

“The Life of the Church“

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; John 3:1-17

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Westminster Presbyterian Church ~ 60th Anniversary

In 1958, a gallon of gasoline cost 25 cents. That was also the year Kellogg's introduced Cocoa Krispies Cereal to the world. The Academy Awards were broadcast live for the first time. The American Express Card ushered a whole new era of consumer credit. Michael Jackson and Madonna were born, and so was Barbie (the doll). Rock and roll was still new. Trading stamps and party line telephones and black & white TVs were common. What a lot has changed in 60 years!

On a typical Sunday morning in 1958 almost half of Americans were attending church – the highest percentage in all of US history before and after. The women would have been mostly in dresses and hats, and the men in suits. The bulletin would have been run off on a ditto machine! We hadn't learned to sing “They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love” ... because it hadn't been written.

In 1958 there were about 3 million Presbyterians (more than double our numbers today). Most Presbyterians hadn't yet encountered a clergywoman, since the first woman minister had been ordained only two years before. Many Presbyterian churches (Westminster not among them) had yet to elect any women leaders. The northern and southern branches of Presbyterianism, divided since the Civil War, hadn't yet reunited, and wouldn't for another 25 years. Nobody even dreamed of computers and the internet, which would eventually change so much about how we do church.

And no one who was here in 1958 could have imagined that in the years to come, Westminster would establish a relationship with a congregation in Cuba, take a stand on welcoming people without regard to sexual orientation, call co-pastors, sing a “Gloria” that involves clapping, have an endowment fund and a scholarship fund, put on an annual Art Festival, or share its building with the Presbytery and adult day care program.

In 1958, Westminster didn't even have a building yet. But this congregation began its life in a time when there was great optimism about the church, founded on strong religious participation, and a decade of population growth and relative peace and prosperity. Suburbs were expanding; new churches were being built everywhere. In most places, people had more religious options to choose from than ever before... including pentecostal and evangelical churches, and congregations like the one formed here which sought to offer a more progressive, less dogmatic approach to faith in a “traditional” denomination.

It seemed a great time, and sometimes, looking back, it still seems like a great time.

But we ought to remind ourselves that the reality was more complicated. The 1950's also brought us the Cold War and McCarthyism; 25 percent of Americans were poor in that era of prosperity; and equal pay for equal work wasn't yet law. The church as a whole was only beginning to be aware of the evils of segregation and racism. In 1958, Catholics and Protestants were very separated and often mutually suspicious faith communities. Any conversation about "religious differences" meant Protestantism and Catholicism (and sometimes Judaism); other religious traditions were not much seen. All of that, too, was part of the context in which our congregation was born. Being church in the midst of challenging times is nothing new!

1958 also brought the first post-war recession. The birthrate which had been growing for some years, had already began to decline. The Civil Rights movement was emerging as a force that would change the church as well as society. The role of women in the church was already starting to change, and the charter members of Westminster recognized that in electing two women to the church's first Session. A part of the background in 1958 was change.

I think that's so important for us to remember, especially when we get tempted to define our expectations of church according to any particular time. In truth, there is no "moment" we can look back to as a benchmark. Things may have changed a lot between 1958 and 2018 but if you think about it, those changes are probably not any greater than those that happened during the previous 60 years, from 1898 to 1958. Things are always changing around us, and in us, and in the church. Change is a part of life. It's inevitable. To be alive is to be able to respond. To be alive is to change.

So... *thank God* that we have changed! Thank God we are still changing! Because this means we're alive. It means we are responding to what's happening in our world, to the leading of God's Spirit, to the needs of our community and to our own changing needs and understandings. The changes we have experienced as a church through the years are evidence that we have not been *preserving* our faith, but living it.

Think with me for a minute about some of what that has involved:

Well over 3000 Sunday services in which we have gathered here to worship of God
Communion served hundreds of times
More music than we could ever record
Something like 600 Session meetings
60 annual budgets and faithful giving of literally millions of dollars
Hundreds of CROP Walk miles and tens of thousands of dollars
Who-knows-how-many building repairs, grounds projects, and cleaning days
Hours and hours of serving at Ministry with Community or the Food Pantry
Dozens of mission projects and organizations supported with donations
Countless visits to shut-ins and folks in hospitals
Oh-so-many families supported through times of grief
Numerous children and young people nurtured, supported and loved

Many, many Bible studies, Sunday School classes, thoughtful discussions, and new ideas explored.

Endless gallons of coffee

Much hard work

Many unsung tasks done cheerfully

Hard things lived through: grief and goodbyes, disappointments and difficult decisions

Hundreds of lives touched with God's grace

Thousands and thousands of prayers

Immeasurable love and faith and commitment.

And, above all: God's grace, Jesus' call, the Spirit's leading

And there's more: beyond these walls, the people of this church have been in the community and in the world, teaching children, healing the sick, running non-profits, advocating for the powerless, raising families, loving their spouses, making art, making music, making friends, caring for animals, supporting local businesses, designing and building things, solving problems, counseling the troubled, playing sports, coaching and mentoring, doing science, bringing integrity into legal practice and business, recycling, gardening, cooking, learning, caregiving, marching, making connections with others, exploring different cultures, doing humble jobs with grace and kindness, cultivating a spiritual life, being kind, loving the world ... living a whole life, in response to God, as our Westminster Intention Statement says.

That's my favorite thing about our intention statement, that line about "living a whole life." It's so expressive of who we are as a church. I connect it with the way Jesus talks about life in John's gospel: the idea of "life" is really central to this gospel in particular. not meaning biological life but the fullness of life that belongs to God, and is God's gift to us. In John's gospel "life" is often connected to "light" and both have to do with the presence of Jesus.

In the well-known verse we read from chapter 3, Jesus says that he was sent into the world to bring "eternal life." Elsewhere in John, he says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

To many people "eternal life" means going to heaven after you die, but that is most definitely a too-narrow interpretation. Eternal life is the life those who love God are already living. Eternal life is being fully alive to God's Spirit in everything. It's what we mean when we say, as our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith says, that "in life or in death, we belong to God," and that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ." Eternal life is life redeemed.

The redeemed life is not "by and by." It's also about now. It's not about one part of our being but our whole selves. It's not about saving ourselves but about being the beloved community. It is not about separating ourselves from the world but being in the world with love, as Jesus was ... engaging the world for the good of all.

Living a whole life is not static but dynamic. There is the constant that we are always trying to follow Jesus Christ ... but we don't ever know where Jesus will lead us in the future. We don't know what will happen in our community or country or world. We don't know what kind of challenges we ourselves will face, or what kind of unexpected blessings God will drop into our laps. We don't know what we might have to give up, or take on. We don't know what we will need to respond to in the world around us; we don't know what new things God's Spirit might teach us. We can no more imagine the next 60 years than the folks at Westminster's chartering in 1958 could.

But we do know that God loves us and that God's Spirit is in our midst and that Jesus still says, "follow me." We don't know how we will live it and share it in the next chapters of our life together, but we will always have that good news, that gospel which doesn't change.

The Christian philosopher Dallas Willard said that "The gospel is less about how to get into the kingdom of heaven after you die and more about how to live in the kingdom of heaven before you die." We have been learning how to live in the kingdom of God, friends. That's what we are celebrating today, nothing less than that. Thanks be to God for this wonderful life together.
Amen.