

Tom James

I Corinthians 16.1-9

“State of the Church: 9. A Great Opportunity For You”

November 11, 2007

On the evening before Michelle and I were elected pastors of First Presbyterian Church, some of you may recall that the Pastor Nominating Committee sponsored a “meet and greet” in the Church House. I have to admit that, on occasions like that, when I meet lots of people for the first time, I have a hard time remembering everything I hear. But one greeting in particular sticks in my memory. One church member came through the line and welcomed us with the observation that this was a “great opportunity” for us. I have many times reflected on that observation, and I continue to wonder whether I have fully availed myself of the opportunity for ministry that is here.

But I want to point out this morning that “great opportunities” come not only at the beginning of a ministry or of church membership or election to a board—often they come in the middle: sometimes, when we aren’t exactly looking for opportunities. Paul’s words from the closing paragraphs of his letter to the church in Corinth come at the end of a many complicated and controversial instructions, arguments, and pleadings about how the Corinthians ought to “do church.” Surely his audience is weary by now. And we are, too. We are nearing the end of a very tiring letter, and a very difficult series of sermons based on it. We’ve worried with the Corinthians about the waywardness of the world’s wisdom, the danger of lawsuits, the call to exercise our freedom for the sake of the common good. We’ve dealt with quarrelling and sexual misconduct and greedy self-indulgence at the Lord’s Table. We’ve immersed ourselves in the difficulties of being “church” in a world which teaches us in a thousand ways how *not* to be church. And that’s exhausting, because once you take that on, you find that it’s a project that never ends.

So we arrive at the end of the letter, ready for a benediction and a word of hope, like the assurance of God’s forgiveness after we’ve confessed our sins. And that’s what we get—except that we get it in a strange form.

Many scholars believe that one of the major purposes of several of Paul’s letters, including this one, was to raise money for Jewish Christians who were stuck in Jerusalem when everyone with means was leaving because of the tightening grip of the Roman occupation. So after all the sorting through difficult and sometimes embarrassing problems, Paul concludes his letter by reminding them that they have an opportunity to give. What a great opportunity for these Gentiles. They have failed in many, many ways to be the church that God is calling them to be. They have left an example of “how not to do it” for billions of Christians in later generations to ponder. And yet, despite all of this, and indeed out of the midst of their squabbling and pettiness and very probable self-absorption, they have an opportunity to give of themselves and to participate in something larger, something reconciling, something healing and redemptive.

The legacy of the Corinthians is complicated, and that is part of its value. But there is a sense in which their worth and their accomplishments and even their failures are less important than what they had an opportunity to participate in. God was alive in Corinth, and there were possibilities for exercising their gifts of compassion. God was at work among them, and there were possibilities to live and proclaim the gospel of God’s reconciling love. God was a movement of grace in the world around them, too, and there were possibilities to connect, to join, to be a part. What a great opportunity for them.

What a great opportunity for *us*. Stewardship, in the final analysis, is that great opportunity which you and I share to participate in what God is doing in the world. As you are aware by now, we have had discussions

about how much it will cost just to keep the lights on in the future. But, so “why bother?” is the question that lurks. Churches come and go, after all. First Presbyterian of Corinth is ancient history: the lights are off there for good. But what did they participate in? How did they invest themselves? I really don’t know the answer to that, but they had the opportunity, as surely as the Lord lives, to invest themselves in God’s mission in the world, in spite of whatever “issues” they faced, financial or otherwise. And if was true for them, surely also it is true for us. The tri-county area needs ministry. The churches in our presbytery need our support. Mission co-workers in Guatemala, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone need us to participate in their work. What God is doing is much bigger than us. What a privilege to participate. What a great opportunity. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.