

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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Rio Rancho, NM

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WHY I AM A PRESBYTERIAN

I Corinthians 13

The old joke says that a Presbyterian is someone who drinks too much to be a Baptist but does not have enough money to be an Episcopalian. So how about you? Why are you a Presbyterian? Does it have anything to do with your drink of choice or the balance of your checking account? How fascinating to know why any of us is a Presbyterian.

The truth of the matter is I am a Presbyterian by choice. Of course, we are all Presbyterians by choice. But I suspect that almost half of us did not grow up Presbyterian. Many of you made that decision later on in your life. Perhaps you could sport a bumper sticker that reads, "I wasn't born a Presbyterian, but I got here as fast as I could." I arrived in the land of the Presbyterians in my mid-twenties. I have never regretted it for a minute. Oh, maybe a couple times during certain Session meetings.

But then I consider the alternatives and I quickly fall on my knees and thank God I am a Presbyterian. An heir of John Calvin, a

member of the Reformed tradition, a perennial loser in church softball. Some people can tell you the exact moment they became a Christian. I, on the other hand, can tell you the exact moment when I knew I would become a Presbyterian. You could call it an Epiphany, a moment of illumination, a long-awaited homecoming.

It was my first semester at Austin Presbyterian Seminary in the spring of 1972. In a course on the book of Acts taught by Dr. John Jansen, a student asked a question. Dr. Jansen began his answer with these immortal words, “It seems to me.” Now that may not sound very dramatic, but that was the moment. You see, I was not used to religious leaders saying, “It seems to me.” In my background, religious leaders said things like, “Thus saith the Lord”, or “The Bible says,” or “Listen and I will tell you the truth.” Their answers seemed to have a veiled threat, “Believe it my way or hit the highway.”

I was astonished that a religious leader would admit that his answer was subject to debate or that others might have a different and defensible opinion. Dr. Jansen’s answer acknowledged the complexity of the truth, that multi-faced diamond which refracts the light in diverse ways. I became a Presbyterian because I knew deep in my heart that all our perceptions of the truth are limited and

partial. All our truth claims should include this phrase, “It seems to me.” I bless the memory of Dr. John Jansen, the one whose words of grace and truth paved the way for my becoming a Presbyterian.

Now you are quite aware that many Christians are not familiar with this phrase: “It seems to me.” In the Corinthian letter the apostle Paul confronts a group of folks who had never used that phrase. These were Gnostics, the dogmatically self-righteous people who considered themselves intellectually and spiritually elite. The Gnostics saw no grays, only black and white. They figured they had the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In fact, the Gnostics felt they had esoteric knowledge of God, a sort of secret cat-scan of God’s mind. And they made life miserable for Paul, challenging him at every point.

So how does Paul deal with these dogmatic Gnostics, these know-it-all Christians? In I Corinthians 13 Paul points to our limited knowledge of God. He says, “Our knowledge is imperfect.” It is like a child’s reasoning, quite elementary, like a kindergartner thumbing through Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary. A young child will perhaps recognize the pictures, but a lot of the words will go right over her head. That’s how much we understand God-just the pictures.

Indeed, our knowledge of God is like the reflected image from a polished metal mirror. Craftsmen in Corinth fashioned the finest mirrors in the Mediterranean area. Their best mirrors then would be our worst mirrors now. Those polished metal mirrors produced an image that was at best hazy. Paul says that “now we see in a mirror dimly”. So our knowledge of God is like the dim, obscure reflection from a hazy mirror.

As a youngster I remember staring at translucent glass bricks in my hometown church. I could detect someone on the other side, but the blurred image meant I could never identify who that person was. Similarly, we do not know God completely. We know God only as that Someone on the other side who shines through translucent glass into our lives.

Paul contrasts our current knowledge of God with two other realities. First, God’s knowledge of us. In the Galatian letter, Paul says, “Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” Paul corrects himself in mid-sentence, emphasizing God’s knowledge of us, inside and out. As the Psalmists confesses, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.” Our present knowledge of God seems simplistic indeed, like what we knew of the universe before the Hubble and Webb Telescopes. Fuzzy and indistinct, in

truth, pre-Hubble and pre-Webb. In stark contrast to God's pristine knowledge of us now and forever.

Second, our knowledge of God now is always to be contrasted with our knowledge of God in the ultimate future. Then and only then will we see God face to face. To see God, the Beatific Vision, to behold the Lamb of God-that is the promise in Jesus' Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." That Someone on the other side will surely astound us with majestic splendor. Then the infinite Other will be as close as our breath. Then at last every knee will bow and every eye will see. In that moment "lost in wonder, love and praise" we will cry out in delightful awe, "We hardly knew you."

So the question arises, "So what can we know for certain now? What can we believe with confidence?" I turn to that classic old Gospel hymn that says, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." God in Christ reconciling the world to himself-that I believe with all my heart. Everything else is "sinking sand"-open to debate, tentative, questionable. All our knowledge about God is like looking in a mirror dimly, imperfect and incomplete. So let's not get so puffed up about what we think is true.

Remember that Paul said, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” And that is why Paul emphasizes the supremacy of love over knowledge. All our partial knowledge will one day be unnecessary. Gifts of prophecy, tongues, knowledge, creeds, theologies all have a certain shelf life. So we would be ever so humble about what we claim to know. We can come down off our intellectual and spiritual high horse and focus on the one thing needful-God’s love.

One day truly we will walk by sight, seeing face to face. And in that Beatific Vision we will be overwhelmed by God’s eternal love. In the awesome presence of God we will rejoice that only God’s love is infinite. Greater than all knowledge is God’s love. Greater even than hope and faith is God’s love for us. In our best moments, Presbyterians understand this. We know deep in our hearts that only God’s love finally matters from everlasting to everlasting. “But the greatest of these is love.”

What it boils down to is this: God does not fully reveal to us all the secrets of the universe. But God does reveal fully to us God’s own heart. And God’s heart overflows with love, the love shown to us by the Son of God, Christ our Lord. Forgiving love, reconciling love, redeeming love. The bread broken for you, the cup poured out on your behalf-acts of tender mercy for you.

This is the love that overcomes the world and holds the universe together. When all else fades and is forgotten, finally there is only God's love. This is ultimately why I am a Presbyterian and I hope it is at least one of the reasons you are too. "God is love." Thanks be to God. Amen.