

**"What Presbyterian's Bring to the Table"**  
***Preached at The United Church of Los Alamos***  
***By Rev. Don Childers***  
***February 25, 2007***  
***Lenten Text of the Day: Luke 4:1-13***  
***Text for Message: 1 Corinthians 14:26-33***

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is the six-week period prior to Easter Sunday. It is intended to be a time of reflection, prayer, and preparation. In many traditions persons are encouraged to "give something up" for Lent. This small sacrifice of something we treasure is intended to remind us of the great sacrifice that Jesus made.

This year we are encouraging people to "add something" for Lent. We are encouraging people to make a spiritual commitment in which they will do something extra during Lent. This commitment is intended to help us expand our use of our gifts and to at the same time make a sacrifice of time and effort on behalf of someone else.

During these six weeks we will also be exploring what each of the denominations officially associated with The United Church bring to the life of our church. Of course we recognize that among our membership there are far more than these six denominations represented. As with many churches persons gather from a wide variety of backgrounds and all these backgrounds add to the tapestry that is The United Church.

Yet, some sixty years ago persons associated with what is now the National Laboratory in Los Alamos desired to meet together in worship. Following the model of the military chapel they banded together to form one "united" congregation. I understand that in the beginning all denominations were

represented at The United Church. Today we still actively participate through our mission giving and other support with six denominations. These are: The Presbyterian Church U.S.A., The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), The Reformed Church of America, The United Church of Christ, The American Baptist Church, and the Moravian Church. As pastors and lay leaders we have committed to keeping in contact and participating in these denominations.

Now, here is my “disclaimer”. These sermons will represent the reflection of each of us pastors. They are not intended to be the end of the dialogue but a beginning. We speak from our own background and experience and bring that to the Table as well. The point is that each of us, each of our backgrounds, and each of our traditions bring something special to the wonderful mix of The United Church and to the wonderful mix of Christ’s Church. We are one body but each of us brings something unique. Without us the body would be less.

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Now to the focus, “what the Presbyterian’s bring to the Table”.

The Presbyterian Church had its beginnings in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as part of a reform movement that spread across the church in Europe that we know today as the Protestant Reformation. Although Martin Luther is credited with starting the Reformation, in reality the reform movements sprang up all over Europe. Prior to that time the Roman Catholic Church dominated the Western Church.

All of these movements owe something to the invention of the printing press in Germany around 1440. It was the printing press that revolutionized communication even more dramatically than the computer has revolutionized

communication in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Religious thinkers now had a vehicle to spread their message and although authorities would attempt to silence dissent, it was impossible to do so.

Some twenty years after Martin Luther defied the Church in Germany, John Calvin a French/Swiss theologian further refined reformed theology. John Calvin organized a movement centered in Switzerland. Later John Knox, a Scotsman, took Calvin's teaching back home to Scotland. Reformed communities began to spring up throughout Europe but primarily in Scotland and England.

The Presbyterians figured prominently in U.S. history. The Rev. Francis Mackemie arrived in the Colonies from Ireland in 1683 and helped to organize the first American Presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706. Throughout its history the Presbyterian Church has had several splits and reunions. At present the largest group is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) with its national office in Louisville, Kentucky. We are part of this denomination and serve together as part of the Santa Fe Presbytery.

The word "presbytery" comes from the Greek word for "elder". John Calvin devised a system of church government in which the elders were chosen by the people and together with ministers of the word exercised church leadership. Presbyterian elders are both elected and ordained and serve in the local "session" of a congregation.

Reformed theology affirms the majesty and holiness of God. The scriptures are important as the prime authority of faith and doctrine. The church

is governed congregationally by persons elected by God to use their talents and gifts in ministry. The Presbyterian Church is both a confessional and connectional church.

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I have had indirect experience with the Presbyterian Church throughout my ministry. It has always been a positive experience. In my service here I have had the privilege of attending the Presbytery meetings. Over the years I have had many important colleagues and friends within the Presbyterian Church.

In addition my own tradition, The Christian Church (DOC) grew out of the Presbyterian Church in the early 1800s. Even though the disagreement with the Presbyterian Church was intense in the early years, Disciples now enjoy a renewed fellowship and cooperation with our mother church.

In my observations about Presbyterians I note two things that they bring to the table of the church. Of course like all churches Presbyterians are multi-faceted and diverse. They have strong mission involvement, strong social justice involvement, strong liturgical involvement, and have a reputation of strong and effective preaching. The two things I notice are first a sense of order and discipline and second an appreciation for using our minds to explore and understand faith.

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The first thing that I observe is that Presbyterians cherish order and discipline. Good representation can only occur if persons play by the rules and learn to respect the differences of others. Presbyterians see good order as an

issue of justice and fairness. Procedures that are clearly outlined bind us together and those procedures allow all voices to be heard.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians that congregation was suffering from many internal divisions. Worship apparently was chaotic with persons over speaking each other. The life of that congregation was fractured by the chaos of every person doing what they wanted. So Paul writes,

*“So here’s what I want you to do. When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide insight. If prayers are offered in tongues, two or three’s the limit, and then only if someone is present who can interpret what you are saying. Then each speaker gets a chance to say something special from God, and you all learn from each other. If you choose to speak, you’re also responsible for how and when you speak. When we worship the right way, God doesn’t stir us up into confusion: he brings us into harmony. This goes for all churches---no exceptions.”<sup>1</sup>*

Paul wanted persons to feel free to be responsive to God's spirit. At the same time order and discipline meant that everyone was treated fairly. When order breaks down the spirit is actually hampered not helped.

We would do well to remember this in our own ministries. Respect for each other and allowing the space for diverse viewpoints is essential for allowing the spirit to work. Time and time again we quench the spirit by being disorganized, chaotic, argumentative and dogmatic.

Such discipline carries over into our personal lives. Being organized, setting priorities, following through with those priorities is important in becoming effective servants of Christ.

So the first thing that I believe our Presbyterian tradition brings to the table is a respect for a sense of order and discipline in doing ministry. This reputation

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<sup>1</sup> The Message, Eugene Peterson, p. 2088.

of Presbyterians is so well known that there is a variation of the light bulb joke that involves Presbyterians. It goes this way,

*Question: How do Presbyterian parliamentarians change a light bulb?*

*Answer: The motion as to changing the light bulb shall properly be brought under new business. When the main motion has been made and seconded, amendments as to the acquisition of a ladder and/or the deposal of the old light bulb may then be brought. When the motion has been perfected, the moderator shall read the text of the motion. If there is insufficient light by which the moderator may read, then the motion shall fail and no action shall be taken.<sup>2</sup>*

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My second observation about what Presbyterians bring to the table is that they call our attention to and encourage us in the use of our minds.

Presbyterians have been closely associated with education. Princeton University and Seminary was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Presbyterians. Today dozens of colleges, seminaries and universities trace their roots or are currently supported by Presbyterians.

This is one aspect of Presbyterianism that the founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) did not reject. Thomas Campbell and especially Alexander Campbell, both Presbyterian ministers, stressed that the mind was a gift from God and was to be used to understand and appropriate faith. Calvin Brown writes, ***“Education has long been one of the jewels in the crown of Presbyterians. In fact, Professor Arthur Herman in his best-selling book, How the Scots Invented the Modern World, notes that the Presbyterian’s***

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com>.

***approach to education led to the creation of the worldview that now governs civilization.***<sup>3</sup> William Paterson, one of the signers and designers of the U.S. Constitution, a delegate from New Jersey, was Presbyterian. Lest we think that those who stress the intellect are devoid of the spirit it was the Presbyterians who were one of the major forces in the First Great Awakening that swept the American colonies from 1730 to the 1770s.

I believe that in our current religious environment this aspect of Presbyterians needs to be lifted up again. For some reason many want create an artificial choice for persons of faith. On one side of the debate are those who argue that one must believe every word and action in the scriptures literally, without interpretation. If evidence comes to light that suggests otherwise then one must choose faith over reason.

On the other side of the debate are those who believe that there is no room for faith in a rational world. Religion is pure superstition and is to be rejected along with horse and buggies and the use of leeches in the treatment of disease.

In between these two positions rest most of us. We desire a strong faith that uses reason to understand it. We recognize that God gave us a mind to use and that an educated approach to faith will only deepen and enhance faith.

By the way if something similar to Y2K ever really does happen it will be the Amish who still use horse and buggies who will find themselves on the top of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://renewalfellowship.presbyterian.ca/channels/r04202-1.html>.

the economic ladder. As to leeches, well modern medicine is rediscovering the use of leeches, called "Hirudotherapy".<sup>4</sup> Go figure!

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All of our traditions add to the tapestry of the United Church.  
Presbyterians teach us the value of order and discipline and remind us that our minds are a gift to be used. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> "Maggots and Leeches make a comeback", Aisha El-Awady, found at <http://www.scienceinfrica.co.za/2003/july/leech.htm>.