

Coming Home to a Liquid Church  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Centennial Homecoming Weekend  
Oct. 14, 2012  
Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

“You can’t go home again.”

So said the novelist Thomas Wolfe. But this weekend we are grateful for those returning Caldwell “alumni” who disagree. Back in the spring, we welcomed a large number of former members of Caldwell as part of our year-long centennial celebration. They told us stories and shared their love and gratitude for having grown up here. We’re delighted that some have returned again for this, our Centennial Homecoming weekend. To each of you, welcome!

For just about all of the rest of us, we celebrate a different kind of homecoming today. At one point or another, many who are part of the new Caldwell thought they may never feel as if they could call any church “home” again. This place has a knack for welcoming those who’ve been judged or scorned, rejected, misunderstood, unappreciated or simply overlooked elsewhere. We shout our prayers of gratitude that God has given us all this place where, as we sometimes say before we pass the peace, we all stand on the level ground at the foot of the cross.

Thomas Wolfe’s famous line “you can’t go home again” recognized that “home” is often not what we remember. Anyone who’s been to a school reunion knows how that feels. Wolfe knew that we often look back on past times and, at least in part, see through rose-colored glasses. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that, as long as we realize it.

In many cases, we can’t go home again for other reasons. The world changes and places change with it. That, too, is as it should be. Nothing in this world can go unchanged ... without quickly risking irrelevance. As much as we may want to fight change, we will lose in the end. It’s all a matter, then, of knowing where we can bend and advance, where we can let go and where we need to hold on, what to keep and what to release.

That’s profoundly true with the Gospel. The Bible is a manual for change. God calls the people of Israel, only to change everything they knew – their homeland, their religion, their laws, their place in the world. Their world changes again in exile and again back home. Then Jesus comes and really changes everything ... for all of us. The Gospel never stops moving forward and the Spirit blows where it will.

Earlier this year, many of us attended the multicultural church conference to help us think about a church that better mirrors our multicultural world. We heard an amazing

sermon about “the liquid church.” Zach Thomas – who has grown up at Caldwell and later returned reflected on that sermon. He wrote: “Water is inviting, makes things grow, heals, spreads out to all shores, makes rough places plain, rolls down like justice and plants rainbows of hope.” Zach even wrote a song along those lines that we will have to have him sing sometime.

Others have used the same metaphor. A decade ago a British theologian named Pete Ward wrote a book titled Liquid Church. Our post-modern culture, he said, is liquid, fluid, moving ... and this was even before things like social media redefined so much of how we relate to one another. Ward said the church can’t be solid, frozen, stuck in time, if it is to reach a liquid culture with the transforming message of the Gospel.

So, on this homecoming, we might ask ourselves: What does all that mean for us? How do we distinguish what needs to change from what doesn’t? What about the Gospel is non-negotiable? What is God calling us to do now so that Caldwell church has a 125<sup>th</sup> ... or a 150<sup>th</sup> ... or even a 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary? And, on an individual level, because we are in Discipleship season, where is God calling you ... and you ... and you ... to give your spiritual gifts of time and talent in 2013 and beyond?

\* \* \*

In the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus concludes a long discourse. He offers a vision of the kingdom of God. He includes a concept that we Presbyterians don’t often confront. I’m talking about judgment. We are people who are far more comfortable dealing with grace and, whenever we can, leaving the judgment business to God. But there in Matthew 25 Jesus doesn’t give us much wiggle room. In fact, this is the only portrayal in the entire New Testament that provides detail about the last judgment.

When the Son of Man comes again, Jesus tells his followers, all the nations will be gathered and all people separated into two groups – those who cared for the least of the world and those who didn’t. In this vision, Jesus says, one group receives eternal life and the other eternal punishment. As I said, not much wiggle room there.

Theologian Justo Gonzalez says this about this passage – and I will quote him in length. He writes:

This means that service to the neighbor in need is not an option in Christian life. It is not something else we could do. It is not that those Christians who wish to be more devoted should visit the sick and feed the hungry. According to this passage, those who refuse the hungry are refusing food to Jesus. That is, it is impossible to be a faithful Christian without serving those whom Jesus calls “the least of these who are members of my family.”

In the church one often hears debates about whether religious life or social service is most important. This passage tells us that the discussion itself is wrong. They are not two different matters; they are a single reality. The Jesus we

worship in church is the same Jesus whom we serve in the neighbor. To make these into two different options is to deny Jesus and his words.

Neither lack of resources nor lack of time is a sufficient excuse. Even those who have limited resources can always find something that we can share with others. If we have more than that, then our obligation is even greater . . . .

We have been given fair warning: We are to serve Jesus by feeding the hungry and serving the needy.<sup>1</sup>

When we look back on the last century or two – here and across Protestantism – we see clear evidence of how people of faith have applied this standard. Presbyterians traditionally focused on education, healthcare and overseas missions. In Charlotte, they planted Davidson College, Johnson C. Smith University, Queens University, Winthrop University in Rock Hill. Up the street, our denominational kinfolk established Presbyterian Hospital.

Caldwell itself sent evangelists into the community and schools, funded foreign missionaries and, one summer, built a mobile ark and drove a big team to do mission work in Mexico.

But as we have learned in our review of this church's life, even the most well-intended efforts to serve "the least" and "the needy" in Charlotte were limited by the blindness of the times. When this church opened its doors, deed restrictions barred people of color from buying any of the neighborhood home lots. Decades later in the early days of racial integration, the leaders of this congregation wrestled with whether to seat African-Americans who might seek to attend worship. At first they refused, but, shortly after, they reversed their stance and instituted a policy of welcoming those they then called "negroes."

Like all churches in the last century, Caldwell warmed as the world changed. Even then, in their own way, this was a liquid church. The Gospel advanced, sometimes with the help of human agency, sometimes despite it. Water goes where it will. The Holy Spirit blows where it will.

We also cannot let this homecoming pass without noting how the Holy Spirit did something in those years that took decades to play out. A typical church homecoming consists of generations of different families, from children joining their parents' church, followed by grandchildren and great grandchildren and so on.

But the Caldwell family tree grew in a different way, not so much through blood lines but through the mystery of the Spirit. The old Caldwell started a number of churches, many through the initiative and generosity of William Henry Belk. As has been told before, one was Seigle Avenue Presbyterian.

---

<sup>1</sup> Three Months With Matthew, p. 136

It was its own kind of liquid church. It began as a white church planted in part to minister to a new public housing development a couple of miles from here. When the public housing population there shifted from white to black, other congregations might have closed or moved. That happened in neighborhoods across Charlotte and across the South. But Seigle stayed open, remaining committed to the Piedmont Courts neighborhood. As the great Methodist John Wesley said of his own conversion, hearts there were “strangely warmed.” Through the years, people of different races and classes found a way to worship together, to be in relationship together. Later, some of them came here.

So today, rather than welcoming back or remembering our familial blood ancestors, we celebrate a different kind of generational connection, how years ago Caldwell planted a church, and how, years later, some of its members come back “home” to help revive Caldwell when it was most in need. The Spirit blows where it will. The life-giving waters of the liquid church flow where they will.

\* \* \*

The funny thing about the church is that church people are unusually inept at trying to be liquid. We’re much better at being solid, being frozen, than forecasting where the Spirit will blow next.

You have heard me stand here and cite all sorts of statistics and studies showing that religion in America seems to be at a tipping point. Our predecessors here, some of whom heard Rev. Billy Graham preach from this pulpit, might not recognize the religious landscape in America today. Mainline Protestants make up less than half of all U.S. Christians today. Of 35,000 Protestants recently surveyed, Presbyterians accounted for only 1.1%.<sup>2</sup>

You’ve also heard me use language about how, as of today, we at Caldwell are embarking on the second century in the life of this church. That’s good rhetoric. But given the data it sounds pretty arrogant. Some might ask: Who’s to say you will make it that long? But the Gospel has always advanced. The Spirit blows where it will and the waters of the liquid church flow where they will.

I know you believe that, and you are not lacking for ideas about where that Spirit and those waters may take us. Last week, we began collecting your prayers for Caldwell. Just one Sunday’s worth of those prayer cards give voice to how we should love our neighbors as ourselves and serve Jesus by caring for the “needy,” whether they are in spiritual need, material need or some other kind of need.

So, while I promised to use your ideas in the prayer for the people, I am using pastoral prerogative to borrow a few here. Here are just some of your prayers:

---

<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, study released Oct. 9, 2012

- That Caldwell would continually be an instrument of Agape in the name of Jesus Christ.
- That money might be found to keep Caldwell House open.
- That we can grow a place where our youth can become the disciples of our tomorrows.
- That we would be made “worthy stewards as we garden in the community, reaping God’s harvest and sharing with our neighbors in need.”
- That we be blessed with inspired leadership particularly in a new music director and a new associate in ministry.
- That we continue to honor our deceased senior saints.
- That we can reach our Latino neighbors and others on the margins
- As several of you said, that we can strengthen the bonds between us through fellowship, study and deeper relationship building within the congregation.
- And, as one of you wrote, that we can pace ourselves. (Everything in moderation is always a good prayer.)

In the last few days, you should have received your Discipleship packet. It’s full of information about the many ministries all of you make happen. On behalf of Doreen Byrd and the entire Discipleship Committee, I ask that you take time in the next two weeks or so to give this serious and prayerful thought. Then, on Oct. 28, come and return your commitments of time, talent and money for 2013.

The spirit blows where it will. The life-giving waters of the liquid church flow where they will. Last week, I borrowed an old hand-crank blender from the church kitchen. I used it to stir the waters of the baptismal font. I’ve left it there for the time being as my own reminder – and one for any of you – that we should never let the waters of our baptism lie too still.

This is your church home. It is what you make it. As we open a new century, will it be a place that continues to meet Christ’s non-negotiable call to serve the least among us? Will it be a place of holy provocation? Will it be a place of abundant joy and overflowing generosity? Will it be a place you stir with your own spiritual gifts, your own time and your own talent?

The Gospel will advance, as it always has. The spirit blows where it will and the waters of the liquid church flow where they will. How will you be a part of all of that in 2013?

After last week’s sermon, one member suggested that on Oct. 28, Celebration Sunday, when we come to commit our pledges for 2013, we ought to have a “BYOB party.” Bring your own blender.

I’ve got mine. Have you got yours?

See you then.

Amen.