

**Remarks to Desert Hills Church**  
**March 24, 2010**

Friends in Christ: I'm glad to be with you this evening and have been thinking and praying about our time together. I have a couple of thoughts I'd like to share before we have a conversation.

I understand that some of you are wrestling with God about your connection to the institutional church, and that includes both the Presbytery and our General Assembly. Some of your wrestling has been over previous actions of the General Assembly, such as its reaffirmation of the 100 year old Social Creed. Some of your wrestling has been quiet wondering about our Presbytery and its vision for Christ's Church. I am grateful for the ways your Session has sought to be open and forthright about this moment. I think of the Old Testament story Jacob's wrestling with God's angel – sorting through the past and trying to face the future – wrestling with God all night long, and waking up – having held on, but clearly wounded. Whatever comes of this moment, I know there will be some wounds. But I also know that we can give our hurts and pains to Jesus Christ, and discover a healing beyond our imagining...sometimes even a renewed connection with people we didn't think likely. Please know I continue to pray for you.

(1) I have a couple of thoughts I'd like to share, and let me start with something obvious: none of us knows everything about the faith and I suspect all of us have had some surprises in our faith journeys. One of those surprises for me came through my parents: my mother was Baptist and my father was Jewish, I was raised Methodist, I married an Episcopalian and that's how I became a Presbyterian. My Jewish roots are important to me and when I began hearing people read the Scriptures and say God's love in Jesus excluded my father, I had some wrestling to do. In the end, I decided that the God I worship is loving beyond my understanding and that none of us, even guided by the Scriptures, knows everything about our God in Jesus Christ – Christ's love for this world, Christ's church. I don't know why we are so different at times and yet we're all welcomed at the Lord's table.

Our church is very diverse and as a Calvinist, I believe God has intended us to be in just such a church. That diversity is very real to me. As a former and current General Presbyter, I have worshipped with 350 congregations – large, small, urban, back-woods east Texas, Native American, Hispanic, Black, Korean, multi-cultural, rich, poor, each with some pretty unique stories. I'll never forget my visit with a country church where the elders collected the offering and counted it on the communion table, wrote the amount on a chalkboard and all before the pastor begin the service. I found myself wondering what the story was behind that order of worship. I remember my visit to a small town church, aging and dwindling in numbers who had only one child – a college student who came home on the weekends – and the elders made sure he had a Sunday School class, one on one, lessons right there in the church kitchen. And I can assure you that when my time comes to leave Grand Canyon Presbytery, I'll take with me my lasting impression of your partnership with the Leupp Church – what a mutual gift I sense this has been for you. Now explain to me why God has placed that small town church, that country congregation and this suburban community of believers into the same Presbyterian family. It's beyond my understanding of the ways of God. And what I take from all my travels is that we spend way too much time worrying about our differences and not enough time discovering the rich texture of ministry – the diverse ways God's Presbyterian people serve Jesus Christ.

So my first thought is this: **were we to fail in our care and appreciation of one another in the name of Jesus Christ and part company, we all would miss the gift of discovering the good ministry that happens in our congregations – in each other.** And, you would eventually lose your memory of your beginnings, when Desert Hills was an “idea” – and of how progressive and conservative Presbyterians gave their time, talent and resources so that you could be born in God’s Spirit. And we would all end up spending way too many of our resources to attend to the legal and property matters that comes with a parting.

A better vision, I think, is for all of us to spend more energy learning about and affirming the good ways God is present, alive, and engaged through our diverse Presbyterian family. Not to ignore differences but to keep them in perspective.

(2) You and I have learned to approach our Christian faith in the Reformed tradition. That tradition is founded on the idea that we all have access to God directly, we all have something to contribute – that is founded on the priesthood of all believers, and on the authority of the Scriptures. We were taught to sort out our beliefs first; from there we would be guided in how to live – both in the church and in the world – personally and as a society (which was Calvin’s dream). Beliefs, leadings to behaviors, which would then make it clear to which community we belonged. Belief-Behave-Belong. That’s a 500 year old way of becoming a follower of Jesus. In the last 100 years, however, lots of changes – new understandings, new insights – have taken place in our world which has caused us to review our Reformed way. And because we’re Presbyterian and our very nature is to argue and disagree and use our brains and think our way into the faith, we have gotten hooked by our progressive-conservative divisions. Sometimes we lose sight of the value of those arguments. That is, our diversity and our arguments help us be clear about what we do believe and at the same time, keep us humble because none of us knows the fullness of God’s love. It’s tough work to stay together in our disagreeing, it’s irritating and aggravating, and certainly we can become weary staying in conversation with people who just don’t see life and faith the way we do. Well, I think our forebears might say, “So what?” It’s our way because deep down we Presbyterian-Reformed people – progressive and conservative alike – have all entered the faith through this “Belief-Behave-Belong” way.

Here’s the surprise. Progressive and conservative people these days are pointing out that there’s a different way of becoming Christian. Let me tell you about my son, Nick. He and his family attend a PCA church that worships in the Chapel of Union Theological Seminary in New York City – the seminary that was once a bastion of Protestant liberalism. As I suspect many of you know, the PCA does not ordain women, even though his mother is an ordained Presbyterian pastor. He’s not abandoned his mother or his belief that women are called to ordained service. You and I were taught to avoid the churches whose beliefs we couldn’t support. Not Nick and his generation. What’s more important to my son is that he’s found a vibrant community – young, thoughtful, intelligent – people who help him belong to Jesus first; he and his friends simply don’t care about all our passionate belief statements. And my son doesn’t see anything wrong with this picture. He’s not going to embrace what you and I have been taught: Believe-Behave-Belong. Belong-Behave-Believe is his way into faith in Jesus Christ.

**Here's my second point, more and more progressive and conservative church leaders are telling us that the future belongs to my son and his friends.** Fewer and fewer people are going to embrace what you and I know. We can keep on arguing trying to recruit a smaller and smaller group of people to think as we do. But, if you and I want to continue in God's work in this new time, then we need to spend more time figuring out this new way into the faith. We – progressive and conservatives – have a much bigger agenda before us, one that needs us working together. For me, staying together is the best way to continue God's work, even though it will not be an easy path.

(3) Let me finish with a story. I have a dear friend, George Isaac, a retired Bishop in the Church of South India. Years ago through our General Assembly, I helped Grace Presbytery begin a mission partnership in Kerala, in the southwest region of the country. The Church of South India was formed at the end of World War II. It was formed by a merger of Anglican, Presbyterian-Reformed, and Congregational mission churches. Can you imagine the Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed and Congregational churches in this country merging? The Church of South India is a bit unusual. They have bishops, their Sessions are called consistories, and their ordained leaders are Presbyters. When I asked how this merger came about, my Bishop friend said, "David, in a country where Christians are maybe 3% of the population and so many people are Hindu and Muslim, we decided it was better to bring a united witness for Jesus Christ and to not worry so much about our differences." And congregation by congregation, the folks still cling a bit to their past traditions, tolerate one another's differences in worship, theology, practice, and claim their unity in Jesus Christ.

There's a vision and an invitation here for us, I think. In our country and our culture where so many people say they're spiritual but not religious, where we "belief-behave-belong" Christians are an increasing minority and the faith is being spread in a new and exciting but different way, maybe a little more **tolerance**, maybe a little more **appreciation**, maybe a little more **respect** for all of our conservative and progressive approaches to God's work is the better pathway ahead. Better perhaps, than parting company.

That's my mission for Grand Canyon Presbytery, for as long as I'm privileged to serve as the Interim Executive Presbyter. And we are making some changes here. Our Council is praying for our congregations; we're being more flexible in the way we start new churches; we're supporting our Native American congregations with a new staffing idea. We're reading cutting edge books, reaffirming our baptismal vows, discussing our passion for starting new churches, ministering to the poor and encouraging young people to consider the Way of Jesus. At last weekend's Presbytery meeting, we listened as two national leaders talked to us about our worldwide mission and our attitudes about evangelism. And we discussed this new emerging, missional church movement that is happening. Little things that may be God's gifts as we learn to appreciate one another more, respect the different ways God is leading us into ministry and mission, helping each other.

Like old Jacob, wrestling with God's angel isn't easy. But if, as you move past your wrestling, you determine to remain in this Presbytery and Presbyterian family for now, then I would hope we will extend our conversation in ways that bring a mutual witness to the power of Jesus Christ in our lives and in the world. In Jesus Christ, we never wrestle alone. Again, my thanks to the Session and to your pastors.

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