

“Christian Ministry Today”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “So, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (II Corinthians 5:17).

Today marks a unique day in the life of our nation. This morning we mark the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., that occurred on September 11, 2001. Four years have passed, but the sheer horror and terror of that morning has not been erased from our personal memories or national consciousness. For most of us the images of those planes hitting the Pentagon and World Trade Center will forever be a part of our conscious and unconscious memory. In the four years since that tragic morning we have been engaged in a War in Afghanistan and in Iraq that appears to have no apparent end.

However, this morning we are also deeply aware of the terrible havoc that Hurricane Katrina has wreaked on the Gulf Coast of New Orleans. For almost two weeks we have watched in disbelief as reports have come on television and in the newspapers chronicling the terrible loss of property and life that has taken place in that region and the enormous human suffering that has ensued as the result of this natural disaster.

This past week Thomas Friedman wrote a piece in the *New York Times*, that he entitled “Osama and Katrina.” In that article he points out the intimate relationship between the events of September 11, 2001, and the Hurricane that struck the coastline of this country on August 30, 2005. Friedman points out that in addition to ripping away the roofs of New Orleans, Katrina has also ripped away the argument that we can cut taxes, properly educate our kids, compete with India and China, succeed in Iraq, improve the U.S. infrastructure, and take care of a catastrophic emergency--without putting our country in a state of total financial distress.

In the wake of the aftermath of Katrina we now see more clearly some of the things that we have avoided over the past several years. Because we have refused to conserve gasoline, we now face fuel costs that are in excess of three dollars per gallon, placing our livelihoods at risk, as well as funding some of the most repressive regimes in the Middle East. In addition, the aftermath of Katrina has also demonstrated to us the terrible poverty that exists in many of the urban areas of our country. Many of the people in New Orleans who died or who were stranded did not evacuate the city because they had no means to evacuate and no choice except to stay. For the last several years the mantra in America, Friedman points out, has been, “We’re at war. Let’s party.” Well, today, the party is over. It is going to take an enormous sacrifice on all our part, if we are going to win the war on terror and rebuild the Gulf Coast of the United States.

I.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church in Corinth, speaks of the ministry of the church as a ministry of reconciliation. In this letter, as in the letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul speaks of the death of Christ as “breaking down the walls of hostility between people” (Ephesians 2:14ff). In the time of the New Testament there were walls that divided people from each other. There was the wall that separated Jews and gentiles, the wall that separated slaves from free persons; there was a wall that separated males and females.

Today, we find ourselves facing walls that divide us. One is the wall of race. Cornel West, in his book Race Matters, points out that in spite of the many strides that we have made over the past decades, the issue of race is still a critical issue in this country. Our cities are segregated. Our neighborhoods are segregated. Several years ago I had the opportunity to get to know a young African-American man whom I met at the Urban Ministry Center. He was struggling to turn his life around. He had found a job. He was clean from alcohol and drugs. He was working in a restaurant in South Charlotte. When I saw him a few weeks later, he was very rejected looking. He told me he had lost his job. When I asked how he had lost it, he told me that he was required to work at the restaurant until midnight. By then, he said, the buses were no longer running, so he had to walk to where he was living in north Charlotte. But he was afraid to walk through Myers Park and Eastover because he knew that if someone saw him, that person would probably call the police.

There is another wall that divides us and it is the separation between rich and poor, a division that is growing in this country and is a real threat to the social fabric of our nation. This has been very obvious in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast. Wealthy people had the means to evacuate. Many of the poorest of the poor did not. They

had no way to leave the city and no place to go. Moreover housing patterns in New Orleans, like so many cities in this country, are such that wealthier neighborhoods are on higher ground and far less vulnerable to floods and hurricanes than the poorer neighborhoods.

One of the deep concerns that occupied John Calvin, the great Reformer of the 16th Century, was the concern he had for Christians to live with simplicity in their lifestyles. In part this was a reaction to the corruption that Calvin witnessed in the medieval church: corrupt priests, corrupt popes, and conspicuous consumption by ordinary Christians. Calvin's concern was that if the rich lived extravagantly, the poor would go hungry. That was particularly true in a city like Geneva, which was crowded with refugees and vulnerable to food shortages. Calvin was confident that God had created such a bountiful world that all could enjoy the means of life if resources were fairly shared. He encouraged the church and its leaders to model simplicity in their personal lives.

We are living today in a time in which the walls that divide us are high indeed. But just as the Apostle Paul proclaimed that Christ was able to break down the walls that separated Jews and Greeks, slaves and free men and women, so today we are called to a "ministry of reconciliation" to break down the walls that separate us from each other.

II.

In the first place, the ministry of reconciliation demands us to place Jesus Christ firmly at the center of our proclamation. Dr. James Edwards, who teaches religion at Whitworth College, observed recently that throughout the history of the church there has always been a certain discomfort with Christ. In the Second through the Fourth Century there were a series of Christological controversies that demonstrated certain nervousness about Christ.

Edwards goes on to say that in our own time there is a great deal of uncertainty concerning what we believe about Christ. Several years ago a Presbyterian minister by the name of Dick Ficca preached a sermon at the "Peacemaking Conference" that he entitled "What's the Big Deal About Jesus?" In that sermon he echoed what is very current in our contemporary society and in our churches as well. We don't want to make a big deal about Jesus. After all, isn't Jesus just one religious leader among others? To be sure, Ficca argued, Jesus was special, but so were Buddha, Mohammed, and Moses.

Another tendency that Edwards has noted in the church today is a theological shift from an emphasis on salvation to an emphasis on creation. We have shifted from the proclamation of human sinfulness and the subsequent need for repentance and redemption to an emphasis on the state of things in their natural order as being the rightful and final expression of God's will. The new theology assumes that what "is" is essentially good. The not so subtle shift in culture and in the church as well is a movement from a call to transformation according to the image of Jesus Christ to an affirmation of who I am as I am. Historically, the gospel has been preached in transitive term verbs such as change, believe, turn, repent, and follow. The new theology is couched in intransitive verbs of affirmation--being and becoming.

Let us be clear about one thing. If we cannot be certain about Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the World, then nothing else we do is going to make any difference.

III.

Closely connected to the centrality of Christ in the church is an emphasis on the “transforming” nature of Christ. That is what the Apostle Paul proclaimed to the church at Corinth. “If any person is in Christ,” he wrote, “that person is a new creation. The old has passed away; see, the new has come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Now, I think we have to be clear about this. The gospel of Jesus is not a particularly relevant gospel to the culture in which we live. Dr. John Leith, who taught theology at Union Seminary for many years, once told me that at the time of his retirement, he went through his extensive personal library. He gave away a number of his books to his former students. Others he threw away. He did note that in many of the books he threw away there was a common theme. Almost all of them were books written in an attempt to make Christianity relevant to the modern age. All of them, he said, had failed.

Perhaps it is time for us to realize that we cannot make the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant to the culture in which we live. After all, if the Apostle Paul understood that the gospel was a “scandal to the Jews” of his day and “foolishness” to the gentiles, is it no less true today? Do we expect a secular, narcissistic, selfish, and self-absorbed culture to understand a gospel that is rooted in the voluntary death on a cross of a man who lived “not to be served but to serve?” Isn’t it not time for the church to say that we are not in the business of just accepting people for the way we are, but that we exist to transform people by the grace of God in Jesus Christ? Often, I meet with families and individuals who are planning to join our church. One of the things I try to say to them is that if you are just joining this church to get married in a sanctuary with a center aisle, or to baptize your baby, or to park your membership somewhere, then for God’s sake, don’t join this church. We don’t need you. You don’t need us. But if you are willing to acknowledge your own sinfulness, repent of your sin, receive God’s forgiveness, and try to live as Christ would have you live, then for God’s sake, come and be a part of the life of this church.

Over the next several weeks I am asking every member of this church to do two things: 1) make a financial pledge to First Presbyterian Church so that we can continue the work of this church in 2006 and 2) Make a personal commitment to help in the recovery efforts of Hurricane Katrina. There are over a million people who live on the Gulf Coast who have been displaced and whose lives are shattered. None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something. Perhaps you are able to make a donation. Perhaps you are able to work with those people who are now in the Charlotte area. Perhaps you can contribute one of the school kits, or child kits that our church is sending to Vicksburg, Mississippi. Perhaps you will at some point be able to travel to that area and assist in the rebuilding of homes and churches. But each of us can and ought to do something.

Finally, the most important thing I am asking you this morning is to commit your life to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. As a church and as a nation, we are going to be challenged over

the next several years in ways that we have not been challenged before. If we are to be the church that God has called us to be, we will have to be a church that puts Christ in the center of all that we do. Moreover, we must also open ourselves to the transforming power of Christ in our lives.

Nothing less will be anywhere close to being enough to provide us the strength we will need for the living of these days.