

WE : ONE

Texts for Worship at the Annual Meeting of the Presbytery of Western New York
Psalm 133, Ephesians 4: 1-6, John 17: 20-23

May 27, 2008

I've been reading a lot in the field of organizational development and leadership lately. The mainline churches struggle on up the hill year after year with such heavy labor; I seek an understanding that penetrates deeper than the latest denominational lingo. Ed Friedman's posthumously published *Failure of Nerve* hit a nerve in me. Consider:

"In 1970, an experiment was conducted in a French laboratory in which two organisms from the same species that had not developed immune systems were moved closer and closer toward one another. At a certain threshold of proximity, the smaller one began to disintegrate, and within twenty-four hours it had lost all the principles of its organization. The researchers tried to ascertain what the larger one had done to the smaller one, but in the end found that it had done nothing at all except exist; it had not secreted some substance, nor destroyed it in a hostile way. The smaller one simply began to disintegrate in response to the *loss of distance* . . . The researchers concluded . . . that they had induced auto-destruction in one member of the species by bringing it into proximity with a larger member of the same species." (Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, p. 180)

So succinct and complete an analysis of the rise and fall of the mainline church I have found nowhere. See the parallels. The mainline church is of the same species as the wider culture; it has the same values, the same anxieties, the same prejudices and fantasies of saving grace, the same types of compassion and the same patterns of fighting as are found spread through the society. Also, for decades, the church has had no immune system—that is, no clarity or skill for recognizing good and resisting bad behaviors—what does and does not belong. But now we are so much smaller than we were. Like the organism in the French experiment, the mainline church is just too near to its immense cousin. In the words of the researchers: *auto-destruction was induced in the smaller member by bringing it into proximity with a larger member of the same species*. We have done the same.

Now that may seem a dour thing to claim on the occasion of the installation of the new moderator of the Presbytery. Don himself invited me to deliver the sermon today, themed on Christian unity—and he may be wondering just now about that choice. But given that we have dwindled continually for five decades, and no quantity of handbooks from the national office or vituperation from the *Layman* has had any effect, I'd say the spirit of faithfulness require us to be as honest as we can at an annual ceremony of our life together.

All our scriptures today are about unity. Which means they are really about disunity, for a guide does not spend his breath commending behaviors which most already have in hand. No, disunity is a rule in ordinary life; disintegration is the threat we face always. Like a feared bird flu, disintegration has landed in our tradition. The whole system is terrifically anxious. What is there to do?

The biological phenomenon identified by the French experiment is not merely an interesting metaphor, to accept or reject. Consider rather that it is a natural, lawful process of organization and disorganization which cannot be nullified. The smaller of two similar entities will disintegrate—lose its unity—if its immune system is not functioning. No initiative can alter this outcome if it does not define the values of Christian culture, that is, take-up-your-cross culture, so clearly that anyone can see and feel the membrane. Kits from Louisville, changes in staffing patterns and committee structures, infusions of money—none of these can stop the disintegration. Only leaders who are preparing themselves inwardly for the exciting and often emotionally demanding work of . . . being like Jesus can make a difference. That challenging toward their vision, that unperturbable in the face of sabotage, that committed "to the lifetime project of being willing to be continually transformed by [their] experience." The science of immunology discovered that the immune system is not inherited; it develops only in response to challenge. The church is the same.

Unity, as John's gospel means it, is not pretending to believe the same things about God and Jesus, or adopting a tolerant, sweet disposition toward people you don't know or like. Unity is not a warm pool we can all jump in at once, if we choose. No, in fact that sort of unity is confusion—a melting down of real, valuable differences. A mask of unreal feelings pulled on in order not to have to deal with one's own feelings, or others. Dwelling together in unity means all souls convicted by a vision of their own capacity for divine action in a concrete, joined effort that not one can accomplish alone— "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I," in the psalmist's word. Unity is submission to that vision. For Christians, it must have the shape of the Cross—that is, a real relinquishment of power, faced voluntarily under the sign of mystical hope for the life that is given, not earned.

Human leadership is required for such a vision for personal and social transformation to glow and then burn in many hearts.

Friedman writes, "Leadership is the immune system of organization." But this Presbytery has let go of the pattern of leadership from an executive who can cast and hold a vision. So far as I can tell, we have not focused attention and practice on who will fill that function. Whose shaping of our vision will we submit our hearts and minds to? It is not clear that program staff can or should be invested with that responsibility. Yet without such leadership, the membrane of our organism will keep disintegrating. Now, it may be okay for the Presbytery to wither away. That may actually be the path into our century— provided strong leaders and their visions arise in the congregations. But I leave you with a question.

There was a day when the spiritual power and role of the Presbytery moderator was all and more than that of the executive of recent times. In recent times, Presbyterians have expected their local moderator to brew a weak tea: to lead meetings well, to be sure, but not to cast visions, not to hold pastors and elders accountable to their promises. John Updike's novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* opens with a portrait of a Presbyterian pastor and his moderator engaged in just such a relationship—in 1910. Might it be that we need to change? That we need to call forth from our moderator, now and henceforth, more than they know they have in them, and trust them to feel inwardly the call of God Holy Spirit for these times? To reshape these meetings. To engage the people in spiritual practices. To loosen the tongues of lay people for the stories of inner transformation that need telling.

For the sake of the world, we must begin to experiment with utterly new expressions of our being one, completely one—under the sign of the death strangely accepted and the life mystically given.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
Member, Presbytery of Western New York
delivered at First Presbyterian Church, Buffalo, New York