

Pitching Our Tent

Exodus 33:7-11, Acts 2:1-12

June 9, 2019

First Presbyterian Church

90 Days of Listening Report

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God, you are the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night,
you still lead us into each new moment of our lives.

By the power of your Spirit,
settle now into our hearts and illumine your will;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

Exodus 33:7-11: The Tent outside the Camp

7 Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. ⁸Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. ⁹When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. ¹⁰When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tents. ¹¹Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

Acts 2:1-12

2When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine

Sermon

Following their dramatic exodus from Egypt, the Israelites spent some time wandering. They would move when the pillars of cloud and fire moved – the cloud during the day and the fire at night. These visible manifestations of God’s presence gave them a clear sense of direction on their journey. But when they were not sure where to go next... what direction to take... they “pitched tent” and waited for God to reveal the next steps of the journey. What this means is that the Israelites weren’t able to rush ahead directly to the Promised Land. No, the plan and path developed... over time... within a discerning relationship with God... which also means their wandering in the desert required them to trust in God... to trust that their journey had meaning and purpose... and to trust that God would provide for them along the way.

I tell you this ancient story because I think it offers a fitting analogy for the work of discerning and planning the future direction of a congregation today. There is a rhythm to congregational life – there are times when the pillar is clearly seen, and we follow “full steam ahead” where it leads... and then there are times when we pitch our tent to wait and pray and listen for direction.

Eventually, all analogies break down, of course, and this is no exception. NEVER have I... nor the congregations I have served had a direction so obvious as a pillar of cloud and fire. Maybe other pastors have... not me! And my experience is that no congregation can just stop everything it is doing... suddenly pitch a tent for an extended time, and just wait for the next pillar to appear. It just doesn’t work that way. But I have found there IS a rhythm to our life together... and that there are seasons in which the congregation’s energy is mostly expended pitching a tent. Well, I have suggested to our session... and now I am suggesting to you... that sometime in the near future we consider “pitching our tent” for a season... so that together we might study and talk and pray and plan for the future of this congregation.

This “90 Days of Listening” (which I HOPE you have heard or read about) is sort of a “toe in the water” exercise that was designed to learn what was on the minds and hearts of a cross section of FPC members. I have always found that unless church folks have a really serious issue or complaint, most won’t make an appointment share what’s on their mind – we need to ask. And this past spring that’s what we did – we asked some 25 or 30 members three basic questions. First, who are we? Second, who in our community and world does God love yet we are not reaching at this time? And third, what might you recommend that the staff and session and other leaders of the church devote their energy to in the near future? Well, I realized pretty early in the week that I had bitten off more than I could chew by trying to summarize the entire 12 hours of group discussion. So, this morning I’ll focus on the first question and will return to the second and third at a later date. You’ve no doubt heard of the image of “drinking from a firehose.” Unfortunately, that may be what I am asking you to do this morning. And I am sorry for that! But rest assured that everything I say today will be available by clicking the sermons tab on our website and in a letter, I will write to our congregation.

So, here's your first sip from the firehose – the question, "Who are we?" This is obviously a question of identity which invites each of us to think of how we describe this church when asked by someone who knows nothing about us. What do you say? We wanted to know. If you are a data nerd, you could offer the latest demographic numbers and describe us that way... but what we did was explore who we are by playing a little game called "Animal Farm." Whoever said Presbyterians can't work and have a little fun at the same time? Animal Farm takes particular animals and uses them as indicators of an organization's identity.

The first animal was a peacock... and the question was: What about your church makes you proud as a peacock? Let me just say how positive and encouraging this part of the conversation was... because at least this slice of First Pres. Members is very proud of many things about our church. Our history, for instance, we're proud of almost 150 years of continuous service to Christ... we're proud of our church building (the physical plant) including the accessibility improvements and investment in children we have made of late... we are very proud of our preschool and youth programs... proud of Wednesday Night Suppers and all-church retreats... proud of our two distinct worship services... that we now offer options for folks. We are proud of our excellent music programs – both here in the sanctuary and in Kairos. There is a sense of holy pride in FPC's involvement in the greater Hickory community and this congregation's generosity to many important community organizations... we are proud of the over 25 years of commitment to mission trips. And finally, we are proud of the people who inhabit this place – our pastors and program and support staff... and all the friendly, caring and servant-hearted people who make up this church. Though we ain't perfect, not by any stretch... the overall sense of these folks we asked is that this is a strong and healthy church right now... and that there's much to be proud as a peacock about.

The next question asked is the bovine question: "What are our sacred cows?" What do we treat as "that which shall not be messed with" in our church? The groups identified several POTENTIAL sacred cows: our building... and even certain rooms within the building which some of us might feel should never be changed. Now that we have two worship services, folks wondered whether our two services could become like silos in which some folks are fixed in either one service or the other. Another sacred cow is the idea that worship can only happen at a certain time on Sunday morning... or that we must always have a dedicated Sunday school hour. Other potential sacred cows might be our half day preschool in a world where many families need full-day care... our benevolence commitment which is significant and in which we have holy pride but may not be sustainable... and then the all-too-common response we hear in every church: "Because that's the way we have always done it."

Next, was the elephant: the groups were asked to identify the "ELEPHANT in the room" – meaning any issues we need to acknowledge and discuss but may be afraid to tackle? What do you think we need to deal with but are afraid to tackle? One issue that received significant attention is the financing of the future mission and ministry of our church. Folks are very aware that over the past several years several very generous donors have died... and in light of this, how will we continue to pay for the quality building and staff and programs and mission that we have now?

Another elephant relates not to financial, but human resources... and the impact of the pace of our lives and the fact that more and more these days folks do not want to commit to anything for very long... what impact will these cultural forces have on the availability of our people to do the work of the church. Yet another elephant in the room centers around the impact of having two worship services – the sense that we are now two congregations with little crossover between them and the temptation to be territorial and even competitive. Finally, an issue we definitely need to tackle is the safety and security of our members when we gather here at church.

We live in a time when houses of worship are vulnerable to violence... and though the chance of something happening here is very small, we want to be prudent and proactive about the safety and security of our members and guests.

The next animal is one we only see in pictures and movies and museums these days: the dinosaur. And the question is: What are the dinosaurs in the life of our church today... in other words, what is either already extinct or needs to die in order to move forward? This is a touchy one, of course – and for obvious reasons – because one member's dinosaur just might be another member's reason to be proud as a peacock... it might be their real connection to this Body of Christ. Yet, suffice it to say there are probably some dinosaurs around here. And I don't just mean me!

The next animal is one we see a lot of around Hickory – the squirrel. The squirrel symbolizes all the distractions that keep us from our primary tasks. What is distracting us from our primary ministry and mission as a church? Here there was a lot of discussion around how our culture has changed over the past 2 - 3 generations and just how busy our lives are. Folks talked about the impact of children and youth sports on the involvement of younger families in church... they acknowledged the fact that First Pres. Hickory is about the “traveling-est” congregation around. And then there was some discussion about how our church – in our desire to meet as many needs of as many people as possible – how our church may have we fallen into the same trap of busyness – of over-programming ourselves to the point of distraction.

And finally, our groups were asked to identify our church's “road kill” – to name and embrace our failures as a church. Interestingly, the conversation about road kill took place on two levels – the denominational level (the PCUSA)... and the local level (this congregation). At the denominational level, some of our folks felt like the theological and political wrangling that has dominated our Presbyterian lives for the past 50 years has at best been a squirrel (a huge distraction) ... and at worst road kill (an epic failure). And then, on a congregational level – the group was in almost unanimous agreement that our road kill – our failures as a church – have almost always involved church staff members... meaning how we have either agreed or disagreed on what we expect of our staff... how we have handled the calling and sometimes dismissing of staff (particularly in our music and youth programs) ... how we have handled retirements and interim pastors and the change that pastoral transition brings.

It was pretty clear that when we look back over the years... and on the most painful and divisive times... we recognize that most of our failures (if we can use that term) have involved our congregation's relationship with persons we have called to work on our church staff.

OK, so let me turn the firehose off for now and ask you if what I have shared sort of squares with what you think of when you describe our church. Assuming I have done a half decent job of summarizing the input of these two groups, for you does this accurately reflect our road kill (our failures)... our squirrels (our distractions)... the elephants in our room (the issues we may not want to deal with)... our sacred cows (the things that shall never be changed) ... and the aspects of our life together that make us proud as peacocks to be a part of this congregation? Admittedly, this is just one way to approach who we are as a congregation... there are many other helpful ways to talk about this. In fact, the groups did this in their joint meeting... noting that we are largely a white, middle and upper class, well-educated congregation. We are a relatively large church as compared to many others in our community... which means we are able to offer a variety of choices for worship and study, fellowship and mission. We are multi-generational church – if you were to divide a typical life-span into three parts, we would have about equal numbers in each of the age groups. First Pres. is known for its generous support of mission agencies in Hickory... for our members being involved in service to the larger community... and for offering our building for use by many community groups. This is in our DNA. And finally, we are a church that does not ask its members to check their brains at the door – we value a thinking faith in which questions can be asked in the service of deepening our faith and obedience. Yes, there are many ways to speak of who First Presbyterian Church is... and if you have something to add to what has been said this morning, then please shoot me an email... give me a call... come see me... I look forward to conversations like that.

Today is Pentecost... it's the day we celebrate the event that inspired and emboldened the followers of "Jesus' WAY," as the early church was first called. The thing about this movement in the days and years after Pentecost is that it was always a combination of the new with the old...

of fresh ideas mixed with ancient practices from its Jewish heritage. When the apostles preached, they proclaimed the meaning of Jesus IN CONTINUITY WITH the traditions of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the prophets. They placed their belief in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah within the defining story of God's relationship with Israel. When the movement then spread to Gentile territory, its leaders were shocked to learn that certain Jewish taboos no longer applied... they could leave some things behind. And they discovered, much to their surprise, that their God's Holy Spirit – the Spirit which fell upon them in Jerusalem that day (and that they had assumed was only for them) – also fell upon the Gentiles.¹ You see, from the very beginning, following in Jesus' way has involved churches being open to fresh ideas – individual disciples welcoming new movements of the Spirit in their lives... even as those churches and those disciples kept and nurtured the practices of the past.

¹ George B. Thompson, Jr., *Futuring Your Church: Finding Your Vision and Making It Work*, (United Church Press-1999), p.87-88

As your pastor, my sense is that this is a good time for us to spend some time “pitching our tent” - not to stop everything we’re doing, but to pour some of our congregational energy toward waiting and thinking and talking and praying and then planning for the future. And that we might do this encouraged by the words of our brother Paul, who said: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” May it be so, Lord. May it be so. Amen.