

God's "Yes" and the Gospel of Gretzky  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
February 15, 2009

Scripture:

Isaiah 43:18-25

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

For as long as the Word of God has been read, studied and preached, God's people have sought to follow God's will. They have done so not alone but in communities - from the families of the patriarchs to the nation of Israel to the first century churches inspired by the Holy Spirit to today's congregations of every type and stripe.

It's been said by many scholars and writers that two qualities characterize these communities of believers - memory and vision. Memory of God's abiding covenant, communicated most clearly in Jesus Christ, and vision focused by the knowledge that God is always doing a new thing.

Bruce Birch of Wesley Theological Seminary put it this way:

Both memory and vision are necessary to an adequate theology of the church for every congregation. Rootedness in our past tradition and trust in God's future is what frees us from the tyranny of the present. It is instructive that in biblical Hebrew verbs do not have past, present and future. They have only completed actions and incomplete actions .... Thus, a congregation seeking to be faithful cannot wallow in its present. It must draw on its memory and move into the future.<sup>1</sup>

It's not easy, balancing these backward-looking and forward-looking perspectives. We dare not take the wheel of the church of Jesus Christ, fix our eyes on the rear view mirror, put the car in drive and floor it. Nor should we barrel down the road unmindful of all that God has communicated to us through the ages.

For the most part, we don't, thanks be to God.

But sometimes our attempts to balance these perspectives cause disagreement and tension in the church. There are plenty of examples but we need look no further than the current debate in our denomination.

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<sup>1</sup> Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform, p. 25 and 26

As you may know, we are voting on whether to remove language in our church constitution that bars gays and lesbians, bi-sexuals and transgendered people from serving the church as ordained elders or ordained ministers of word and sacrament.

Both sides find support for their position in scripture. So, the debate has hinged largely on how much the church should be informed by its historical, traditional views and confessions as opposed to bringing a more progressive, forward-looking view to our understanding of humanity and of the gospel.

As you probably know, the Charlotte Presbytery voted yesterday in favor of ordaining gays and lesbians. It was the latest reversal from several Presbyteries from the last similar vote in 2001 and progressive Presbyterians are a bit surprised and more than a bit pleased.

It's too early to know how this may change the conversation among local Presbyterians, and we won't know the final, national outcome of whether the constitution is changed for several months.

What we do know is that when it's over, one way or another, some part of our denomination will feel separated from their fellow believers and, perhaps, even separated from God's love. Either way, some part of the body of Christ will know at least a little of what it is to be exiled.

Last week, I exchanged emails with a friend of mine who is gay about all of this. He told me in no uncertain terms that denominational disagreements like this are the reason he left the Episcopal Church years ago.

"A key reason I have walked away from a church," he wrote to me, "is the infighting, condescension and outright bigotry that attends the issue of gays in the church. To me, the entire discussion is a red herring from Christ's word and serves as a clarion example of how man can screw up a good thing: in this case, the inclusive, loving and forgiving world Christ sought to establish. My feeling is, 'You guys can fight about this for the rest of time and neither side will ever know who is right or wrong (until, I guess, you know who comes back)...I'm going to go have a relationship with God/Jesus and get on with my life.'

I don't share his grim outlook for the church. As what is ultimately the work of God, I pray we never give up on the church; God has never given up on us. God is, however, working through us broken human beings so I take my friend's point about our ability to get in God's way.

And while I have never felt his pain, his emotions are understandable. The church surely mourns the loss of him and all those who share his feelings. But feelings of exile, of separation, aren't limited to his side of the debate. Thousands of more conservative

Presbyterians have already left the denomination over this issue and that trend is likely to continue.

The feeling of being exiled is, of course, not limited to church disagreements. We may feel exiled from our family. If you've have lost a job, you may feel exiled from the community you had at work. With all the world's uncertainties swirling around us, we may feel exiled from any sense of confidence or understanding of what is happening ... and what could still happen, with the economy, with our finances, with our nation.

This week we at Caldwell have been touched again, too soon, by the sudden and premature loss of a good man among us. Some of us may feel even a little – or more than a little – separated from the God we sometimes struggle to understand.

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The people of Israel had been in exile for some time, separated from the life they knew back home in Judah, when the prophet we know as Isaiah spoke to them.

Then, as now, the people of God were trying to make sense of this balance, this tension, of looking to the past while also looking ahead. "Where is our God," they asked as they passed the years in Babylon, forbidden to return to their homeland of Judah. "If we are to die here, separated from our homeland and separated from our God" they asked," what happened to God's covenant with us as God's chosen people?"

Isaiah responded with words of encouragement.

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Here at Caldwell, these words bring a smile to our faces. They formed the joyful mantra of the resurrection of this church only two years ago, a clear statement that it was God who kept the doors of this church open.

God may be up to a new thing in the Presbyterian church. We don't know yet. At the very least, it seems a new thing seems to be stirring in our Presbytery.

What we learn from these verses in Isaiah is that, whatever our exile may be, whatever stage of exile we may be in, we come to know ourselves and our God even more deeply through it.

First, we see in new ways that we worship a God of hope and compassion, a God who "will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

Second, we learn all the more deeply that we must never forget the source of our blessings. The God who redeemed Israel time and again, including bringing Israel out of exile, will never, ever leave us.

Third, that God knows our sins and failures, as individuals and as a church, and forgives us still. “I, I am the one who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins,” God says through the prophet.

The one that the prophet points to is, of course, the ultimate proof of this amazing grace, Jesus Christ, the same Christ who inspired Paul to write so passionately to the church at Corinth.

Paul’s message echoes Isaiah’s message to Israel. But Paul says it far more succinctly. In fact, perhaps nowhere else in scripture is the message of God stated in cleaner, simpler terms.

Is God’s message ‘yes,’ Paul asks, or is it ‘no?’

The answer, Paul says, is unequivocal. In Jesus Christ, who took on our sins to show God’s love and hope for us, the answer is “always ‘yes.’”

“For in him,” Paul writes, “every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.”

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Surely, friends, we could hear no better word than that.

In these days when our larger church family is deciding to say “yes” or “no” to a set of our brothers and sisters who may show the same commitment to Christ but know human love differently than the rest of us ...

in these days when the margin between recession and depression seems unimaginably thin ...

in these days when life sometimes seems more ambiguous and uncertain than ever ...

in these days when a friend is gone in what seems like a blink of an eye ...

in these days, we need to know that God doesn’t say “yes” one day and “no” the next. God’s word doesn’t waver. God’s promise stands firm and unambiguous.

In Jesus Christ, God’s love is purely and absolutely “yes.”

I don’t know whether Wayne Gretzky, considered the greatest hockey player of all time, is a Christian. I don’t know if he knows that in biblical Hebrew there are no past, present or future tenses, only completed and incomplete actions. But he spoke a good word when he was asked about the key to his success on the ice.

“I skate to where the puck is going to be,” he said, “not where it has been.”

Because we have God's final answer, God's "Yes" in Jesus Christ, we might take the same approach to being the church. Never forgetting what God has done for us, but facing forward, moving faithfully toward the open space that God has already designated for us.

There, beyond the tyranny of the present, or even the unexpected joy of the day, we will meet God anew, together, as the church.

"For this reason," Paul said, "it is through Christ that we say the "Amen," to the glory of God."

Amen.