

State of the Presbytery  
March 21, 2015

Holding up glass half full of water - How is the state of the Presbytery of New Covenant like this glass of water? When George Carlin was shown a glass of water like this, he said, "Some people see the glass as half-empty. Others see it as half-full. I see a glass that is bigger than it needs to be."

What I focus on is not the glass but the water. The water is half what it should be. I could be talking about our membership, but I'm not. And I could be talking about our finances, but I'm not. And I could be talking about our lawsuits, but I'm not. What I am talking about is our faith.

We are representing our faith about half as well and half as much as we ought to be. The message we deliver by our actions is not perceived by the world as particularly "good." We focus on what is wrong rather than what is right. We snipe at one another over ecclesiological minutiae. We show more concern for our definition of purity than for peace and unity. We have allowed personal agendas to get in the way of spreading the Good News.

Society watches our behavior and concludes what we have is "not-such-good" news. They hear what we say and perceive it is "ho-hum," irrelevant, nothing they can't hear at Rotary or Kiwanis, and definitely not "news." We've become so inwardly focused, including on our own disagreements, that we have lost sight of both the "good" and the "news" of the gospel. Society has watched us very closely and what they have seen is the two ends of the "bell curve" of our denomination going at each other to preserve the "purity" of the church, while people in desperate need of Good News languish in poverty, cycles of abuse, addiction, war, hopelessness and despair.

But in Jesus Christ - who IS our message - we have what a dry and parched world need, and we don't have to be pure to deliver it. We do have to get outside ourselves and our churches to deliver that life-giving water. And we needn't do it alone. We need each other to deliver grace, hope and encouragement to a world that doesn't trust people who don't trust one another. The strength of our Presbyterian system is that we covenant to connect with dissimilar people to do similar work for Jesus Christ.

We live in a society that is constantly dividing itself into smaller and smaller like-minded groups. As Presbyterians we have an opportunity to demonstrate a counter-cultural approach that doesn't rely on division but on multiplication. We can show the world that the strength of our bond in Jesus Christ is what keeps us together, not how uniformly we think. We can prove that the 98% on which we agree is more important than the 2% on which we disagree and get about the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. Together we can show that we care more about the world than ourselves - just like Jesus did.

When Gradye Parsons, the Stated Clerk of the PCUSA, met with some of us for discussion of where the church is going, he shared lots of statistics. One that really caught my attention is that 88% of the "nones" (none of the above on religious surveys) are not even looking for a religious setting. That means that they are not going to simply show up in our churches because we have a great program, sermon or activity. They are not going to show up where we are. So, we have to show up where they are.

Forty seven years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. He was there to lend his support to sanitation workers - most of them African American - who were on strike, protesting terrible working conditions and low wages. Taylor Rogers and Elmore Nickelberry were among the 1,300 who walked off the job in 1968.

Rogers remembers picking up tubs of garbage that were full of holes. "That garbage would leak all over you," he says. By the time he got home, his clothes were dirty and full of maggots that had fallen on him. "And we worked in the rain - snow, ice and rain. We had to. If we didn't, we'd lose our job. They said, 'A garbage man wasn't nothing.'"

Rogers says, "It was awful." One day, two workers, who had gone into a trash compactor to escape the rain, were crushed to death. "All we wanted was some decency, some dignity," Rogers says. "We wanted to be treated as men. So we said that this is it. Thirteen hundred sanitation workers, we all decided that we wasn't going to take no more.

Rogers and his wife, Bessie, were both at Mason Temple on April 3, 1968, when King delivered what would prove to be his final speech. "It was wall to wall with people," Taylor Rogers says. Dr. King said, "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. ... And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land." The civil rights leader was assassinated the following day.

"You know, it's kind of like you lost a part of your family," Taylor Rogers says. "You just really can't describe it. "He put everything aside to come to Memphis to see about the people on the bottom of the ladder - the sanitation workers."

That my friends is a model of discipleship that few of us follow adequately. It's what Jesus promised us when we truly follow him - not prosperity and success but service and sacrifice. The Good News that is both Good and News is that in Jesus Christ, God set everything aside to come to the world to see about people at the bottom of the ladder. As fascinating as it is for us to have theological discussions about the ladder, where it came from, and which rung we occupy, our role as disciples of Jesus is to join him at the bottom of the ladder.

My prayer is that next year in my state of the presbytery I will report not on further divisions but on multiplications of our "bottom of the ladder" experiences where we have slaked the thirst of a desperately thirsty world. In other words, that glass of faith - even though it's not all it should be - it's enough to share. And it sounds just like something Jesus would expect.