

Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Guest Preacher
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Colossians 3:1-11

Alive and Transforming

Someone said “We [as a church] are not dead. We are alive!” Led by God, “we are transforming the world, one person at a time.”

Today, I have the dubious honor of giving a little lesson on the General Assembly (or “GA”) of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

For those new to the PC(USA) denomination or those who simply don’t know what the GA is or does, I’ll give you a Cliff Notes version:

The GA provides oversight of the denomination and keeps us true to the Gospel!

As most of you know – especially those saintly volunteers who offered to provide office coverage while I was away – I attended the 222nd GA held in Portland, OR last month. It probably doesn’t seem like an exciting thing to hear during a Sunday Worship service, but it is my hope that you will walk away with at least something that excites your soul!

The theme of the 222nd GA was “The Hope in our Calling.”

The GA’s own summary of the 222nd Assembly reads, “*Some General Assemblies make their mark. Others make history. [THIS GA] made so much history that it will long be remembered as one of the most significant in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*”¹ Wow! And I got to be a part of that!

I’m going to highlight 3 of the historic actions that took place.

One was the election of Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson as the PC(USA)’s new Stated Clerk. The Stated Clerk is the denomination’s top constitutional officer.

Nelson is a native of Orangeburg, SC and a 3rd generation Presbyterian pastor. He comes to the office with amazing credentials. He is brilliant, well-educated (3 degrees, all in Presbyterian schools, of course!), has served as a pastor –in Greensboro, NC, a leader of a social change agency, and since 2010, has led the PC(USA)’s Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C.

J. Herbert Nelson is the *first non-white* to hold this position in the history of the PC(USA) – and this is monumental – particularly in a denomination that is over 90% white! And he is the “someone” who said the quote that I began with: he has a vision of “a vibrant and powerful future for the PC(USA). We are not dead. We are alive! Led by God, we are transforming the world, one person at a time.”

And that is precisely where our focus needs to be and the attitude all PC(USA) churches need to adopt if we are to live by the Gospel.

¹ https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/assembly-in-brief-ga222-bifold.pdf

In addition to Nelson's election as Stated Clerk, Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston were elected as *co-moderators* – this is another *first*: there has never been anything other than a moderator and vice-moderator. Anderson and Edmiston are the *first all female* moderated team (which happened to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the ordination of women in our church). Anderson, too, is African American, and the *youngest* elected moderator. That's a lot of groundbreaking and is evidence of a transforming church.

It is a new day for PC(USA) leadership – both in composition and focus.

The third thing I wanted to highlight, and probably the one with the most impact, was the adoption of the Belhar Confession into our Book of Confessions.

The Belhar Confession, admonishing all forms of discrimination, is profoundly powerful, especially amid current escalating racial tensions and social injustices that are at a boiling point in our society and seem to be enveloping our lives – at least it is mine, and I happen to know most of yours as well.

Although it took two attempts and more than six years to adopt after being first being proposed at GA, the Belhar being added as a part of the PC(USA)'s *foundational structure*, couldn't possibly be more timely.

Belhar originated during the peak of South Africa's struggle against Apartheid. After the vote to adopt it at GA took place, we witnessed immensely moving speeches from two distinguished clergy, both of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa.

Allan Boesak, pastor, leader of the World Alliance of Churches, renowned anti-apartheid activist, and *drafter* of the Confession of Belhar, acknowledged the progress that has been made against racism and injustice, and how much more is needed. He said, "I know because of God's faithfulness, we shall overcome," at which point one person started singing that song, by the 2nd verse everyone in the hall was standing and holding hands, and by the 3rd verse, had lifted our held hands upward. There were many tears.

With Boesak was Godfrey Betha, vice-moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church.

Betha, his chin quivering with emotion, spoke of how there were people in South Africa (where it was 6:00 in the morning at the time), who did not sleep waiting for this moment and were celebrating with us.

He went on to say, "Your decision affirms [that] you say to your children, you say to all, 'When you come looking for a glimmer of racism, don't come to our church.'"

Metaphorically, this transformation is a time of turning for the church. At every worship service held at GA, we sang the "Canticle of Turning" - "wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn." Yes, we are a means by which there is transformation of the Church.

The threads of reconciliation and justice (with most emphasis on racial justice) weaved through the fabric of the assembly in all its facets. Those three historic actions of the 222nd GA are indicative of our transformation as a denomination and they embody the hope that is in our calling.

The GA stated on its website, this “GA took steps to protect from harm the children and youth in our midst; created an administrative commission to tend to structural issues in the church and a “vision team” to establish and reclaim the church’s identity. And... the assembly accomplished its work in a spirit of collaboration and trust not seen in recent, far more contentious assemblies... At the end of the day, commissioners and advisory delegates seemed determined to heed the parting advice of retiring... Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons: “Just don’t give up on this church—DON’T!!!”²

I am compelled to mention one more thing: the newly elected leaders clearly voiced a theological vision of hope, challenging our denomination as a whole to become more diverse and to engage with a hurting world:

- co-moderator Edmiston called on Presbyterians to... **“look at what breaks God’s heart in your neighborhood,” and then act.** [let me repeat that]

That is being an agent of transformation!

You can find other highlights of the GA in your bulletin insert or online and I hope you will take the time to read about more ways in which the church is alive and transforming.

Caldwell, you have been transforming for a decade – you are a standard to all churches! But do keep in mind, the foundational theology of the PC(USA) is built on change: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* – that is the Latin for “the church reformed and always reforming.” We are never all the way “there yet!”

My role at this GA was that of a “delegate.” Delegates advise “commissioners,” composed of ½ ruling and ½ teaching elders (this title will revert back to “minister of Word and sacraments” as a result of a vote at this GA).

After the initial opening, a little business, including electing a moderator, commissioners and delegates retreat to assigned committees where we discussed overtures. An overture is basically formal request made by a presbytery about a specific matter asking the GA to take action.

When an overture has been discussed and/or edited/amended in committee, the committee votes to propose to the full Assembly whether or not to adopt the overture.

The highlight for me, however, was not the 10 - 12-hour long days! But when I was afforded the honor of leading the closing prayer of the last night of plenary. It was indeed a great experience and I am forever grateful to have had that incredible opportunity.

Getting back to the scripture, the verses we heard from Colossians began with a passage that is reminiscent of baptism, “we are raised with Christ” – perhaps the most transforming act we ever experience. We are cleansed of our sins and strengthened for new life – we are raised with Christ with the promise of grace and of hope. We are to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

² https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/assembly-in-brief-ga222-bifold.pdf

Jesus' promise gives us hope of possibility and hope in our calling, and with this hope we find the infinite magnitude of God's power for those who believe.

Just this past week, you may have heard First Lady Michelle Obama speak at the Democratic National Convention. She told of how in raising her daughters in the spotlight, how important it is to rise above negative influences. She tells them, "When someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don't stoop to their level...no, our motto is, when they go low, we go high!" The Pauline author of Colossians speaks the same advice: "seek the things that are above."

There is so much cruelty and bullying in our country and in our world, not reacting with violence and anger, but taking the higher road is certainly more Christ-like, though realistically, that is a difficult challenge. So is following the Word of the Lord – but that is clearly what it tells us and clearly how we are to live.

God has plans for us and sometimes they demand our very soul. And so scripture tells us it is better to be prepared, by living our lives to the fullest, with love and gracious generosity.

GA co-moderator, Denise Anderson, wrote a guest commentary in the *Presbyterian Outlook* a couple of weeks ago entitled "How White Supremacy Hurts White People" in which she rightly articulates the truth of just how deeply-rooted in white supremacy our country is.

Tracy Howe Wispelwey, a white pastor who supports peacemaking work, responded with her own guest commentary, rightly telling the truth of how complicit we whites have been in benefitting from centuries of injustice – up until this very day. She articulated how, though we have been through theoretical "transformations" such as emancipation, integration, and civil rights, we white people have not taken on, much less, even acknowledged "the engine of racism" in our society.

Both of their columns included a prayer from their hearts and the perspective of their races. I believe these prayers to be filled with the hope of transformation.

Listen to Anderson's prayer from her African-American perspective:

I confess my internalized fear and hatred. Forgive me God. Forgive me my brothers and sisters of color. Forgive me my white sisters and brothers for perpetuating it around you.

Lord, show us the depths of who we are so we can see who we are in you. Give us eyes and ears anew to see clearly the hate and fear implied in media narratives, rhetoric, and images.

Help us resist what our cities, segregation, and poverty tell us – that white lives matter more. Let us be free of needing our own pain and concerns addressed before listening to those crying out for justice here and now.

Guard us from judging what we do not understand – and words and organized actions and protests that make us uncomfortable.

Let us instead be uncomfortable with our lives that hide and sustain white supremacy. Let us live justly and beautifully even as we resist and struggle to bring that justice and beauty.

Wisp-EL-wey's prayer is a congregational confession from her white perspective, portions of it read:

...We confess that we have made ourselves the center of history, the center of our communities and made a world that served our interests and suffocated those different from us.

We have arrogantly ignored injustice and history that benefitted us and diminished the humanity of the poor-and-marginalized... explain[ing] away all the inequity and disparity we see in the world.

We have accepted our own reflection... that dominates [the] media, determines priorities, and maintains white power... as normal and good. We cannot fathom all the suffering this has caused... in history and in our present world.

...We humbly repent and ask that you would shine brightly so that wherever the sin of white supremacy remains, we – might – be – part – of dismantling it.

...Wherever injustice remains and communities of resistance cry out, let us listen and root [ourselves] in solidarity with them.

May we continue praying these prayers for the transformation of ourselves and of our faith in action.

This church is a trailblazer, a torch-bearer, not just for the denomination but for the church of Jesus Christ at large. I wonder if you have any idea just how far ahead of this transformation you are! You have an exemplary visionary leader in your pastor, John, and you, as a congregation are already modeling the prototypical church of the revolutionary change that is needed. And... you do it with so much love for one another – you join hands and walk with each other outside these four walls, out into a community in need. You are to be applauded!

So, we have been challenged by the 222nd GA and by God to always be diligent in keeping hope in our calling, seeking the things that are above – reconciling and transforming – and not only that but proclaiming it to the world around us – not just to ourselves, our small groups, our congregation, our own race or denomination or faith – but as Jesus instructed his disciples and us, “Go...and make disciples!”

If we take on this challenge, as we must, and do so with persistence and perseverance,

one in the Spirit and restoring unity;
walking with each other hand in hand;
working with each other side by side;
guarding each other’s dignity and respect;
telling the world that God is with us...³

...then they WILL know we are Christians by our love – and by our inclusiveness, diversity, and cooperation – by our willingness to be transformers.

The church is not dead; the church is not even dying. We are absolutely alive! And with God’s help, we are transforming the world, one person at a time. May it continue to be so.

Amen.

³ From the hymn, “We are one in the Spirit”