

June 9, 2019 The Peter Paper Acts 11:1-18

I know very little about the totality of the business of the General Assembly that has been meeting in Waterloo. I did know going in that the major question before the Assembly would be the one concerning the potential for ordination of members of the LGBTQI coalition. Because it appeared that a decision on this matter would split The Presbyterian Church In Canada, last year's Assembly requested that the wisdom of Past Moderators be sought to propose a way forward that could prevent division, and potential destruction of The Presbyterian Church In Canada. The Past Moderators did meet and proposed 4 ways forward. I am not going to deal with their proposals. The Assembly is still in Session but it has made the decision to ordain candidates from the LGBTQI coalition and to recognize and make provision for the performance of marriages of same sex couples.

What I am sharing with you this morning is my opinion on where we are, and the effect these decisions could have upon us, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church Stirling in the Presbytery of Kingston. I have in the past opposed the making of the decision that has been made. I want you to know that I am not planning on going anywhere at this point in time. I am allowed because of my age a liberty of conscience that makes it possible for me to remain, as I understand the current decisions. Please be patient. I doubt that we will know with

certainty much about where the church is, before early or mid Fall.

I have not preached on this matter in morning worship at any time. I felt that doing so would simply inflame a situation where divisions are still possible. My ordination vows as those of the elders who serve this church include a commitment not to pursue a divisive course of action. I have not done so, and I will not do so. And I can answer that question for no one else. What I do understand is that there has been a concerted effort to preserve the unity of our denominational family. I also know that numbers of ministers have sought to place their congregations squarely on one side or the other of the divisive question. I was invited to join an organization called PSALT in order that plans might be made as to how those who could not live with the decision that has been made, might leave The Presbyterian Church In Canada, with property, church buildings and manses, at very least. I refused to be a party to the activities of PSALT as I believed then, and I believe now, that to have laid plans for division, when the question had not even been put, was to engage in divisive action.

I suspect, I do not know, but I suspect that the pursuit of unity is extremely fragile. I know of nothing in print whereby the pursuit of unity is binding on those who wished not to have the decision made that has been made. In other words it is simply too soon to estimate or gage the

consequences of this year's General Assembly decision. That decision must now be sent down to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act. If a majority of the Presbyteries approve the current decision...they/we in Kingston will have only 2 choices: approve or reject. If they/we approve it will become the law of the church. If they/we reject, we will still face the question of an uncertain future.

I say again for clarity's sake, I am not going anywhere if God gives me breath. I beg you to be patient as things unfold and we sort through facts. I will do my best to keep you apprised of anything further that you should know. And I do want to share some things with you that are both Biblical, Scriptural and I pray...helpful.

There is a saying that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks. We are not dogs. And faith in God, faith in Jesus, faith in the work of the Holy Spirit is not and never has been a trick. Faith is real. Faith in Jesus changes lives. The Holy Spirit of God still does marvelous things in a world that finds it increasingly hard to have faith in an all powerful, all loving, benevolent and gracious God. We can learn new ways. We can and we do learn to do things differently. As I said at the beginning of this message, I very publicly opposed the making of the decision that has been made by the General Assembly. I opposed the paper circulated which dismissed what the Bible says about homosexuality. Please be patient with me. I have changed my mind. I have changed my position. I still say, we

were not given good Biblical tools to deal with the question, and there are good Biblical tools. The Biblical Word has not failed the church. The church (including me) failed the Biblical Word. The Lord did not fail the church. The church failed to see, to heed and to hear what the Gospel continually tells us.

In Peter's day, shortly after the resurrection there was controversy in the young and growing faith movement we call the church. All of the apostles and the majority of the believers were Jewish in background. This was the central issue in the controversy. The Messiah of God was for Israel, for the Jews. The Jews had the measure in the Old Testament to recognize HIM. So here was the question. Did one need to become a Jew in order to be baptized, to receive forgiveness on profession of faith, and the HOLY SPIRIT? That question threatened to divide the early church, not once but twice!!

As I read to you in Acts 11:1-18 no less a figure than Peter was at the eye of the storm. Word had reached the church in Jerusalem, made up of people who have been Jews all their lives, that Peter has been going into Gentile homes and eating with them. Scandal. He ate non Kosher food. With Gentiles! Non Jews. It says they "criticized Peter." They were angry. How angry? A couple of Sundays ago we had a picture on the service folder of men throwing stones. Potentially that angry. Angry enough to kill Peter. He returned to Jerusalem and Peter quickly discovered the seat was hot...very hot.

The whole point is simply this: the homes into which Peter went, and the people whom he ate with...not one of them was circumcised. For the males of the Jewish population circumcision is the physical mark of the inner faith that makes one a Jew, a follower of the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob. You do have to give them credit for one thing. They let Peter speak. Luke tells us in Acts 11 that Peter explained precisely what happened. The King James Version says it this way: "Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning and expounded it by order unto them." He told them the whole story. From beginning to end. As it unfolded. The details in order.

God gave Peter a vision. A sheet containing all the animals of every kind including those that were forbidden as food to the Jews because they were unclean. Peter was invited to kill and dine. He said, I do not think so, I have never eaten from the forbidden list. And the voice of God said, "What God has cleansed, do not call unclean." Peter explained that he had been invited by some Gentiles that had seen an angel that directed them to find Peter and hear the message of salvation. Peter did not go alone. He took 6 men with him who corroborated his telling of the story. These Gentiles listened. Peter told them about Jesus, and they received the Holy Spirit, literally a repeat of Pentecost. And when the whole story was told Peter's critics stopped being critical and glorified God that (this is the King James Version) they glorified God saying, Then

hath God also to the Gentiles given repentance unto life. (Acts 11:18)

In short I believe that is what we are faced with. There are people who are very different from me, to whom God has both revealed HIS saving purpose in Jesus, and has called them to serve HIM in the field of ministry. And that does not mean we throw away half of what we call the Bible. It does mean that the call to ministry is only validated by a testimony of saving faith, and a morally discreet lifestyle. I am willing to answer questions if you wish to ask them of me. I am not about to produce a preaching series justifying my position because that would be as divisive as it would have been to preach my former position from the pulpit.

Once again....we do not know enough to be in any way certain about the future of the current, Presbyterian Church In Canada. We do not know what the final position of The Presbyterian Church In Canada will be on the question of Gays in the ministry, or as elders. For that we are going to have to wait at least 15 months, when the dust has settled on next year's General Assembly. Please pray for The Presbyterian Church In Canada. Please pray for patience on the part of our church families, and for love and understanding on the part of those who would rather fight than change.

Remember these things: We are who we are. That has not changed. We are where we are. That has not changed. Jesus saves, the grace of God is real, and the Holy Spirit is

present. That has not changed. The Scriptures have not changed. Our journey is our journey. It is clear God the Lord is leading us. Celebrate that truth. I pray for you. Continue to pray for me. And let us take these moments to pray together. Our prayer is offered to God and HIS angels. The words are from hymn 607 entitled "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones"

Ye watchers and ye holy ones, bright seraphs, cherubim and thrones, Raise the glad strain hallelujah! Cry out dominions, prince-doms, powers, Virtues, archangels, angel choirs...Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah. And if you are wondering what all this really means here is my translation. We may not understand what is happening...God is still God, His saving grace is as mercy filled as ever, our task is to hold on and witness to the truth in the hours we are given, to the glory of the name of Jesus Christ. Amen