Sermon - Being Presbyterian

Good Morning. Today I wanted to share with you what being a PCUSA Presbyterian means. I was raised a Roman Catholic and I have been a Presbyterian since 1984. I have served Session 5 times during this period and I cannot tell you the number of times that I have heard, “why are we sending money to Presbytery? What is per-capita and why do we have to pay it?”

Let’s talk about PCUSA. It is the largest Presbyterian denomination in the US and is the original Presbyterian church. Other Presbyterian churches split off from our church over different issues such as slavery, ordaining women and lately ordaining LGBTQ+ people to be elders. Elders come in two forms: Teaching Elders who are ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament and Ruling Elders who are ordained lay people.

PCUSA was established in 1983 by the merger of the Presbyterian Church US whose church located in the South and the United Presbyterian Church whose congregations were in all of the states. The two churches split over slavery during the Civil war.

In 2021, there were 1,193,770 active members, 18,458 ordained Teaching Elders in 8,813 congregations. Membership, like all traditional churches has been declining over the past several decades.

The constitution of the United States is based upon the Presbyterian separation of powers. Many of the founding members of our country were Presbyterian. The PCUSA constitution is composed of 2 parts. The Book of Order and the Book of Confessions.

The Book of Order is divided into 3 parts and gives the structure for government, worship and rules of discipline. It is a wonderful read for when you can’t fall asleep, but you can look up specifics for direction of what is required.

The Book of Confessions, on the other hand, is an exciting read about what we believe as Presbyterians. This book was collated when the two churches reunited in 1983. From the beginning of the church, the confessions are about our underlying beliefs. From the Nicene Creed to the Brief Statement of Faith, the church has written when there is a great need to decide what is important to be Presbyterian.

When Diana was teaching confirmation classes, I would stop in when they got to the Book of Confessions. I would ask the confirmands “what is your definition of a Christian?” They always stated that stating that you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior was the definition of a Christian. I would then tell them that Adolf Hitler was a Christian by their definition. The Declaration of Barmen was written. It stated that:

1. The source of revelation is only the word of God, any other sources will not be accepted
2. Jesus Christ is the only Lord of all aspects of personal life. There is no other authority
3. The message and order of the church should not be influenced by current politics
4. The church shall not be ruled by a leader (The Fuhrer) and there is no hierarchy in the church
5. The state should not fulfill the task of the church
6. Therefore this declaration rejects the subordination of the church to the state

Pretty powerful stuff that was written to make a statement of what is right as Presbyterians see the world.

The Book of Order lays out the structure of our government. It is a representative form of government with 4 levels of government:

1. Session
2. Presbytery
3. Synod
4. General Assembly

The Session is the local form of government. Each Presbyterian Church elects lay people to govern their individual church. These people are ordained as Ruling Elders and are responsible for the operation of the local church. They serve a set amount of time and are replaced by other members of the local church. The members of the congregation choose their Pastor or Teaching Elder with the help of Presbytery. The pastor is a member of presbytery and not the local congregation.

The Presbytery is the next level of government. It is formed by all of the local churches is a geographic region with the exception of the Korean Language Presbytery and the Dakota Presbytery. Only the Presbytery can ordain a Teaching Elder as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Presbytery has two elected officials, the Moderator and the Stated Clerk. The executive Presbyter or General Presbyter is responsible for the Presbytery staff and all administrative duties. (It might be helpful to acknowledge that all presbyteries are different and the following groups are in Baltimore Presbytery) The Presbytery is the coordinator for all of the churches in the presbytery with groups such as the following:

 The Commission on Reconciliation which coordinates the mission groups to Guatemala, Cuba, Dakota and Racial Justice

 The Commission on Ministry which guides people that are interested in ministry, helps congregations find new ministers and inspects proposed new ministers on their Presbyterian beliefs

We are in The Baltimore Presbytery which is all of Maryland north of Silver Spring and not the Eastern Shore.

The next level of government is Synod. Presbyteries are organized on a regional basis to form a synod. The synod’s job is to develop and implement the mission of the church in their region. They facilitate communications between presbyteries and General Assembly. They also mediate conflict between churches and Presbytery. We are in the Synod of the Mid Atlantic.

General Assembly is the highest governing body for our church. It meets every two years and consists of commissioners elected by each presbytery. There are equal number of Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders as commissioners. The General Assembly elects two new moderators who serve a two year term. One Ruling Elder and one Teaching Elder. The moderator is the face of our denomination for their term.

The responsibility of General Assembly is to:

1. Set priorities of the church
2. Develop overall objectives for mission and a strategy to guide the church
3. To provide essential programs, functions for overall balance and diversity within the mission of the church
4. To establish and administer worldwide ministries

During General Assembly. Many committees are formed from the attending commissioners to do the work and then present to General Assembly their recommendations for action. Some of the committees are purely administrative but some are deciding our actions as a denomination. After the committees give their recommendations, the entire General Assembly will debate and then vote on the recommendations.

Some of the committees are as follows:

1. Ecumenical and Interfaith
2. Environmental Justice
3. Health Safety and Benefits
4. Immigration
5. Race and Gender Justice
6. Theology, Worship and Education

I was blessed to be a commissioner to the 2020 General Assembly and participated in the entire process. This last General Assembly that was the end of June, I was able to participate as an advocate for an overture that was sent to Race and Gender Justice.

Many of you know that I am involved with the Baltimore Dakota Learning Camps. I am currently serving as the chair to their steering committee. Our Dakota partners asked if we would support an overture (request) for the Presbytery of the Yukon to right a wrong from 1963. We reviewed the overture which was concerning the closure of a vibrant native church in Juneau Alaska. The national church decided that they had to close and merge with the local white church without giving them any notice or recourse. This outright racism and colonial thought was based upon the belief that the white church was better for the natives. The closure of the church and the treatment of its native pastor drove the majority of the congregants away from the church. The native pastor was not given the open assistant pastor position at the church but was given a boat to do mission work with the outlying native communities. The overture asked for a formal apology and reparations of $300,000 to be used to support the native people with scholarships and tuition for seminary. The money was agreed to by the local Presbytery and funded from the sale of the original church property.

After our group agreed with the overture, we sent a recommendation to our Presbytery for their support. An overture needs at least two presbyteries support before it goes to General Assembly. Our presbytery voted unanimously to support the overture. When this overture came before the Race and Gender Justice committee, I was one of the supporters to help the commissioners understand the overture and its implications. From working with my Dakota friends, I have learned that we white people like to decide for our native people what is best for them without their input. The overture passed unanimously from the committee to General Assembly.

So why do we send money to Presbytery?

At General Assembly a budget is approved. The budget is then divided by the membership of the denomination. This number is the base for Per Capita. Next the Synod divides their budget by the number of members in their Synod and that is added to the GA number. Lastly, the local Presbytery budget, which is approved at our Gathering, is divided by the members of the Presbytery. Adding these three numbers together is the total for Per capita. This money is used to fund the operations and staff for our governing bodies. Our church is required to pay for each member whether the member gives to Per Capita or not. Our current per capita is $38.13 per member. At every level, the budget is approved by those attending. If you, as a Ruling Elder are selected to attend the Gathering, your voice will be heard.

I hope that this brings a little clarity to being a Presbyterian.

Amen