

DON'T STOP THINKING ABOUT TOMORROW

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Luke 14:25-33 NRSV

Don't stop, thinking about tomorrow,
Don't stop, it'll soon be here,
It'll be, better than before,
Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone

Those of you of a certain age know these lyrics well. They come from the 1977 Fleetwood Mac song *Don't Stop (Thinking About Tomorrow)*. Those of you who are a bit younger (or maybe those who stopped paying attention to popular music by the time the 70's rolled around) may know the song from when Bill Clinton used it as his theme song in his 1992 run for the White House. I think that churches should break out their guitars and sing this one now and then, because churches, perhaps more than other institutions, seem to spend a whole lot of time stuck in the past, so much so that little thought is given to what they are doing at present or where they will be in the future.

I don't mean to give off the impression that a church's past is not important, because the old adage "those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it" is especially true of churches. The past matters to each of us as individuals and to us as a faith community, but it is best used as a tool for facing what is to come. Another old adage says, "The past is a nice place to visit, but you can't live there." That's all too true. If I could modify Fleetwood Mac's song for our hymnal, I would want it to say something about "don't stop thinking about tomorrow and don't forget about what you learned yesterday." (It doesn't have the same ring to it.)

Today is Rally Sunday here at our church. If you read my column in this past week's newsletter, you know that I struggled to find a better name for today, but "Summer's Over So Get Your Rear End to Church" Day just didn't have the panache that I was looking for. Rally Sunday sounds old-fashioned, and when I hear it I have thoughts of the pep rally scene in *Grease* and the memories of sitting on bleachers in my high school

gym just thankful to be out of class early. However inadequate it may be, it's all I could come up with.

I'm coming around, however, to thinking that "rally" might be just the right kind of word for First Christian Church as we look towards the future and remember our past. In some ways, we as a church are rallying after decades of declining membership. Indeed, as I will remind you from time to time, when I interviewed for the job as your minister, the first question each group I met with asked was "How are you going to grow this church?" Do you remember my answer? I said, "I don't know, but I do know that I'm not going to grow anything. If this church is going to grow it will take everyone's help." I also said that I didn't believe in trendy church growth strategies or theories. A new one seems to come out each week and the only thing I see growing from most of them is the bank account of the expert hawking them. What I do believe however, is that a church can grow in numbers and more importantly in a spiritual sense if it is willing to get excited about what it means to be a follower of Christ. Those are rather simple and even vague words, but I believe them to be true—they better be or we should all hang this church thing up.

It has been over sixty years since the pastorate of Cleo Madison Chilton; some of you still remember him, at least in his life after retirement. That was the golden age of this church in terms of its weekly attendance and its influence in St. Joseph. Despite some really good ministers, members and ministries, this church's numbers and influence have diminished ever since. This church's decline in numbers parallels almost exactly the decline at a national level of mainline churches (meaning non-evangelical ones). Beginning in the late 50's and early 60's, a whole generation of Baby Boomers was essentially lost to these churches. Afterwards, the numbers have never been the same and neither has the mainline church's influence upon culture.¹ Does anybody remember listening to Harry Emerson Fosdick on the radio or seeing other tall steeple ministers on the early days of TV? Now, in the national media, the image of Christianity that is spread is a narrow-minded and judgmental one that trivializes the faith.

Our church saw another reason for its decline in the changing landscape of St. Joseph. Over the last several decades, the streets around us changed from the commercial center of the city to row after row of abandoned buildings. The city now looks east for its jobs, shopping, education and medical care. We are no longer on a main drive that people habitually travel and getting them to turn west again is no easy task. This church chose to remain in its historical building and location—a fact that I have already remarked upon is entirely attractive to me. I'd rather be here in the heart of the city in this beautiful building than out in a former cornfield. Yet, despite some good work, this church has failed to reach out to the community that has remained downtown, and it remains to be seen whether it will reach out to the new folks moving back downtown.

Finally, this church has historically operated in a manner that is all too common in mainline churches. For its folks, religion has been a private matter. I had lunch with one of First Christian's former ministers this week, Bill Shoop, who pastored here from 1963-1977. He remarked to me that you could sit down with First Christian folks and have a

great conversation with you, but it would never occur to them to talk about their faith with you. Part of that reticence is honorable, I believe. It comes out of a respect for the faith and the variety of ways God works in the world. Out of a desire to respect others, no imposition is made upon them in terms of faith. I feel largely the same way. There is nothing more bothersome to me than to be confronted with someone at my doorstep or across the aisle from me in a restaurant who wants to strike up a conversation about accepting Jesus as my personal savior or taking a copy of the Book of Mormon or the latest issue of Watchtower. I understand the desire not to be lumped together with that crowd.

Yet, reticence to speak about faith or one's religious life may not come only out of a sense of propriety; it can also arise because there is really nothing going on that profound or meaningful in the first place. By no means do I wish to judge anyone in this church or any other--past or present, but I have plenty of experience with church folks for whom being active in church meant a lot but having an abiding and purposeful sense of the divine in their lives meant little. If the hymns we sing and the words we proclaim and the scripture we read, all says that our experience of God should be the most important and meaningful part of our lives, then that experience of the divine should bubble up from us in our everyday speech, in how we view the world, in how we treat those we live and work with, and in the hope we have for the future. I don't mean that our faith needs to be expressed in a contrived or trivial sort of way, as if unless we're out there handing out tracts at the airport we're all going to hell, but rather as people who have a firm grasp upon the things that really matter—the things that transcend the trivial and damaging.

When we look to the past as members of First Christian Church in order to gain our bearings to face the future, it is not just a past of declining numbers and missed opportunities. On the contrary, there is a rich history here. We stand on the shoulders of some giants that should inspire us as we turn to face what lies ahead.

In order to have standing as a minister in my new denomination, The Disciples of Christ, I am required to take a course on its history and polity. Since I must endure this, I thought I would share some of the burden with you my parishioners. Don't worry, I won't be delivering a history lecture, but the history of our denomination is relevant to our particular church. Our denomination began in the early 19th century as a movement to restore the church to the form it possessed in the early church. Its leaders reacted against dogmatism that limited the freedom of individuals to interpret scripture and encounter God on their own. They also sought to abolish barriers of creed or practice that separated one believer from another. Early on, they practiced open communion, a rare practice then and still today in some circles, celebrating the fact that just as God's love was available to all when Jesus sat around the table while on earth, so also should the communion table in church be open to all.² Those of you who have been Disciples all your life may not think of this as a radical act, but if you have ever been in a service where you were not allowed to take communion, then you know the hurt and exclusion that occurs. Our church was founded just a few years after the founding of St. Joseph as this movement spread across the frontier in the mid 19th century. We were in a sense at the forefront of this type of thinking from our birth as a church.

The debates over just how open would the Christian Church continued into the twentieth century. One of those who fought for a more inclusive and open church was the pastor of First Christian Church, C. M. Chilton. In addition to serving as the moderator of the denomination he also led for a time the denomination's body in charge of promoting Christian unity across denominational lines. In one of his historical addresses, he wrote, "The world is still waiting for a people to live the simple religion of Jesus. Gethsemanes and Calvaries lie in the way, but this religion of ours must be lived if it would conquer the world--yes, it must be lived if it would conquer the church."³ In other words, he viewed the dogmatism and close-mindedness of the church as one of the key obstacles to living out the teachings of Jesus. Chilton promoted the idea of "open membership" where a person did not need to be baptized in a particular way in order to be a member. I've heard it told that Chilton once remarked after golfing with the pastor of First Presbyterian here in St. Joseph, "If he's good enough to golf with, then he ought to be good enough to go to church with." In his day and still in ours, the ability to look beyond doctrine or denomination is rare.

The succession of pastors following Chilton remained pluralistic and ecumenical. They along with the membership sustained a church that was committed to social justice, working to eliminate the religious lines that divide people and creating an atmosphere of intellectual faith that refused to shy away from difficult questions or quake in the presence of diversity of opinion.

I would offer to you that this is a legacy that has been passed down to us that we accept or refuse at our own peril, for it is perilous to discard such a history and perilous to accept its great responsibility. We can choose to look at the past decades of decline and choose to keep doing what has been done only to slide into irrelevance. Or, we can look to the rich history of First Christian and choose to believe that there is still a need for a church in St. Joseph that treasures loving God with our minds as well as with our emotions, a church where people can hold different beliefs but still sit together and find common ground to worship God, a church that chooses to set aside dogmatism that excludes people and welcomes all comers. This is a church that is worth rallying for.

Jesus asked the crowds following him to consider the cost of being his disciple. He declared through use of hyperbole that we should place following Christ above even the strong and deep ties of family and possessions. Although Jesus was not literally asking us to hate our parents or necessarily asking us to sell all we own, he is asking us to sacrifice for his sake and the sake of loving others in his name. The problem with most Christians today, I believe, is they have not experienced anything worth sacrificing for.

The church a believer belongs to serves many functions in that person's life, but chief among them should be a feeling that their church is the place where they come together with like-minded folks to experience God. First Christian Church is the place and it is the community where you have the opportunity to create the church as you believe it should be—this is the place where the Kingdom of God breaks into the world for you.

As we look to the future, we should learn from the mistakes of the past and be inspired by our church's rich history. Both can guide us as we seek to live out what it really means to be a Christian here in this community of faith. We can be the church that God wants us to be for our community. We can be a church that is not afraid of questions, that does not claim to have all the answers, that works to care for those that no one else cares for, that speaks for those whose voices are not heard, that welcomes all people regardless of race, nationality, religious background, sexual orientation, gender or whatever other thing it is that people use as an excuse to oppress others. We can be the church that people turn to who have no hope and who live believing that they are worthless and they are unloved. We can be the church that shows that Christianity is not just a religion of hypocrites who judge and condemn. We can be that church!

Don't stop thinking about tomorrow. It is time to rally. Amen.

Rev. Chase Peoples

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 9, 2007

¹ For a brief yet thorough overview of 20th century American Protestant denominations, see C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream: Sources of Growth and Opportunities for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 22-36.

² I'm sure there are any number of good books about the history of the Disciples of Christ, but I'm a newbie. Here are the books I read for my course on History and Polity: Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997); Lester McAllister and William Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1976); and Colbert S. Cartwright, *People of the Chalice: Disciples of Christ in Faith and Practice* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 1987).

³ C. M. Chilton, "Thomas Campbell and the Principles He Promulgated" in *The One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Disciples of Christ: Pittsburg, October 11-19, 1909*, ed. W. R. Warren (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1910). This document is available on-line as a part of a great collection of texts by important figures in the "Restoration Movement" of which our denomination grew out of <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wwarren/ccr/CCR15D2.HTM>.