protestantism, the slice of the American church pie that we find ourselves in, declines in membership. Other change is less quantifiable. Scholars talk about a decline in cultural influence. Perhaps. Certainly there is a shift in the church's place of prominence, some of which I don't think is all bad. COVID has only accelerated all of that change. Some churches, with fewer financial resources or shrinking memberships or albatrosses of buildings simply won't survive. I grieve that, and give thanks for their ministry.

I have a book on a shelf called something subtle like "Why the Church Must Change or Die." That had probably always been true; COVID and all the the earlier cultural recalibrations has likely made our runway shorter. Essay after essay I am reading right now say similar things – as awful as this pandemic is, and it is so awful on so many levels – shame on us, shame on the church, if we don't learn from it, adapt from it, and not in a defensive way. Nobody is talking about going back to the way things were, an "old normal." I am not even comfortable with

language about a “new normal,” because that implies a normality that I believe will be elusive for a very long time. “New reality,” yes. New forms of ministry and service, yes.

For us, PCCH, I believe that will include, when it’s safe, many of the things we’ve done in person and onsite, with some tweaks, if not more than tweaks. And it will also include some continuation of online offerings, and remote offerings, because as much as people don’t like to be on Zoom all the time, Zoom has allowed us to connect in greater numbers for committees and education and praying. Life online has allowed members of our community to be present when – by distance or circumstance – they might not otherwise have been able to. We need to remember that.

And so much more importantly than that, we need to remember that regardless of the delivery system – in-person, remote, live, recorded – that some underlying principles need to drive us, need to give shape and form to whatever this congregation’s ministry evolves into post-COVID. The good news is that we needn’t make them up. And the better news is that we are not, never have, never will, going it alone.

Each of our lectionary passages this day could take us in many fruitful directions.

Jesus is traveling with his mates and he knows, as we do, that they are talking. “What’s the buzz,” he asks in a way. “Tell me what’s happening?” Who are people saying that am? The disciples names some names from the tradition, John the Baptist, the prophets. OK, good. He pivots – “who do YOU say that I am?”

It’s a plumb line question for all of us, always. Who is Jesus? Peter, replies. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That question and that answer unfold in generations, lifetimes, of faithfulness. Here, though, what I am interested in is what happens next. Jesus affirms the answer and tells Peter, *petros*, the rock, that “on this rock I will build my church.”

Church history is chock full of instances where we’ve fought over those words. Who, Peter? Who, humanity? What church did Jesus intend, because the Greek word, *ecclesia*, is a more generic term for “assembly.” Did Jesus mean church with dogma and doctrine and denominations and committee meetings? Did Jesus mean all those things are we pondering now, about sustainability and mission in

the land of COVID? Did Jesus mean factions that would take hard stands on big issues and little ones?

Those are all secondary questions today, because I choose to extract these words: “I will build my church.” I will build *my* church.” Whatever else he intended, its ownership is clear. And whatever else has evolved, we need to remember that. When we stray from it, we have a problem. When we anchor who we are in that core identity, we are always the better for it, a clarifying proposition that can help filter all we do and way – “how are we being Jesus’ church, right now?”

Paul, the practical theologian, wrote to and provided leadership to the little communities, the churches, that popped up in villages and towns after Jesus’ ministry. Paul understood the threat posed to a fledgling church in a hostile, or indifferent, environment. Don’t, he said, go along to get along. Don’t conform yourself to the world. Be transformed.

That’s a good word for this moment. Whatever we do in this new iteration of church, however our ministry takes shape, it needn’t be hostile to the world – Jesus wasn’t – but it needn’t accommodate itself to the world either. Transformed, not conformed. Remember that.

And remember that the church Jesus builds needs many things. And it gets them, in the form of gifts and giftedness and flesh-and-blood humans to be the church and to enact those gifts. Paul’s imagery of the church as the body is radical and provocative and transformative, because it insists that not only do we all have a place, not only are we an inclusive community of faith, but that we are all gifted and all have a contribution to make. When the church either neglects or rejects any gift, or when we think we ourselves as not gifted, the church is the lesser for it.

And whatever the church looks like going forward, Paul gives us a very good litany of what we will need – prophecy (discerning and visioning), ministry (care and compassion), teaching (sharing the faith with all ages), exhorting (encouraging and supporting), giving (generosity of time and yes, money), leading, persevering (being resilient and durable), and compassion.

What are your gifts and how are you using them, in this symphony with many instruments, a team with many positions, a body with many parts?

Of the church, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes that “The church is a diverse community, but its diversity is not just a natural diversity of temperaments or preferences – we trivialize the idea if that’s all there is to it. It has a diversity of gifts given by the Spirit, a diversity of relationships with God, we might say, out of which come diverse perspectives on God and diverse ways of making God’s work real for each other.” Our task is to “work steadily to release the gifts of others...” (*Tokens of Trust*, pages 105ff)

That was true when Jesus launched this thing; it was true in the best of our farther back and more recent history; it was true pre COVID and during COVID and it will be true, by the grace of God and our creativity and imagination, when whatever emerges next does so. Relationships and connections. Learning and growing. Serving in bolder and more expansive ways in a world hungry for justice and reconciliation. Opening and welcoming.

We sing today that “The church is one foundation,” a new and ever renewed and renewing creation, pressing to one hope. We sing today “God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power...” and envision an unfolding story, with this generation, you and me, adding new chapters. We ask God to give us wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour and the living of these days.

Perhaps that’s what we imagine, then, when we hear the word “church,” the church Jesus set out to build so long ago with flesh-and-blood followers who are given gifts and a vision, for such a time as this, even us, even now. Amen.