

**On Being Presbyterian  
Part 2: “Decently and In Order”**

Luke 15:11-32; Philippians 1:6

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on February 8, 2015]

I

Last Sunday I began a two part series on what it means to be Presbyterian.

Because of the weather, a number of you weren't able to be here, so there are copies of that sermon on the information table in the fellowship hall.

Today for part 2, I want to begin by asking you,

**How would you sum up what it means to be Presbyterian so that it fits on a bumper sticker?**

Now I am no fan of bumper sticker theology.

Narrowing a great thought or idea down to a statement that can fit on a bumper sticker is a silly exercise.

There is too much mystery and complexity to our Christian faith and to the God we worship to be reduced to a trite slogan.

But, like you, I do read bumper stickers,  
billboards,  
and church signs.

So, what would be on a Presbyterian bumper sticker?

II

One suggestion that has actually been printed on tee-shirts and distributed at Presbyterian gatherings is, “*Presbyterians do it...decently and in order.*”

This fits Presbyterians and it also gives us some insight into our gospel lesson this morning.

If you have been around church for any length of time,  
you are familiar with Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The younger son asks his father for his inheritance even before his dad is dead—  
which takes quite a bit of gall to do.

He heads off to a far country in search of wine, women, and song.

The money eventually runs out and the boy hits bottom and has to take a job at a CAFO (folks in Jay County know about CAFOs), feeding pigs to survive.

Finally, it dawns on him that the pigs are eating better than he is.

So the boy returns home to confess his sins and beg for a job as a servant in his father's household.

The father's response to the son's return is completely unexpected.

The father sees him coming from far off,  
runs to greet him,  
barely listens to his confession,  
and then throws him a great homecoming party,  
complete with music, dancing, and beef barbeque.

That's when the Presbyterian enters the story.

That's what the Greek says: the *presbuteros* comes in from the fields. *Presbuteros* is the Greek word that gives us the word "Presbyterian." It literally means "elder."

In this case, the *presbuteros* brother—the elder brother—shows up.

He takes great umbrage at what is going on and refuses to join the party.

### III

If you have been around Presbyterians for any length of time,  
you probably recognize the elder brother.

He is the brother who all his life has done everything **decently and in order**.

This is the brother who stayed at home,  
diligently followed all the rules,  
and faithfully did all the right things.

Every family has someone like him. Usually it is the oldest child—  
the golden boy or girl,  
who fulfills parental expectations,

never gets into trouble,  
and carries out all of his or her obligations,  
usually without complaining.

The elder brother was decent and in order as opposed to his younger brother,  
who was indecent and totally disordered,  
running off to a far country to waste his inheritance on riotous living.

The elder brother does not understand celebrating a person who broke all the rules and should be suffering the consequences of his actions.

Today I have brought a visual aid: the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Looks impressive, doesn't it?

It's actually much longer than the Constitution of the United States and all its amendments.

We have two volumes: The Book of Confessions and The Book of Order.

The Book of Confessions is a collection of statements of Christian faith over the last 20 centuries. Each one represents the faithful witness of Christians at a particular time and place as to what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Order is the compendium of church law for how Presbyterians are organized and governed. It has four sections:

F, the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity;  
G, the Form of Government,  
W, the Directory of Worship,  
and D, the Rules of Church Discipline.

*This is how we do it...decently and in order.*

Presbyterians have found that faithfulness to the Gospel works best this way.

Now maybe we will join the party when the prodigal son comes home,  
but we Presbyterians will at least wonder—

What is going to happen tomorrow?

Who is going to get up and go to work?

Who is going to do that week after week,  
year after year?

Is the prodigal son home for good? Or is he just there to bide his time and get his act together until he can leave again?

The elder brother is concerned about the “proven track record”—  
what is sustainable, workable, and tested.

This is a picture of Presbyterians.

We don’t get worked up in our worship services with shouts and jumping around and waving our hands in the air.

We understand that people can be changed, transformed, and converted—  
we just want to see it over the long term.

The old Aesop fable about the race between the tortoise and the hare fits us to a T.

You remember the story:

In the race the hare has all the speed but no attention and focus.

The tortoise is slow and boring and plods along at a steady pace.

Presbyterians are like the tortoise in that we make progress by plodding rather than by great leaps and bounds.

But you remember who won the race, don’t you? It was the tortoise.

Slow and steady wins the race and builds the kingdom of God.

#### IV

By and large, we Presbyterians are the elder brother who stood outside the party.

The party did not fit his expectations and his understanding of how the game is played.

In essence he says to his father,

*“I have done all the right things and I have never had a party like this!  
It is just so not fair!”*

Here, in part, is our dilemma:

Prodigals seem to have more fun and excitement than we Presbyterians do.

Prodigals seem to get away with breaking the rules.

The father responds gently and lovingly to the elder brother by saying  
 “Son (or daughter), you are **always** with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

Perhaps the word “always” fools us, makes us not see it.

Sometimes what is closest to us is what we fail to see.

All of you know the Frank Capra movie “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

It’s one of my favorites,  
 I watch it every December,  
 and I have to admit I **always** get choked up at the end.

George Bailey gets stuck doing his duty...  
 being responsible...  
 doing what needs to be done for his family,  
 his friends,  
 and the citizens of Bedford Falls.

He dreams of traveling the world,  
 breaking new ground,  
 being carefree and having no responsibilities.

And suddenly he gets his wish—he can live as if he had never been born.

But then George (wonderfully played by Jimmy Stewart, himself a life-long and faithful Presbyterian) learns the implications of his having not been born.

His brother Harry dies because George was not there to save him as a ten year old, and as a result during World War II ten thousand soldiers die in a torpedoed ship because Harry was not there to save them.

Mr. Gower goes to prison for accidentally poisoning a child.

Bailey Park, a community of decent homes for hard working people, is a dark, dismal cemetery.

The quiet community of Bedford Falls is swept up into the greed of Mr. Potter and is renamed Pottersville,  
 a seedy town full of bars,

saloons,  
and honky-tonks.

In fact, most of George's problems have something to do with the villainous Mr. Potter.

George, by doing his duty, keeps Potter from getting what he wants.

At the end of the movie, George can even say "Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter!"  
as George discovers a joy that the Potters of the world can never know.

Here is an important test for all Presbyterians:

Can we let go of worrying about whether or not the prodigal son gets his just desserts?

Can we give up trying to impose our standards of fairness on others?

Can we forego the need of always having to be right—  
having the right doctrine,  
the right biblical interpretation,  
the right standards of morality or ethics?

Can we allow ourselves to enjoy the party,  
even when we think it is not just or fair?

Can we find in our lives a joy in living responsibly,  
doing our duty,  
serving God faithfully as Presbyterians?

## V

One of the most important things Presbyterianism teaches us is the high theology of God that informs all we do.

God is not simply our "friend" or our "pal." God is the Sovereign Lord who created the heavens and the earth.

God is greater and more powerful and more mysterious than our deepest imaginings.

Our opening hymn expresses it well:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

This is why Presbyterian worship has a strong sense of dignity, formality, and reverence.

It is rooted in our conviction that in worship we encounter the very God whose holiness and majesty are beyond our comprehension.

One pastor told of a church member who was leaving the worship service and said,  
 “Pastor, I did not like that last hymn.”

The pastor replied, “We didn’t sing it to you.”

Worship is not about us...it is about God.

This, by the way, is why I find so much of what is called contemporary worship to be theologically vacuous—

it too easily becomes me-centered, rather than God-centered.

In our worship,  
 in our Christian education,  
 in our service to others in our community,  
 we are to put God first,  
 not ourselves.

This means also that our lives are to be marked by “holiness.”

By that I do not mean that we are to be “holier than thou,”  
 but rather that our faith in God must be evident in how we live our lives.

In the Book of Order there is an expression, “*Truth is in order to goodness.*”

That means as Christians we are called to serve God in all that we do.

As Presbyterians we believe we are saved solely by God’s grace.

**“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing;”**  
 says Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9, **“it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

But we also believe God’s grace compels us to live in conformity to God’s will and intention, as Paul continues in verse 10:

**“For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”**

Another implication is an appreciation of education and culture.

John Calvin spoke often of the “life of the mind” and believed that the search for truth leads inevitably to God.

As Christians and as Presbyterians, we are called to love God not only with our hearts, but with our minds as well.

Over the centuries, Presbyterians have placed great value on education,  
 founding some 65 colleges all over the US—  
 including Hanover College in southern Indiana—  
 and supporting ten seminaries for the training of church leaders.

Presbyterians have always valued the arts as well.

If you want to understand the Christian tradition,  
 don’t just look at the creeds and confessions.

Look also at the great contributions of Christian artists:  
 Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling...  
 Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*...  
 Mozart’s *Requiem*...  
 Rembrandt’s *The Road to Emmaus* and *The Return of the Prodigal*,  
 to name just a few.

Duty is not just about doing the right thing.

Duty is about learning practices that enrich life and lead to joy.

As Calvin wrote,

*Let us not cease to do the utmost, that we may incessantly go forward in the way of the Lord; and let us not despair of the smallness of our accomplishments.*

## VI

Friends, it truly is a wonderful life!

And it is wonderful to be part of God’s Presbyterian family.

Through regular worship,  
 faithful prayer,  
 generous stewardship,

and humble service  
 we find the joy of our loving Father who says,  
 “In these practices you have always been with me.”

Back in colonial New England, the legislature was meeting when a full eclipse of the sun occurred.

The unanticipated darkness in the middle of the day frightened many folks and some of the legislators moved that the assembly be adjourned,  
 since surely this was the end of the world.

But one of the legislators jumped up and in good parliamentary procedure addressed the Speaker of the House:

*“Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move that candles be brought to light the hall and let us continue our work.”*

Each of us has a part to play and a duty to fulfill.

Even though we are living in what has been described as a post-modern, post-Christian, post-denominational world,

I believe God still has an important contribution for Presbyterians to make.

Yes, there will always be changes and challenges,  
 and the future will always be different from the past.

But one thing will always be certain:

**“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”** (Phil. 1:6)

This promising word of grace from the great apostle applies to the Presbyterian Church, USA.

God, who gave birth to the church,  
 and keeps working in and through the church,  
 despite all the darkness and doubts,  
 will not let us go.

Just as God was in our past,  
 so God promises to be in our future.

We indeed have a rich theological heritage

and a great and continuing opportunity to bring the light  
of Christ's love into a world of darkness.

**May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.**

Amen.

Sources:

Alex Evans, "The Future of the PCUSA," sermon preached July 8, 2012, Richmond, Virginia.

William C. Pender, "It's About Being Presbyterian," sermon preached October 15, 2006.

"Presbyterian Imperative," sermon preached January 14, 2014, Rock Hill, South Carolina.