To Be a New Church, Part II: New Wine
June 13, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-10
Matthew 9:9-17

One of the great mysteries of baseball has nothing to do with what happens on the field. It doesn't concern balls and strikes, corked bats, spitballs or steroids. No, it has to do with what comes out of the mouth of one of the game's most famous – even infamous – players: Yogi Berra, who played catcher for the New York Yankees and later managed the ball club. Berra was an unlikely looking athlete, but he is far better known for his non-sensical statements to the press.

When asked once about his troubles with the bat, he said:

"Slump, I ain't in no slump. I just ain't hittin.' "

One night, when he was out to dinner with his teammates, he is said to have remarked:

"You better cut the pizza into four pieces, 'cause I ain't hungry enough to eat six."

Other pearls of wisdom from his mouth, if not his brain, are:

"Baseball is 90% physical and the other half is mental."

"It's like déjà vue all over again."

And, "I didn't really say everything I said."

The mystery – one that will probably go with Berra to his grave – is whether he really means to say these kinds of things, or whether anyone is capable of being so goofy and clever at the same time.

One of Yogi's Berra-isms has been going through my head since last Sunday's sermon.

"When you get to a fork in the road, take it."

Is that the dilemma for our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA? Have we – or will we – reach a point where we have to make a decision, a choice to go in one direction and forfeit the possibilities of the other path?

Could there be a third choice, one we don't see yet?

Or worse, when we get to the fork in the road, will we just come to a full stop, out of indecision, a lack of vision or a lack of courage?

Let me explain.

Last week, we explored some of the questions facing the mostly white, mostly segregated Protestant church as America moves closer to its certain future of being a minority-majority nation. A minority-majority is one in which a group of minorities, together, form the majority over the next largest single group.

In America, that day arrives around 2040 or 2050, a day when Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Latinos and others will, together, make up a larger portion of the population than white folks. It gets closer every day. In fact, last year, for the first time in America, more than half the babies born were other races than white.

Here in Charlotte, whites will be a minority within the next five to ten years, according to some projections. The scope of this change in our city and across all aspects of society can hardly be over-estimated.

Of course, this concerns the church, Presbyterians more than most. Our denomination is 91% white. At the current rate of change, it will be 2060 before we are even 20% non-white, well after the rest of the country has embraced the realities and the opportunities of this momentous shift. Our denomination has already shrunk by half in the last 50 years, so taking no action to address this even more fast-changing future is not an option.

Last week, I recapped two predominant perspectives on what must happen to prepare our denomination for its future. Denominational leaders who are not white hold one view most strongly. It says that we cannot successfully become a multi-racial and multi-cultural church without confronting racism and its effects. This view says a deep confession and apology for white dominance in social and ecclesiastical structures is critical.

But the other perspective stands in tension with this call for institutional and individual confession. This second perspective focuses on the emerging generation, those in their twenties and thirties. These folks, by most accounts, are far more interested in forward motion. This generation doesn't downplay the sin of racism. But they are said to focus more on what is right – and doing it – rather than determining who is right or who is wrong or who is to blame. So, as I said, you can see the fork in the road.

At least one candidate for the moderator of our denomination, our top elected position, believes strongly in that first view - that we must engage in deep confession and apology for the racism that is latent in all of us. In particular, the church must acknowledge that its largely white structure and heritage has exacted a cost on its non-white members.

It's not just an institutional thing, they say. Directly or indirectly, personally or through the actions of our families and ancestors, many of us individually have gained at the cost of others whose skin isn't white and whose families have been affected by white power.

The sin of racism is a deep stain on our nation, a sin committed by people of every race and color. That much is undeniable.

I told you last week that I made my personal confession and apology at the denominational conference of multicultural churches I recently attended. I know my family's history. I am proud of my family members and ancestors who have fought for the weak and the oppressed. But, at the same time, I know some of my ancestors owned African-American slaves and exacted racist, structural power, however gently, over Native Americans.

I am, as I said last week, required and enabled by my faith to confess that I am, even in my blood, a part of that. I confess also that, despite my best intentions, I am at times personally guilty of racism in my own actions. I am as stained as anyone.

Rev. Dr. David Anderson pastors a multicultural church in Maryland. A few years ago, he suggested we take the word – racism – and put a "G" in front of it. The "G" stands for God, he said. What you get is "Gracism."

Gracism, as he defines it, is the "positive extension of favor" on other people "based on color, class or culture."[1] It asks of those with power and influence to extend favor to

[1] Gracism, by David Anderson, p. 21

those who do not have it. It asks of those of one race or ethnicity to invite people of other races and ethnicities into relationship.

"A gracist," Anderson writes, "reaches across ethnic lines and racial borders to lend assistance and 'extra grace' to those who are different, on the fringe or marginalized." [2] Gracism also, it stands to reason, calls for the grace of forgiveness from those who have been harmed.

He reminds us that race summons dangerous emotions – anger, bitterness, prejudice and pride. But when we put God in front, we are called to respond to all of our brothers and sisters with forgiveness, patience and help with what we have. Isn't that the message of the Gospel? Isn't that why our Lord came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ? Not because God's people complained about the debts they owed others and didn't want to pay. Not because some of God's people made demands of others. And certainly not because any of us merited God's favor or had somehow earned God's help.

As we read in Ephesians:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, of God's great love for us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved …."[3]

Friends, let us pray that, by grace, we can move from racism to gracism, that we can confess that we are all racists and that, by God, we can become gracists. Perhaps then we can move forward as people called Presbyterian.

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What about what lies down the other path we find when we meet the fork in the road of our denomination's future, if we can stay with that metaphor a moment? If one path says that deep confession of racism is non-negotiable for us to embrace our multicultural future, what about the other path? That second path calls us to move forward focused on the question of why the church is losing a generation of young people?

What's going on with that generation? And what does the church need to do to invite them into the body of Christ, the church.

[2] Ibid, p. 29
[3] Ephesians 2:4&5

A first step is to understand the depth of hostility and resentment toward Christianity held by many younger Americans. Recently a conservative, evangelical-leaning research organization conducted a multi-year study of what young people think of the church at large. To its credit, it shared the results, warts and all, in a book called UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks about Christianity and Why It Matters.

The research showed that, a decade ago, even young people who called themselves "outsiders" from the church held generally positive views of Christianity's role in society. But in the last decade, these "outsiders" have turned hard-core negative in their impressions of Christianity.[4] The driving reason for this reversal: The perception that Christians are known far more for what they oppose than what they are for. The research shows that those outside the church believe Christians are anti-homosexual, judgmental and hypocritical.[5]

Still, there are many opportunities to relate to the younger generation. As with all shifts from one generation to the next, understanding is imperative. At the PCUSA multicultural church conference I attended, an Episcopal priest who has spent more than 20 years studying those now in the twenties and thirties offered these insights, which I pass on with the caution that should comes with all generalities:

Younger Americans yearn for deep experience – and they experience through various ways, through their senses and multiple avenues of learning and taking in information. They don't always favor one-way, hierarchical communication (like long sermons). Think about the explosion in new media, this expert says. Through U-tube, Twitter, Facebook and more, this generation expresses itself by creating its own new media as fast as it consumes it.

They value relationships and want them first – before exploring beliefs.

And our younger generations live comfortably with tension and paradox. For example, the experts say they want to be spiritual but not necessarily religious. They want to retain their individual identity – but be a part of a larger community. The first instinct of many young Americans is to distrust authority and centralized power. Yet, they are not lazy and apathetic about the world's challenges and opportunities. They want to make a difference. And they want the opportunity to do so now, rather than waiting in line for their turn.

[4] UnChristian, p. 24

[5] Ibid, p. 26

They seek authenticity in all aspects of life and have a highly sensitive radar for falseness and pretention. As people who grew up with America's fast-approaching multiculturalism and diversity, they see difference not as a threat but as an opportunity.

And, as all of this should make perfectly clear, our younger generations are committed to pluralism – multiple ways of thinking, of being, of being together and of seeing the world.

If the opportunities to engage with people of such rich, vigorous and life-giving perspectives don't scare the pants off the church, let us pray that it energizes us. Imagine, imagine how the church might adapt to see life as younger Americans do – and, at the same time, be reenergized in how it translates the timeless truths of the gospel and of the Reformed tradition that is the DNA of Presbyterianism.

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If there is a gospel that speaks to – and even for – the emerging generations, it might very well be the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew emphasizes both faith and its application, ethics. It holds up authentic, genuine ways of not just believing in God's will but also following it. In Matthew, Christ pays particular attention to those outside the church and those on the fringe of accepted society – sinners, tax collectors and even bankers, who violate the Torah's admonition against charging interest. In Matthew, Jesus offers divine forgiveness prior to repentance and confession. He acts to share God's love and grace lavishly rather than withholding it and requiring hardship, such as fasting.

In today's New Testament reading, we heard an account of how Christ's first followers and the religious authorities of his day confronted the reality of this unexpected kind of Messiah.

God's coming into the world is a transformational gift of new life, like new wine that has been fermented and transformed from fresh grapes into something altogether different.

Using that metaphor, Christ explains the practical reality that if new wine is put into old wineskins for fermentation, it will expand as it ferments. The old wineskins, which are more dried out and have lost their elasticity, will not be able to stretch as the volume of wine expands. The old wineskins will burst and be ruined and the new wine will be lost. But if new wine is put into new wineskins that can stretch and expand as the wine ferments, nothing is lost, including the old wineskins.

As the church in America moves toward its future – a time defined in large part by multiculturalism, pluralism and a deep hunger for authentic, less divisive religiosity – Matthew has a word from God. More than the other gospels, Matthew emphasizes the continuing presence of Christ with the church – to this day and for all the days ahead. Just as the grape juice continues to ferment into new wine, the Body of Christ, the church, is called to live not by and for itself but by continually seeking the fresh guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So, by the Spirit, let us pray that God directs us in how to create new wineskins and that God guides us to provide a witness – in worship, in fellowship, in spiritual growth and in service – that is elastic enough to change and expand so that the new wine of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ is preserved, shared and enjoyed by generations to come.

Amen