

“The Things That Cannot Be Shaken”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

January 18, 2004

Text: “This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is created things—so that we cannot be shaken may remain” (Hebrews 12:27).

This week marks the beginning of what has become a strange ritual in America today--the beginning of a Presidential election year with the Iowa caucus on Monday night. Over the next few months our nation will be in the midst of an intense debate over the future leadership and direction of our nation. This week I noted an article in *The New Yorker* magazine that featured an interview with a former Senator and presidential candidate, Eugene McCarthy. In the interview McCarthy noted that there were five categories of people that should not be president. The first, he said, are former Governors. (That would exclude President Bush, former Presidents Clinton and Carter as well as Howard Dean.) “We used to say in the Senate,” noted McCarthy, “that if you elect a Governor to the Senate, it takes them six months to get over it, and if you elect them President, they don’t have enough time.” The second category was Vice Presidents, especially those who have run for President. (I immediately thought of Al Gore and the former

President Bush.) “They have compromised so badly,” McCarthy observes, “they don’t have any integrity left.” The third category was Ministers and sons of ministers. Walter Mondale was the son of a minister, noted McCarthy. (But then, so was Woodrow Wilson). The fourth category was Generals. (That would take out George Washington, Ulysses Grant, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Colin Powell.) The fifth category was corporate C.E.O.s who, according to McCarthy, come out of a “corporate morality that is uncivil and artificial.”

I.

One of the most difficult tasks in the life of faith is trying to distinguish between the things that are essential to one’s faith from those things that aren’t essential. In fact, so much of the trouble that the church has experienced through the centuries comes from this very dilemma. Through the years the church has wrestled with issues such as slavery, the rights of women, the civil rights of African-Americans and other minorities, the War in Viet Nam, just to name a few. Now most of us would argue that these are important--even critical issues. But these are not the only issues that have divided churches. Churches have also been divided over the use of alcohol, Baptism by sprinkling or immersion, dancing, card playing, and attending movies on Sunday. Someone once shared with me an article that was published in the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* in April 1944, entitled “Dancing at Davidson.” In this editorial the writer lamented the fact that the Board of Trustees of Davidson College had voted to allow students at Davidson to hold dances on the college campus, a decision that the editorial writer viewed as “a tragic compromise that would have far-reaching and serious results.” I wonder what they would think of what is happening at church-related colleges and universities today.

Looking back on some of the things that the church was fighting over during my childhood years, some of these things seem strange, if not bizarre. But whether we like it or not, the fact of the matter is that one of the most important tasks of Christian discipleship is trying to distinguish the things that are really important from the things that are not.

One of the things that strikes me about the Book of Hebrews is the remarkable way that it links the present to the past. In the twelfth chapter of Hebrews the author of that great Epistle compares the Christian journey to a race where the runner sets forth to run the race and get to the finish line. The writer of Hebrews then observes that we do not run this race in a solitary fashion. We are, he observes, surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses.” It is like a coliseum or stadium where the athletes perform in front of a great audience. Then, later in the twelfth chapter, we encounter that verse: “the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been, that those things which are not shaken may remain.” They too faced a problem that every generation has faced. That was certainly a problem in the early church. Early on the church tried to distinguish what was essential to following Jesus. Jesus was, in fact, a Jew. As such, he followed the Jewish religious rules and rituals. But what about the Gentiles--the non-Jews? Did they have to be circumcised? What about the dietary laws? What about all the Jewish rites of purification? What was essential and what was nonessential?

II.

So, let's be honest. There are things that do change. Our thinking about God has changed. In the early chapters of the Book of Genesis God is pictured as walking through the Garden of Eden as a person might walk through his yard in the time of late afternoon. Or, on another occasion, God is pictured as coming to earth fearful that humankind might build a tower so high it would ascend into the heavens themselves. Most of us do not view God in that fashion.

Our view of the universe has certainly changed. The worldview of the Bible reflects that of the ancient world the earth is flat with the heavens above it and the waters below it. Today, we have a much different view of our universe. We know not only that the earth is not the center of the universe; it is not even at the center of our solar system. In medicine, in science, in astronomy, in almost every field we can imagine, our world has changed.

III.

There are, however, some things that have not changed. The gospel has not changed. On another occasion the writer of Hebrews reminded his readers, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Recently I came across a book by Dr. Thomas C. Oden, entitled *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*, in which Oden, a distinguished theologian and United Methodist minister, notes a stark reversal in our time: as modern secular and political ideologies continue to wane, communities of traditional faith are flourishing now more than ever. This resurgence shows itself in widespread efforts to reclaim the classic spiritual practices: the study of scripture, daily prayer, and the discipline of regular worship, doctrinal integrity, and moral accountability.

One of the most remarkable experiments in the Presbyterian Church in the past century took place in 1918 when the First Presbyterian Church of New York City called as its minister Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was one of the most famous ministers in America, but there were a lot of people who were upset that he would occupy such an important pulpit. He was, after all, an ordained Baptist minister. He was furthermore, a "modernist" preacher whom many regarded as too liberal. Fosdick became the focal point of a controversy that riddled the Presbyterian Church in the struggle between the so-called "fundamentalists" and "modernists" in the church.

Recently the First Presbyterian Church of New York City published a book, entitled *A Preaching Ministry*, that gives an account of the years 1918-1925 that Fosdick served as the minister of that church. Those who remember that period of time are quick to point out that while there was a controversy surrounding that church, there was no controversy within the church. Liberals and conservatives alike found in this remarkable preacher a man, who like the Apostle Paul had found God in Jesus Christ, had lived his life undergirded by the presence of Christ, who had found forgiveness for his sins and who spoke with a deep faith and a compassionate heart, who could say with the Apostle Paul that, "for me to live is Christ."

You see, at the heart of everything we do, there are some things that cannot be shaken: faith in God, life in Christ, power through the Spirit, the resurrection of the body, the life

everlasting. This is what constitutes the gospel of Jesus Christ and this is one of the things that cannot be shaken.

IV.

Another thing that cannot be shaken is the great imperative of the Christian life. One of the things that attracted people to Jesus Christ was that he not only spoke about service to others, he lived it in his own life. "The Son of Man," Jesus said to his disciples, "came not to be served but to serve." Certainly that was the witness of his life. He reached out to a woman taken in adultery saying to her, "Go and sin no more." In the same fashion Jesus opened his arms to all who were in some way on the fringe of his society: women and children, tax collectors and prostitutes. "Those who are well," Jesus said to his critics, "do not need a physician. I have come to save the lost."

This past week I participated in an interview with Frye Gaillard, a local author and reporter. He was writing an article on some of the ministers in Charlotte for a local publication, *Creative Loafing*. As I talked about First Presbyterian Church, I told Frye that I did not believe we were what some would call an "issues" church. That is to say that I don't think our church has tried to take certain positions on controversial issues such as abortion, homosexuality, the War with Iraq. Rather, I told him that I believed that we had a number of people who represented a pretty broad spectrum of theological, political, and social views. When he asked me if there were any special qualifications for membership in this church, I told him that the only qualification of which I was aware was that a person profess faith in Jesus Christ. You can be rich or poor, black or white, straight or gay--as long as you are willing to profess Christ. When he asked me if there was any defining characteristic of this church that stood out above all others, I told him that I believed that the one defining characteristic of this church was its outreach to people in distress: the poor, the homeless, the ones Jesus called "the least of these"

Someone once observed that there are two dominant views of Christianity that vie with each other. One views the faith as static, defined once for the faithful for all times. Its creed is timeless, its formulations etched in stone. It is a finished article. The other view is that Christianity is not a finished article, but a growing movement. It is like a tree whose roots are deep in the spirit of Christ. Sometimes it puts forth misshapen branches that must be pruned. Sometimes old branches die and must be cleared away. But it is always changing, always pouring new wine in new skins, always moving to new challenges, always struggling to separate the things that change from the things that never change.

Someone once observed that people are like flagpoles. Some are tall and straight; others not so tall and straight. But the glory of a flagpole is not its physical dimensions; it is the colors it flies. At the end of the day we might all wish we had been straighter and taller flagpoles. But we must never be ashamed of the colors that we have flown.

Amen!