

Gettysburg Presbyterian Church Col. 1:15-18; Acts 2:44-47 2/3/19

What's so special about GPC? About a year ago, one of our members asked me if I would preach a sermon to help people put together a short "elevator speech" about GPC- you know, something brief they could say when they have an opportunity to talk to someone about our church. I was intrigued by the idea. There are certainly other good churches in our area. What is so special about GPC? This morning I'd like to give some answers to that question, answers you can use as you talk with others about our church, reaching out to them with the love of Jesus Christ. I'm going to structure this sermon around three words, "Gettysburg Presbyterian Church," but in reverse order!

We'll start with "Church." When you think about "church," remember that most of what we believe and do here is common to all Christian churches. Here are a few of those biblically-based commonalities. In Colossians 1, Paul is describing Jesus in the highest, most holy and powerful terms.

¹⁵He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body,

the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. (Col. 1:15-18) Did you catch verse 18?

Jesus is the head of the church. He's the founder, the CEO, the president, the king, the Lord... of the church. That means that we can't do whatever we please with this thing called the church. It is the church of Jesus Christ, so we are bound to what he has called the church to be and do. So, what has Jesus called us to do? In summary, he has called us to love God and love our neighbors. Here's how that looked in the very first church in first century Jerusalem.

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (So they cared for one another and sacrificed to help each other.) ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, (That time in the temple was probably for worship.) they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, (This is probably a reference to the Lord's Supper and table fellowship.) ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (They were effective in bringing others to faith in Jesus.)

Ever since those early times, churches seeking to follow the lead of Jesus have been involved these same things. Serving those in need through sacrificial giving. Worship and sacraments. And fellowship. Most every church attempts to do these things. But for many of our churches today, the results are different than they were in the first century. Most of us aren't "*day by day adding to our number those who are being saved.*" We'll come back to that later. Let's move on to the next word, which describes a particular kind of church, "Presbyterian."

Last week Buz Myers did a great job outlining some of the distinctives of being a Presbyterian. Here's a less serious way to contrast the various denominations, entitled, "How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?"

Charismatics? Only one. Hands are already in the air!

Pentecostals? 10- one to change the light bulb and 9 to pray against the darkness.

Roman Catholic? None- candles only!

Baptists? At least 15- One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken!

Episcopalians? 3- one to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

Unitarians? “We choose not to make a statement either in favor of nor against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, CFL, and LCD- all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.”

Lutherans? None. Lutherans don't believe in change.

Presbyterians? Also none. Lights will go on and off at predestined times!

More seriously, you may remember that Buz talked about our Presbyterian Reformed heritage, our theology which emphasizes the majesty and transcendence of God, our worship, and the way we govern ourselves. All those things are important, but when I think of being Presbyterian, I also think of a few other strengths.

Along with other mainline denominations, we have been leaders in our culture on issues involving justice, like the civil rights movement, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights. We were among the first

denominations to ordain women to all offices of the church. And, holding fast to a millennium of church teaching, we've been cautious about going to war, speaking out about the War in Viet Nam and the War in Iraq. For those concerned about justice for all people, the Presbyterian Church is a good place to be.

Second, although our churches have a great deal of freedom, we also have accountability for our pastors and other leaders through our Presbyteries. Because of that, Presbyterians were early leaders in dealing with and preventing sexual misconduct by our leaders. We mandate background checks for our leaders. And, any pastor convicted in a church court of sexual misconduct offenses has that fact recorded in their permanent record, so pastors can't simply move somewhere else and offend again. We have accountability, in order to maintain trust in our churches.

Third, we focus on the life of the mind, putting great emphasis on education. Did you know that Presbyterians are the only denomination that requires clergy to study both Hebrew and Greek, the original languages of the Bible? And, here at GPC we have lots of opportunities for adults to learn about the faith- Sunday School classes, small groups, Women's Circles, and high-commitment courses like our Disciple series. We also have good education programs for children and youth. Because we believe

that Jesus Christ is the head of the church, we believe it is vitally important for us to carefully study his Word, so we will know what his priorities are for our individual lives and for our world. That's why we are so serious about Christian education.

Finally, Presbyterians have a lot of freedom to innovate, so that a church of our size can offer different styles of worship, for example. We're very pleased to be able to do this, knowing that some people respond best to one style of worship and others respond best to another. So, justice, accountability, education, and freedom are all things that might resonate with people you are talking with about GPC.

Our last word is "Gettysburg!" God has placed this church in a specific location to do God's work here. Our members have impacted this community for over 275 years in a variety of ways. For example, we have farmers, teachers and medical personnel, attorneys and judges, police and fire service people, business owners and managers, university and hospital staff, people in the building trades, restaurant workers, and retirees- people in all walks of life who help this community better reflect the values of the Kingdom of God through their work.

In addition, many of our members volunteer in service clubs, serve on boards, and work with a wide variety of community ministries. As a church, we helped found groups like Adams County Habitat for Humanity and the

Gettysburg CARES homeless shelter, which will be located here for the next two weeks, beginning tomorrow! And, I'm pleased to announce today that we are adding two new staff members to help us in our local ministry. Pam Phillips will be joining us as our Faith Community Nurse, a position funded by several grants. She will help us with health needs both inside the church and in the community. In addition, I'm pleased to announce that we have found a new music director, Jamie Bowman. Jamie directs choirs at the Gettysburg Area Middle School and High School, and will be a great addition to our staff, helping us reach out to our community through our music ministries. (We are still searching for an organist.)

God has placed us in Gettysburg, and although we are called to ministry around the world, we have taken seriously our responsibility to this community. Can we do more? Sure! Particularly, we can do more in inviting others to follow Jesus with us here at GPC. I believe GPC is a great place to explore and grow in faith, and we need to overcome our Presbyterian shyness about such things and invite others to come and check out the exciting things God is doing here! According to a Barna survey, 25% of Americans would go to church if invited. Perhaps thinking about the words, "Church," "Presbyterian," and "Gettysburg," will help you figure out what to say!

And if you come up with a nice, brief “elevator speech” about what GPC means to you, share it with us, and we’ll try to find a way to share it with the congregation!

As we prepare for the Lord’s Supper, note the words of the Praise Song we’re about to sing. It reminds us of the grace that God extended to us on the cross, a grace that changes us where we need to be changed.