

A fundamental foundation for what makes us Presbyterian is our understanding that all of life is subject to the rule of God: that God sends us out in the world to serve God’s purposes here and now:

In our work as well as our worship, in our politics as well as our prayers, in our intellectual as well as our devotional life, in the public realm as well as in the privacy of our homes.

The historian John McNeill describes how John Calvin, the theologian/preacher/founder of our Reformed Presbyterian faith tradition gave expression to this understanding of the Christian life as he served the church in Geneva, Switzerland in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.

He writes of Calvin’s range of concerns for life in Geneva: *...It was at his suggestion that railings were ordered for the balconies of houses for the safety of children, no fires were to be permitted in rooms without chimneys, and chimneys were to be swept for safety...the streets kept clean and it was he who brought about strict enforcement of the law against recruiting mercenaries in Geneva. He also...prompted the Town Council to introduce the manufacture of cloth in order to provide a livelihood for the unemployed poor.*

Calvin wrote: *No kind of life is more praiseworthy to God than that which is useful to...society...*”

Like my Daddy would tell me on Saturday morning when I wanted to settle in for cartoons on TV: *“Get up and make yourself useful as well as ornamental!”*

The founder of the Red Cross grew up in the Reformed church in Switzerland and because of his home life through his parents’ understanding of this foundation of faith, his life was dedicated to making a difference in the world. And I could go on and on about individuals...

As Presbyterians we’ve built hospitals and schools, more than any other denomination.

We Presbyterians have emphasized that God sends us out in the world to serve God’s purposes here and now: to be useful to society.

That’s what the story in our reading from Luke is all about.

Jesus could have told these disciples and followers, stay here and keep away from life outside our little group, but he sends them out with a mission, to make the world a better place.

One thing Jesus did when he sent the seventy out was to send them out in pairs. In part, I think, he did that to remind us that we never go it alone; we’re in this together, partners in faith.

Also, Jesus sent them out as lambs among wolves, and the times; they haven’t changed much, have they. We go out in scary times, too.

And he gave them power to heal. I think most of us are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We, too, seek changed lives: spiritual and physical and emotional and economic.

More than anything, though, what this story shows me is what Jesus believes about the future.

He believes that God has a harvest for him in the future, so he acts now. He sends out the seventy, and all who’ve come after them on that mission, to reap that harvest.

Just as Jesus trusted those 70, Jesus trusted those 20 or so saints who began First Presbyterian Church of Athens back in 1820 under the leadership of Moses Waddel for their future.

They wrote a covenant which said, in part: “To him (Jesus)...we devote ourselves in that covenant of grace...which ever ought to

distinguish us as the congregated followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

I love that picture of the church, ‘the congregated followers of Jesus Christ devoted to the covenant of grace’.

The Seventy with Jesus, the Twenty with Moses Waddel in 1820, and now you who are distinguished as ‘the congregated followers of Jesus Christ devoted to the covenant of grace.’

Jesus trusts you today with his message of love and salvation, of freedom and justice, of grace and mercy; a message that changes lives and comforts those in need.

Jesus trust you for the future.

Which raises the question for the morning; I heard it first at a conference several years ago when our leader asked:

*If the church you currently serve would cease to exist, who would miss it? Would anyone really notice or would anyone care?*

It was like the minister I heard about who called off the weekly Wednesday night prayer meeting that had been part of the church’s life for years.

Somebody asked him if he had gotten permission from the Session to cancel the service. “No,” he said, “Unless somebody tells them about it, they’ll never know!”

So, if First Presbyterian Church disappeared, would anybody miss it?

Of course, it’s an unthinkable thought! But I’ve found that it is good from time to time, especially during an interim time, to think the unthinkable.

Imagine, driving along East Hancock or coming down Dougherty, and where this church stands, all you would see is one more big parking lot.

Would it really matter, if this church disappeared?

Throughout the history of this church, this has been a church that has pointed not to itself, but to God; even to the point of at one time having a hand with the index finger pointing upward sitting atop the steeple of the church.

And now it is yours, and I do not think for a moment that God has gathered this church in this place at this time to sit on its hands.

As I’ve listened to you tell about the ministry of this congregation, I know this church has been unflinching and unwavering in its challenge to people to make the matter of commitment to Jesus Christ a priority.

From this pulpit, the ministers have challenged you to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. The officers of this church, the Sunday School teachers and their classes, Youth and Children’s Ministry leaders, through the ministry of music, Women of the Church, Men of the Church: all have set forth a faith for that daily walk into the future

I saw a cartoon about a Pastor Nominating Committee. They said, “What we want is an energetic, innovative, minister with a grand vision that will inspire us to stay just like we are!”

That is not First Presbyterian Church of Athens.

People are looking everywhere for help, support, and guidance for the challenges of life, and First Presbyterian Church has been, is, and will be that place because we believe we need to be useful to society.

The harvest is still plentiful for congregated followers of Jesus Christ, gathered in the name of God, joined by the love of Jesus Christ, working by the power of the Holy Spirit, to show the world that in the face of challenge and change, God has raised up a church that has made and will continue to make a difference for people to have a better life now and forever.

We are here to offer the resources to help people make those decisions that are faithful and good and worthy, that will change lives for the better!

Our Scripture lessons this morning combine the spiritual and the practical, and the thread that brings them together is ‘commitment.’

We must face the unwritten essential tenet that this church, as every church, is dependent not on somebody but on everybody to make commitments to keep the church strong.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, I thank God for those of you who continue to provide the resources, the facilities, the staff, the volunteers, and the programs for this church that prove God’s outpouring of blessings as you have met the challenges of the day.

If First Presbyterian Church of Athens disappeared, what would be lost would be the reach for excellence for the glory of God in this community, for the least and the lost, for all the people who walk through the doors of this church and find the sacred here.

I earnestly believe that as the story continues to be told of First Presbyterian Church, “Here is a place, a people where you find:

**1. Passionate Worship:** We honor God for who God is and what God has done with the purpose of connecting people to God...not performance but rather devotion and celebration expressing our love of God.

**2. Radical Hospitality:** We offer the absolute utmost of ourselves, our creativity, and our abilities to offer the gracious invitation and welcome of Christ to others...to pray, plan, and work to invite others and help them feel welcome and to support them in their spiritual journeys.

**3. Intentional Faith Development:** We deliberately and purposefully engage in Bible studies, daily devotion, church school classes, small groups, and retreats to mature in our faith and in our knowledge and love of God.

**4. Risk-taking Mission and Service:** We cooperate with God in moving out of our comfort zone to engage in work in the church, community, and world that alleviates suffering and injustice to improve the conditions of other in the name of Christ.

**5. Extravagant Generosity:** We joyfully and sacrificially give and share of all that we have in order to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ.

Jesus sends you into his future, the future he believes in as live the promise that was made nearly 200 years ago: “To him (Jesus)...we devote ourselves in that covenant of grace...which ever ought to distinguish us as the congregated followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.