

“The Eternal and the Transient”

a sermon by

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Text: “And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; not shall another be made.” (Jeremiah 3:16)

This morning I want to hold before you two verses of Scripture from the Old Testament. The first is from Joshua 7:6 where we read, “Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening.”

This was an appropriate place for Joshua to pray. After all, the ark of the covenant was the most sacred symbol of Israel’s faith. It contained the tablets of law that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. At times the Israelite people brought the ark into battle to insure victory. When David made Jerusalem the capital of the kingdom of Israel, he immediately brought the ark of the covenant to the capital city. In the same fashion when King Solomon built the great temple in Jerusalem, he placed the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. The ark of the covenant represented the presence of God. The Israelite people believed that as long as the Ark was present in the temple, they would never be conquered by an enemy.

Six hundred years later we find a very different assessment of the role of the Ark of the Covenant. In the prophecy of Jeremiah we read these words: “In those days, says the Lord, they shall no more say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed. It shall not be made again.” (Jeremiah 3:16)

Now, here is a very stunning tension within Scripture. In the early days of Israel’s faith the ark of the covenant was identified with the presence of God. Where the ark goes, God himself goes. But by the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the ark is meaningless. He is glad that it is gone. He does not want it remembered or rebuilt.

There is something in this tension that presents one of the great dilemmas that all of us experience in the life of faith. How you separate the eternal from the transient? How do we discern

what is timeless, true, and authentic from institutions and forms which may contain the treasure of faith but are not themselves the faith?

I.

Now, there are many of us who can identify this tension in our religious faith. As a boy, I remember that Sunday (the Sabbath) was observed very strictly in the community in which I lived. This was true in many places in the Southeastern United States. Church people did not go to movies on Sunday, did not engage in recreation, and many families practiced a strict observance of worship, rest, and study of the Scripture or catechism.

Today, I wonder if there are any families who even understand the concept of Sabbath. To be sure, we understand the concept of weekends. Weekends in contemporary society are times of recreation, leisure activities, and for many working people they are rare times that parents can spend time with children.

But what about the notion of Sabbath? The fourth commandment still stands: “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.”(Exodus 19:8-11) What about the notion that even as God rested after six days of creation, there is a time of rest, to abstain from all work.

But there are other changes that we have experienced as well. The ordination of women did not take place in the Presbyterian Church until the 1950’s. Moreover, Presbyterian Churches, like other churches, were racially segregated until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s.

Over the years the church has struggled to maintain this tension between the things that are eternal and the things that are transient.

II.

There is another dimension of this as well. It is critical to distinguish between a faith that does not change and the forms of faith that are constantly changing. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, notes that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels so that we it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us.” (II Corinthians 4:7)

I remember a woman in a church I once served who said to me that if she could not believe that the whale swallowed Jonah, she would lose her religion. Now all of us who knew her knew her as a radiant Christian with a very deep faith. We knew that her faith was stronger than any whale.

But we do have those whales don’t we? We have those things that we believe are essential to the faith and often churches are split or destroyed because someone has a whale that he or she cannot let go of.

I remember several years ago when Dr. Fred Craddock gave the Willard Lectures at our church. He told of a church where he had grown up as a boy. It was a downtown church and he remembered as a boy there was a dispute going on the church. The dispute centered on the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (Communion). Apparently, there were new people moving into the neighborhood and there was a group of people in the church who were opposed to allowing this new

people to take communion. Apparently the conflict became so bitter that the church divided over the issue.

Craddock went on to say that a few years ago he had the chance to visit the city where he had grown up. He was speaking at a church in this city and he asked his hosts if he could see the church where he was raised as a boy. His host took him downtown to the place where the church was located. Except that it was no longer a church. It had been turned into a restaurant. Craddock said that he walked into the restaurant and looked at the place where the pulpit and communion table once stood. It was now a salad bar. And he said to himself, "Well, I guess now people can finally come to the table."

III.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once observed that there are two temperaments in religion, one conservative and the other liberal and that each was essential to the other. But he observed that each could be easily abused.

On the one side are those who have a great deal of difficulty giving up on the past. Certainly that was true of Joshua. He could have never imagined a time when the ark of the covenant would not be present. He could have never imagined that one day there would be a prophet like Jeremiah who would recognize that the ark was no longer needed.

That was an issue that Jesus had to face. The Sabbath laws in Jesus' time had become very rigid. They were very sacred and religion had hallowed them. But Jesus allowed his disciples to pick corn on the Sabbath and he healed a man who was crippled on the Sabbath and said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.

Sometimes religion is hardened and has to be reformed. When Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to reform the medieval church, they did not do so by resorting to innovation. To the contrary, they insisted that the church return to its original nature. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was a return to the essentials of the faith: sola Scriptura (Scripture alone); sola gratia (grace alone); and sola Christus (Christ alone).

Over the years the church has suffered when people could not let go of some particular ark of the covenant. In the time of Copernicus and Galileo the church could not embrace a new science that saw the sun as the center of our world and not the earth.

In my own lifetime I have seen groups of people who held on to certain fundamentals that they could not let go of: the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, and the substitutionary view of the atonement of Christ.

To be sure, it is critical that we keep the faith. But keeping the faith is one thing and keeping the ark is another. Jeremiah kept the faith. He carried it into a new day and lifted it higher than it had been lifted before. He became a forerunner to Christ. He kept the faith but he did not keep the ark.

IV.

There is another danger that the church faces and it is the danger of abandoning the things that are essential. It is true that Jeremiah could envision a day that the ark of the covenant was no longer needed. But Jeremiah had a much higher view of God. Listen to his words: “Can any person hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him?” says the Lord. That is reforming religion with religion.

Someone shared with me this week an article written by Richard John Neuhaus that appeared in 1992 in *First Things*. The title of the article was “Presbyterians: Where Have All the People Gone?” and the article featured an interview with Dr. John Leith who taught theology at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia for a number of years. Dr. Leith had just returned from the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Milwaukee.

The most decisive action of the assembly, according to Dr. Leith, was the election of the moderator, John Fife, the pastor of a 156 member church in Tucson, Arizona. John Fife was a social activist who was involved in the Sanctuary Movement and who was a vigorous opponent of the U.S. policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Fife had served five years of probation after being convicted of violating U.S. laws in connection with his protest activities. The candidate that Fife defeated was a Presbyterian minister, Dr. W. Frank Harrington, who was the minister of the 10,000 member Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, a church that was known for vibrant evangelism and stewardship. Leith noted that this election was significant in that it showed reluctance in our denomination to elect to leadership positions ministers who had demonstrated a capacity to build and serve local churches.

Another critical point in the Assembly had to do with the role of Scripture in the church. In the debate that centered on the issue of abortion, the assembly of our church, in describing the role of the Bible in the church chose the language of the Bible as “unique and authoritative” as opposed to the previous language that described the bible as “ultimate, and authoritative.” In commenting on this change, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, a professor also at Union Theological Seminary, declared that “There is a virus eating at the P.C.U.S.A., a deadly disease that is making us sick, gradually but surely destroying our life together. The disease is characterized by the attempt to turn the Scriptures into a relativistic document that takes two forms. First, the Scriptures are viewed no longer as the ultimate authority for our faith and practice but only as a unique authority, one differing from other authorities, yet not necessarily superior to them. Second, the Scriptures are said to have no objective meaning in themselves but rather contain only that message which the individual interpreter brings to them.”

Neuhaus concludes his article by saying that one may or may not agree with the conclusions of people like John Leith or Elizabeth Achtemeier, but the Presbyterian Church can only be the church to the extent that it lives by the Word of God.

Now, surely the church today is a church that must be able to meet new challenges and changing times. But it is equally important that we not lose the one thing that makes us a church.

Amen.