

“A Vision for the Church”
Philippians 3:1b-11
October 2, 2005

World Communion Sunday

The Reverend Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, IL

Earlier in his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul confesses: “This is my prayer for you: that your love may grow stronger and stronger with clear knowledge and discerning insight so you can figure out for yourselves what really matters ... through the power of Christ for the glory and praise of God.” A few weeks ago I began a sermon series focused on this prayer – Paul’s prayer for his beloved church in Philippi, and my prayer for you in this beloved church as well. This prayer captures so much of my hope for this time: that our love grows vigorous and strong – not just in feeling but all the more in commitment and in action; that we instruct and nurture our love through rigorous thinking and discernment; and that we learn to trust the Lord instead of approaching our faith as an exercise in self-help. In my last sermon I focused on what Christ-like love looks like. Today we’ll examine how that love grows – in St. Paul’s words, with “clear knowledge and discerning insight, so you can determine for yourselves what really matters.”

So how do we know what really matters and what really doesn’t? We know what our culture values: the right house, as large and as close to the lake as possible; the right car – these days, maybe a Prius or a Mini-Cooper; the right clubs, the right college for our kids, the right job, the right clothes, the right whatever. , it can be tempting to spend our energy pursuing them, comparing ourselves with others viz. them, and, finding our identity in them. It’s hard not to; not only is it human nature to stratify ourselves in terms of money and power, we have a whole sector of our economy marketing these things to us so we will still want more.

Yet at our best, we also know that these are only superficial affects of success. They do not really make us better people. And the moment one our kids is in trouble, or our spouse dies, or we wake up one day and look in the mirror and wonder what half of our life has been spent on ... then we really know, we deeply know, that all these accoutrements of the good life offer little solace and even less meaning. What society values is really not that valuable.

It is moments like those when we often turn to faith for answers ... and we discover that we’re not alone in the search. The shelves of Barnes and Noble are lined with books on spirituality and religion. But not all spiritual answers are valuable, either, and while it may be politically incorrect for me to say so, some paths are even dangerous and wrong. Just because something says it is Christian doesn’t make it trustworthy.

Notice in the passage that I read today, how vehemently Paul warns us against the Christian snake-oil salesmen. In his day, they were the Judaizers who wanted Gentile Christians to fulfill a checklist of behaviors from the Jewish law, including circumcision for the men and dietary laws for everyone. In other letters, Paul battles the equivalent of New Age Gnostics; and Jesus himself fights the tendencies of Pharisees, Sadducees, and legalists who hawk their

fundamentalist brands of “right” belief and behavior. Not everything that’s proffered as faith will sustain us.

So how do we know? How do we sort through the options of faith, to know what matters and what doesn’t? St. Paul, again, is truly helpful, and terribly clear: “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” There is only one thing that really matters, and everything is measured against it; or better yet, everything else is seen through that lens: the lens of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Not knowing about, not merely claiming his name, but knowing ... knowing him as deeply as the most important person in our lives. Knowing him so well that our lives are fashioned in his footsteps. Knowing him so well that our love is patterned on the mind of Christ our Lord.

I wish that I could tell you it was easy. I wish that I could tell you that this happens in the hour that you’re here on Sunday morning. Myself, I learned the hard way; I’m convinced that God has led me into ministry because it is the only life that would require me to read the Bible regularly, and pray often, and learn from the living saints of the church. I am not proud to say that for many years I wouldn’t have been disciplined enough to do these things on my own, if I hadn’t had to.

Knowing Christ doesn’t happen overnight; in fact, it takes a lifetime, of Bible reading, daily, prayer. It takes hard questions: the willingness to ask how my actions give glory to God, or not ... and how my actions in business and politics and even purchases affect my neighbor, even my neighbor across the globe. Knowing Christ takes a community of teachers: the fellowship of small groups and work trips and rummage volunteers mentoring each other through their joys and tears. It takes theological discernment: to know enough to appreciate other Christian traditions, yet also to claim the basic Reformed understanding, for example, of Scripture, so that we don’t fall into the false comforts on either end, of fundamentalist inerrancy or neo-Gnosticism. It takes ongoing learning, so that our moral aptitude can keep pace with the challenges of technology and globalization and science and war ... challenges that beg for our attention, that beg for the kind of “clear knowledge and discerning insight” Paul prays for his church.

It wasn’t St. Paul; it wasn’t John Calvin; but rather, it was Adam Smith who noted how essential clear thinking is to sort through what really matters: “An instructed and intelligent people ... are more disposed to examine, and more capable of seeing through, the interested complaints of faction and sedition. ...” (Adam Smith, cited in Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (NY: Penguin, 2005), p. 253). The simplification of spin is everywhere; yet the questions of moral discernment are more complex today than they have ever been: The tragedy of Terry Schiavo’s dying faced us with the question of how and if and when we decide when medical intervention is no longer morally preferable. The build-up to the war in Iraq faced us with the questions of whether pre-emptive strikes are warranted if weapons of mass destruction are present. The global economy has faced us with the question of how to govern our trade, now

that our well-being is entwined with the future of China, India, and every other region. These are not merely medical questions or political questions or economic questions. These are moral questions, every one of them, and they require the hardest, clearest thinking we can muster. And I'm not sure we are ready.

It is time for us to face the question Christian Education professor Richard Osmer raises when he asks: "Is it too much to expect average church members to have a basic network of theological beliefs and a theological ethic by which to interpret the situations that confront them? ... What persons desperately need in most mainline churches today is help in gaining the kind of knowledge and skill that is necessary to allow them to make moral and religious meaning out of their everyday lives." And then Osmer places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the pastors and church leaders: "The problem," he says, "is not so much that ordinary Christians are incapable of this sort of reflection as that they have not been given the opportunity to learn how to do it." (*A Teachable Spirit* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), p. 169)

I propose that we do something about this now: that First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest becomes a training ground for moral thinking ... that we press ourselves to become fluent in Scripture and basic theology ... that we find the ways that help us all make "religious meaning out of our everyday lives" ... that we develop ways to help us sort through the complex issues of our age ... to help us sort through the most personal decisions of our families and finances, our hopes, our fears, our time, our dreams. I do not presume to be any wiser than you are; there are many saints in these pews that will have much to teach us. Nor do I have a prescription for our work in this; I have only ideas, and over time we will explore together what makes sense in this place, in this time. But I do have this commitment: that I will do everything in my power to equip you with the tools you need to face the questions of this day ... to face the questions of your lives. For this is my prayer for you: that your love may grow stronger and stronger with clear knowledge and discerning insight so you can figure out for yourselves what really matters ... through the power of Christ for the glory and praise of God." Amen.