

Mystery and Kin-Dom
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
August 19, 2012
Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: Mark 4:26-29

Did you see the recent story in the “Faith and Values” section of the Observer about the fastest growing religious segment in America?

No, it wasn't the Baptists. Or the Methodists. Or the Lutherans. or Episcopalians or Pentecostals or Roman Catholics or even the unaffiliated evangelicals of all stripes and colors. And no, it wasn't us Presbyterians.

It was the “none's.” That's not N-U-N. It's N-O-N-E, those who, when asked their religious affiliation, checked “none.” Those who do not affiliate with any tradition, old or new, liberal or conservative, traditional or contemporary, rock-n'-roll or pipe organ.

As I've reported to you previously, this segment has been growing quickly for years. The latest data show it's one in five Americans, according to a study by the Pew Center for the People and the Press.

There's more. According to another new study, this one by the Gallup organization, Americans' confidence in organized religion now stands at a new low. Only 44 percent of Americans have either “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in the church. That's down quite a bit – from 68% in the mid 1970s.

So, to recap: Fewer people than ever affiliate with a denomination or religious tradition. And fewer than ever put much confidence in organized religion as a whole.

You've heard data like this from this pulpit before. It may not be what a lot of preachers are preaching today – or ever. Plenty would like to just turn and look the other way, and many do. And I know that some of you may be thinking, “Who cares? Caldwell works pretty well. We have our hands plenty full with more than enough ministry to keep us busy.” Or others may be thinking: “This has very little to do with what's happening in my life right now.”

As I mentioned in last week's sermon, America continues to become more and more a nation of individuals rather than members of affiliated groups. And our Burger-King-inspired consumer mindset has spoiled us into insisting that we have it just our way,

exactly the way we want. If that means we need to compromise what we want just to be part of a larger group, well, in some circles at least, compromise is a dirty word.

The kind of interfaith service we will host this afternoon is a good example. It will be meaningful, I'm sure, for those who attend. But it won't be standing room only.

I don't think this separatist approach is what God wants of us. The story of the Bible is of a covenant community. It's a story of people who are connected by the Holy Spirit, a people who seek to walk together, to explore together, to deepen their faith together and to understand God together.

That doesn't mean it's easy. All around the world, tectonic shifts in the foundations of Christendom are changing the landscape. Just as with basic geology, long- and slow-moving trends and patterns are colliding under the surface. New mountains are rising in certain parts of Christian landscape. In other places, new valleys and canyons of division are opening up. As with the rise of the "nones", some trends seem to be a very recent phenomena. Still, on the whole, these broad shifts in Christendom and in worldwide religion will be playing out over our entire lifetimes.

With all of this as a backdrop, Presbyterian leaders and thinkers from up and down the Mid-Atlantic region gathered in Durham yesterday to talk and think and pray together. It was a regional conference of a new organization called NEXT. NEXT organizers describe themselves as "Connectional. Positive. Relational. Open. Diverse. Alive. PCUSA."

They are a group of committed Presbyterians – ministers and lay leaders - who want to live out their faith beyond labels and divisive generalizations. They strive to see a way forward for our denomination, past the negativity of these past years, when disagreements about sexuality, ordination standards and ownership of church property have divided us nationwide.

On your behalf, I was asked to share the story of what God and you have done here at Caldwell in the last five years. It was a workshop titled "A Story of Hope: One Church's Journey From Wilderness to Resurrection."

Workshops are just that – gatherings to draw out learning that can inform actions. As I prepared, I found myself dwelling in the tension of several questions: How much of what has happened here was the doing of so many of you remarkable leaders and devoted followers of Christ? And, how much was God's providence? How much of what has

happened here might be repeatable, at least in some form, elsewhere? And how much of your story was written by the mysterious hand of God and God alone?

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In essence, that was the topic Jesus spoke to in a short parable in the fourth chapter of Mark.

As I've said before, I'm deeply interested in Jesus' sayings about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. That phrase, that mention of a "kingdom," was Jesus' way of contrasting his way and the way of his followers with that of Cesar and the powerful Roman empire. But, as Judith Hoch-Wray, a Disciples of Christ pastor in New York points out, the Greek word for "kingdom" can also be translated as "kin-dom."¹ That is, a people who are "kin," who have something in common, who share a connection, namely their relationship to God and, in that bond, to each other.

In his parable, Jesus addresses what defines and what creates that "kin-dom." Jesus said:

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.²

As with all parables, this one raises questions and provokes our thoughts. It gives us a metaphor that stirs our imagination. At the same time, as with all parables, if we are looking for absolute clarity, we won't find it. And, if we seek to reduce Jesus words to a fool-proof strategy for church health and growth, then we are fools.

Someone scatters seeds, then sleeps and rises. The days pass. The seeds do their thing and the one who scattered them has no idea how. The earth produces of itself, the head of grain grows full and the harvest comes. Such is the kingdom of heaven. Hardly the kind of advice we would receive in the mail from church publishing houses, complete with color Powerpoint presentations and 4-volume DVD set.

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¹ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, p. 141

² Mark 4:26-29

In this our centennial year at Caldwell, we've had the privilege and blessing of hearing Beth Van Gorp's monthly summaries of the first 100 years of this church. As I say in my newsletter column this month, when I tell people that a member actually *volunteered* to read one hundred years of session minutes, their jaws usually drop. If Presbyterians believed in sainthood, this would be a valid qualification.

What I also report in that column is the great news that a team of talented editors and writers among us is turning Beth's work into a new history of the church. The plan is for it to be published later this fall. I know you are as eager to have a copy as I am.

Beth's last few reports summarized the downward spiral of this church from about 1960 to the turn of the century. For a period of time in the 1970s and 1980s, the church suffered a major problem of congregational withdrawal, apathy and indifference. Few would take responsibility for leadership or ministry. The session and congregation held multiple votes about closing the church or merging with other congregations. Each time, it voted to stay open, only to follow, it seems, with more demonstrations of apathy and indifference.

Church, it would be so very easy for us to use 20-20 hindsight and criticize what those disciples did or did not do. It would be so very easy for us to say we would have had all the right answers. It would be easy for us to forget all the very real challenges they faced in those years. But that would be sheer arrogance.

It would be equally arrogant for us to say we know exactly what we need to do to continue to grow as the body of Christ. At this point in our centennial year, we will pivot our eyes to the future. In the place of Beth's history lessons, we will ask a few of you to use your imagination and describe what you think Caldwell might become in 25 years.

But hear me when I emphasize the words "imagination" and "might become" because we don't have a proven playbook that will ensure our success. To look back on the blessings of our experience here in the last five years and claim we have the prescription for church growth and health would be to discredit all the honest and earnest efforts by those who tried to turn this church around time and again. As we shift our gaze forward as a congregation, God help us to have that kind of humility, first and foremost.

But, what then do we do? Jesus' parable of the seed seems to suggest that the one who cast the seed played some role in the establishment of the kingdom of God, didn't

it? As my friend Rev. Nibs Stroup, who leads a multicultural congregation in Atlanta writes, the parable of the seed in Mark “emphasizes that the kingdom of God is dependent upon God’s grace and upon human initiative.”³

“ . . . God’s grace *and*⁴ human initiative.”

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So, I asked the participants in yesterday’s workshop, what might we learn from what God has done at Caldwell?

I showed them the marvelous film about this church’s resurrection that debuted earlier this year, a film that was made for just that kind of opportunity for learning and discussion. I grabbed a marker, walked over to the whiteboard and asked those in the workshop:

“What, if anything, might this story tell us about a hope and a future for our denomination?”

“What might be replicable or adapted to inform and shape the current and the future of our denomination and so many of its churches?”

After watching the video, workshop participants chimed in quickly with their observations.

One person said that a close – a VERY close - brush with death is always good to get institutions to rethink their future.

A long and painful wilderness experience, said another.

And out of those experiences, the workshop members pointed out, a church or denomination reengages with a sense of urgency, a clear vision, a tight focus on what is most important and, in the case of Caldwell, the consistent extension of radical hospitality.

³ Ibid, p. 143

⁴ Emphasis mine

Come to think of it, these things – a brush with death, a wilderness experience, a renewed sense of urgency, and a clarified vision and focus – are as good for individuals as they are for institutions.

Thanks be to God.

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Brothers and sisters, the past and the future of this church reflect both the mystery and the kin-dom of God's ways for God's people. The same goes for our denomination. The same goes for Christendom as a whole in the 21st century and beyond.

The mystery is the mystery, the inexplicable ways, of God's unflappable grace. As with a seed that produces new life and hope beyond our full understanding, God's loving grace transcends our meager and often foolish attempts to draw up a blueprint for the kingdom of God. It can't be done. Not really.

But, at the same time, through the grace of the cross and the empty tomb, we are kin to one who had much to teach us about what the family of God is, what it does, how it gets along, how it stands apart, how it points backward – and forward – to the hope we have in Christ.

To be kin to God in Christ is to rest assured that today's troubles will not last. To be kin to each other in that assurance is to extend the gift of God's grace to each other, to see what is good in other people and to find a way to connect with them in love and peace. To be kin in Christ is to find a way to look past disagreement and hurt and to dwell together in the wide space of God's love, acceptance and forgiveness, which none of us deserves but which we all enjoy.

So, Caldwell, as we turn our focus from our past to our future, let us claim and live out of that liberation. In this time of widespread religious mistrust and ambivalence, let us give thanks for our unique blessings. Let us trust the mystery of God's ways. Let us set our imaginations free. Let us recommit ourselves in the confidence that whatever is to come of our church, our denomination and of Christendom, it has already been ordained by the God of providence, the God whose unconditional love is the one thing we know to be predestined.

Amen.