



Rough Spots: An Anniversary Sermon

John 17:20-26

Sunday, June 2nd, 2019

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.

Text: I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they all be on. (v. 20-21a)

Have you ever had a birthday party? If so, which one was your favorite one? Most memorable? I can't narrow it down to one. Three come readily to my mind. I don't recall having many birthday parties as my family was small, but when I was 6 or 7 years old I remember a birthday party in my backyard at 6016 W. Farmington Road here in Peoria. My cousins from Norwood Park attended as well as the girls who lived next door - Nancy and Carol Lile.

When I turned 12 my parents said that I was entering my "teen" years so I had a "dance" in the basement of a new house. They gave me a little three speed "stereo" - 45, 33, and 75 RPM's - with detachable speakers. My most memorable gift that year was a 45 record that I got from a girl whom I had a crush on. The 45 was The Lovin' Spoonful. When I turned 40 my wife and daughters planned a surprise party for me which was a real surprise. It was a surprise until I saw one of the girls in the high school fellowship group sneak into our house by the backdoor as I walked home from an evening meeting. I don't remember any of the gifts except for a black coffee mug inscribed with the words "Over the Hill". I was 40, you must remember!

Yesterday, June 1st, was the 82nd anniversary of First Federated Church. The birth of this congregation was a long time coming.

For several years First Congregational Church and Second Presbyterian Church talked about coming together. Both churches were downtown. Both had a rich history. Both faced declining memberships.

Over the years there was some ecclesiastical flirting with one another. Committees were formed and dissolved as the two congregations were hesitant to make the necessary compromises and accommodations.

It has been said that if the three Wise Men who saw the baby Jesus were women than wouldn't have brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh but a casserole, diapers, and formula!

Years ago, as Sue and I were about to enter seminary, one of the senior ministers of Peoria took me aside and said that women shouldn't be ministers. His reasoning went like this; if women became ministers, men wouldn't have anything to do in church. After all, he said, men like to "play" church, but women "are" church! Nowadays I hope that men do more than "play" church I hope that they join women and "are" church.

With negotiations at a standstill Bertha Heidrich Miles of Second Presbyterian Church invited Mrs. Irma Gamble of First Congregational Church and two other women to her home for tea. Over "tea" the log jam broke and before long the two congregations moved forward toward a federation agreement.

It was a perilous journey as motives and agendas were questioned. Trust was low, but finally, the big day--the day for a vote--arrived.

The meeting took place in the sanctuary of Second Presbyterian Church. As with all church meetings it was opened with prayer and followed by extended--sometimes passionate--debate. Finally, it was time to put debate aside, enter into prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and vote.

When the finally vote was tallied the results were as follows:

First Congregational cast 97 votes in favor of a federation,
36 votes in opposition,
and one abstention.

On the Presbyterian side of the aisle the vote was:

43 votes in favor of federation,
32 votes opposed,
and 11 abstentions.

By the narrowest of margins the federation was approved.

That evening Daniel Shaw Anderson, the surprised Clerk of Session of Second Presbyterian Church, wrote to his friend the Rev. Adolph Booth of First Presbyterian Church in Champaign:

“To my utter amazement the congregation voted to enter into a federation agreement. I figured before we counted the ballots that our cause was lost. ...I am very happy with the results but I feel that we still have ... to smooth out the rough spots.”

Rough spots. Life is about navigating the rough spots, isn't it. We all experience them. Over the years First Federated Church has experienced many rough spots. It is, I believe, comforting to know that centuries ago, Jesus prayed for his disciples--then and now--for he knew that they would face many, many rough spots. Within a short time his disciples would face the rough spots of betrayal, denial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

But the story did not end with the resurrection.

It continued and continues as those who take Jesus seriously spread the good news of God's love to the farthest corners of the world.

He prayed, “I ask not only on behalf of these, he prayed, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” Or, in the words of that once contemporary hymn, “one in the Spirit and one in Lord”. (They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love)

Howard Rice and Calvin Chinn in writing on church unity noted that “unity” does not mean “uniformity”. It means that we respect each other and trust that each individual is seeking to be faithful to Jesus Christ no matter how different their point of view may be. It respects our diversity and our gifts. (Rice and Chinn *The Ordination Questions: A Study for Church Officers*, Geneva Press, c. 1984, p.55)

People of faith can look at the exact same facts and come to diametrically opposite conclusions based upon the filters of their own experience. This does not mean that we are malevolent, but that we have different experiences and gifts. As the apostle Paul wrote to a church facing a rough spot, the Corinthians,

there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;

and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;

and there are varieties of activities,

but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ...

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body,

so it is with Christ.

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—

Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—

and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. . . .

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (I Corinthians 12, selected verses)

In preparation for this sermon I came into the sanctuary and reflected upon our life together. Think of the mustard seeds that First Federated Church has sown over the past 82 years, not only in Peoria but around God's world. Look at the flags in the back of the sanctuary, each one representing a country where we have been involved in mission - literally changing lives as we bring the love of God to people with no strings attached. Remember the Reading Buddy program at Blaine Sumpter elementary school, the honor roll breakfasts at Trewyn Middle School, and the Study Buddy program at Thomas Jefferson. Think of our ministry partners that call our Life Together Center home; Look, It's My Book, a program that give a book to every child in the elementary schools of Peoria five times a year. As a tutor in Study Buddies at Thomas Jefferson I know that outside of the books that I give my students at Christmas and the end of the year, the book distributed by Look, It's My Book is the only book that these children call their own. It is too often the only books in the child's home.

Look at the baptismal font and think of all of the baptisms that we have celebrated. Look at the pulpit and think of all of the sermons that you have heard, sermons that comforted and challenged, that made you laugh, and cry, and even think. Sermons by Odiorne and Stubbs, Fairchild and Gillogly, to name only a few.

Together as church family we have cried at weddings and funerals. Go to the third floor of this building and see the wall of senior high names whose lives were touched and changed through this congregation's ministry. Two of the names belong to the who no longer walk among us but have joined the eternal Church Triumphant. Through these acts of worship, dedication, and devotion this ground has been hallowed.

And today we celebrate the sacrament of communion. The poet Carl Sandburg once noted that the birth of a child indicates that God is not done with us yet. The communion table reminds us that God is not finished with First Federated Church yet. There is still work to do, for the glory of God. Amen.