



Date: September 13, 2015

Title: "The Next Thirty Years"

Scripture: Psalm 78: 2-4

Summary: Reflections on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pleasant Hill Church. Describe some of the qualities that make us exceptional.

Creating this worship service, I searched the internet for other churches celebrating their anniversaries. Beulah International Baptist in Tampa, Florida—146 years; Eastport United Methodist in Annapolis, MD—125 years. PHPC is the only church I found with its original pastor still serving. Am I as old as dirt, or what? I want us to keep being original.

Earlier this year, I described some of what keeps PHPC inspired and creative. Of course, by Sunday afternoon I had thought of several ways I could have said it better that morning. Today I get a second chance. What makes this church exceptional? What's the special sauce that we add to the mix?

There are several of us from those beginning days who are still around. It helps to hear those people tell stories of how it was thirty years ago. It gives us a sense of history that reminds us that we people of faith in Jesus Christ are not a passing fad. On Christ the solid rock we stand, and we're not fading away! We share stories of our past, not because nostalgia is fun, but to let those stories reveal possibilities for our future.

When PHPC began, it was simple. It seemed like everyone out here was new. (And it was "out here" in those days.) All of us had just moved here recently and 30 years ago, all of us were in our thirties! PHPC simply needed to be open, welcoming, and offer a faith that was open and welcoming, not judgmental and harsh. And people resonated with that. We couldn't build facilities fast enough. We were one of the fastest growing Presbyterian churches in all Atlanta

Things changed. After a while, everybody wasn't new, young and 100% American-made. Not everybody was automatically interested in church. Northern Arc Atlanta entered the Age of the Mega-Church. Pleasant Hill was never going to be a mega-church. We didn't want to be. Something about mega-church just didn't resonate with who we are.

It appears to resonate with a lot of people, because North Pointe, 12-Stone, Perimeter, they got it going out here. A lot of people find the adrenaline-filled worship,

seeker-sensitive programs, & applied belief systems work for them. It simply does not appear to work for Pleasant Hill people. We could be a larger church, far more successful if we would do it the mega-church way.

It's September in the South, and football rules. The SEC, ACC, NFL—we don't even need full words to talk with each other. Wouldn't it be sad if football were the only game that anyone watched or played? There would be no opportunity for people to discover lacrosse, and fans of Serena would be left out. If mega-church were the only thing that the Christian faith offered around here, I believe God would be very disappointed in us. Not that mega-church is bad or wrong, but in terms of faith, one size does not fit all. Never has.

Let's identify the things we love and value and that energize us, the things that make Pleasant Hill the church God calls us to be I want to name some of those things.

We are demonstrating a new way of being community together. The old way has grown ugly. The old way of forming group identity is through hostility. "We're the group of people who are against that!" The driving force that is shaping ISIS is their hostility towards Christians, or towards anyone who isn't ISIS. And ISIS has the potential to undermine world peace.

But it is not just them. Politically, America is marked by hostility. Am I the only one, or do you dread the upcoming Presidential campaign? The political nastiness towards opponents promoted by candidates and media is sickening, isn't it?

Christians have been down that road; among Millennials, Christians have a reputation as being against things: against homosexuals, against evolution, against other religions, against Rap music, skateboarders. On Sundays churches declare ourselves OPEN to the public, but all the public sees is "NOPE." The Spirit of Christ is calling us to show a way of faith that is more shaking our heads and saying no.

This church offers a community that is not marked by hostility. We disagree on important matters, but we disagree graciously. We practice an alternative way of handling our conflicts.

This is not easy! Christ tells us to love our enemies, but it is much harder to love our friends! The biggest threat to your faith will not come from Muslims or atheists; it will come from fellow Christians. That was certainly Jesus' experience. Although he was crucified by Roman soldiers and Jewish leaders, he was betrayed, forsaken and abandoned, and completely misunderstood by his closest disciples. Still, he promised his friends, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Out of that context, Jesus taught us to love one another. "As I have loved you, so you love one another."

Every close, meaningful relationship goes through conflict. You've seen families where it's all smiles and sweetness, and it's all plastic and superficial. Jesus embraced Peter as a rock-solid ally; he also told Peter to get out of his sight, that Peter was Satan personified. Friends become like brothers or sisters, not by sitting around singing Kum Ba Ya, but by working through their differences creatively.

Christ holds us together, not our holding the same opinions. You can go lots of places to find everyone making the same income, having the same skin color, holding the same opinions. But here we encounter the fullness of community; the varying perspectives enrich us, the differing backgrounds enhance our praise, the diversity deepening our faith.

We don't have a word for what we do together here at PHPC, but we're practicing an alternative. It isn't always pretty, but it is beautiful. And we're a candle lit in the darkness, a beacon for the world around us.

We're learning a new way of spirituality. What center holds us together? For 500 years, protestants have been busy proving that we can govern ourselves without a pope. People don't care anymore how churches are governed. People don't come to Pleasant Hill because of our congregational meetings; they come here because they experience God here. They feel God's touch in a way that makes them come alive.

(By the way, our own presbytery has got that right. Under our current exec, Penny Hill, our presbytery no longer emphasizes how we can support their programs; their top priority has become discovering how they can support healthy churches and the people in them. It's making a difference.)

Why worship at all? Why go to church on a Sunday morning? People can watch movies without going to the theatre; they can send mail (email) without going to the post office; they can pay their bills without going to the bank. So why do they need to go to church to worship?

The answer: to get our bodies involved together. Worship is what we do that bonds our bodily action to meaning. The way an athlete lifts weights or practices a swing over and over, what we do at worship bonds bodily action to meaning. We need it.

Music has incredible power to do that. So we're careful about the songs we sing here. We're still in the early learning curve of our new *Glory to God* hymnal. We're learning so many new songs. The music of these songs is beautiful and the words say something real. It may take us an entire childhood to know these hymns so well that we sing them in the shower, every word of all four stanzas by heart. Then we'll sing them in the middle of the night in the hospital room when the pain meds aren't working and the nurses aren't responding to the call button. When we have learned our hymns that well, they may be our greatest legacy.

Three weeks ago we watched a video clip of a 90-year-old asked about what it was like when she was a young woman. "I can't remember. I can't remember anything," she says, her voice filled with loss. They put earphones on her and played Louis Armstrong singing "When the Saints Go Marching In." Her eyes suddenly sparkled as she began telling stories of life "back in the day." They almost couldn't stop her talking. I told you that every time we sing a hymn here, I figure I'm making

another deposit in my memory bank for the time that may come. When everything else up there has faded, I want the music of my faith to remain and overflow.

So after that sermon, we sang a hymn, #543, "God Be the Love to Search and Keep Me". One of our members, traveling the road of dementia, stood tall and silent, present in body only. When we reached the line, "O, Christ, surround me. O, Christ, surround me," suddenly he sang like a choir boy. At the end of each stanza, he sang boldly and joyfully, "O, Christ, surround me. O, Christ, surround me." I want a faith like that! Music nurtures that kind of faith that is nurtured here at Pleasant Hill Presbyterian.

4) We reclaim the Bible here. Let's stand for a fresh, new way of grounding our faith in scripture. I love the Bible, and I refuse to treat it as a collection of simple devotional readings and moral lessons.

One of the worst things I can do is preach a sermon on a single Bible story, as though that story presents all the Bible has to say about that subject. Every story in the Bible connects with another story in the Bible. The story of David and Goliath—it teaches that trust in God trumps power and might. It made little David a hero of faith. Later another David story in the Bible tells that God did not permit David to build the holy Temple...because David was a man of bloodshed. He had Goliath's blood on his hands. With two stories connected, instead of a simple moral lesson, you have something complex to wrestle with.

Read the story when Elijah the prophet called down fire on the disobedient prophets of Baal. He showed that a single man of faith can defeat an entire godless system. Elijah rose to be one of the three greatest prophets in Israel's history. Yet Jesus rebuked his disciples when they wanted to call down fire *like Elijah*.

The Bible is a complicated book. Here we reclaim the Bible from those who pluck out sentences from scripture and use them to prove that any simple view contains all the truth. We honor scripture enough to take it seriously and we want to give the Bible the respect it deserves.

Our first thirty years were marked by the excitement of new discovery. We were so young—at age 40 I was older than 93% of our members. Our largest single age group was zero to ten years old. Being young and new, we did crazy things for the sake of Christ. (Some of those crazy things return to haunt us from time to time!)

We're no longer new; some of the craziness may have been replaced by experience and a small amount of wisdom. But we have more influence and potential to impact our world for Christ now. We offer the very things God needs in this world: a refreshing way of being community together; a gracious, respectful way of disagreeing with each other; worship that is packed with meaning and music that conveys meaning along w/ beauty; an honest way of taking scripture seriously.

Our first thirty years are over; our best thirty years have just begun!

