

## **Testing...1-2-3**

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 22:34-46

October 26, 2014

Pentecost 20A

We Disciples, in trying to be an ecumenical, open and diverse group of believers, don't often take ourselves too seriously, or spend too much attention on how we came to be. So I thought it would be a fun refresher course for those of you who are lifelong Disciples, and good information to those of you who have come from other church backgrounds, to have a Disciples Heritage Sunday. The words of our hymns, our prayers and other parts of the service were by Disciples writers. Our church has grown from many roots, and I want to explore one of them today, because it's an anniversary of sorts.

Two hundred and ten years ago last summer, in 1804, down in central Kentucky, a remarkable document was signed by Barton Warren Stone, Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, John Thompson, and David Purviance. It was called "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery." This group of Presbyterian ministers and their congregations had formed the Springfield Presbytery the previous year, and were constantly in trouble with the Kentucky Synod of the Presbyterian Church. It had all started with the Cane Ridge Revival just 3 years earlier. This was part of a religious firestorm called the Second Great Awakening that had spread across the American countryside.

Now most Presbyterian leaders weren't really comfortable with revivalism. It wasn't dignified, and what's more, it seemed to fly in the face of Calvin's doctrine of Predestination—that God has chosen some of us to be the elect and the rest of us to be damned to hell from the very beginning. So why try to convert anybody? But this gang of six jumped right in to the revival atmosphere with both feet. Huge crowds gathered, and the Cane Ridge church was at the center. Thousands, maybe ten to twenty thousand total, gathered from the surrounding countryside to hear calls to repentance; to become believers- in Jesus Christ. The frontier then was a rough and ready place, and few were already Christian.

It had all started when a group of Presbyterian and Methodist churches in the Cane Ridge area decided to have communion together. Too many gathered to meet in the log cabin church that Barton Stone served, so they set up preaching and communion sites around the ridge. Tree stumps became pulpits. Rough wood slabs or wagon beds became communion tables. And just like at Pentecost in the book of Acts, the Spirit came and all heaven broke loose. People fell into trances, people barked like dogs, people rolled on the ground, people fainted, and many people became active Christians.

The Presbyterians in the mix, as I said, continued to work together after the revival was over, eventually forming their own Springfield Presbytery. Relations with the larger church were uneasy, and so they decided to dissolve the Presbytery and just become Christian churches with no denominational connection. In order to dissolve, they drew up a document called the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery. It was made to read like an individual person's will. Even though the churches were growing and healthy, it was time to die as an organization. This line summarizes the whole:

"We *will*, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling."<sup>i</sup>

Two separate movements grew out of this, the Restoration movement, which includes the Disciples, the independent Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ, and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Another group of Christian churches influenced by Stone, back east in the Carolinas, eventually merged with the Congregational churches that later formed the UCC. So this "death" of a Presbytery brought all kinds of life to an incredibly wide band of believers. Some years later, Stone's group of Christians and the Campbell's Disciples movement merged. Alexander Campbell was very rationalistic and uncomfortable with revivalism, but his movement and Stone's movement had so many of the same goals and practices that the merger made sense. We Disciples don't often spend a lot of time talking about our roots, but I thought you might enjoy this story of how we came to be who we are.

I'm sure that when Stone and the others of the Cane Ridge Six were under scrutiny from their synod for breaking so many rules, that they understood a little bit about Jesus felt when the Pharisees and lawyers tested him. Most of our scriptures lately from Matthew have followed a pattern—Pharisees or priests or lawyers try to engage Jesus in a discussion—not to hear what he has to say, but to trap him. In those detestable TV campaign commercials, we see time and time again where the ad writers take a phrase of the opponent's speeches and twist it and take it out of context—a sound bite—to change voter's minds. That isn't too much different from what's going on in our scripture readings. They try to spring traps, Jesus turns the traps back on them.

In today's passage, something different happens. First, Jesus answers a question—what is the greatest law? Rabbis had been arguing that one for years. No matter what Jesus would say, the scholars could likely produce a counter-argument. But in this case, instead of point-counterpoint, something remarkable happened—true communication and real understanding.

What is the greatest law? Of course—love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength. That had been the goal of Judaism from the very start. They had sought to do it by being faithful to the Law that God had given them through Moses; by being a people who lived in covenant, a sacred agreement, between them and God. God gave them the Ten Commandments, which begin with four commandments about loving God—honoring, respecting, avoiding idolatry and careless language; and six relating to ways we get along with our neighbor—honoring our parents; not killing or stealing or committing adultery; or coveting—that is, valuing our neighbor's things more highly than we value our neighbors themselves. So you can see how what Jesus said did truly reflect the heart of the Jewish law.

Often times when we're trying to explain something, someone will ask us to get to the heart of it quickly—So what's the bottom line here? What's the takeaway? Let's cut to the chase. And that's what Jesus did. But to love our neighbor as ourselves, we have to love ourselves, right? How often do we treat our neighbor poorly or think poorly of our neighbor because of our own issues?

It's all so simple and all so complex. David Lose, a Lutheran seminary president, tells the story from the boyhood of a friend of his, named Frank. "When Frank was nine or ten, he found himself in an argument with his younger sister. Before long, arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and pushing and shoving then turned to hitting. Just as Frank had his sister pinned on the ground, fist raised in the air, his mother came into the room. "Franklin," she bellowed, "stop that!" At that, as Frank would tell it, he turned his head toward his mother and said as only a young boy can, "She's my sister, and I can do anything I want to her." At which point Frank's mother swooped across the room, towered over him, and said, "She's my daughter -- *no you can't!*" That's the law: God's will, desire, and good intention that *all* of God's children flourish in this life. It is the law, ultimately, of a loving parent: "She's my daughter -- no you can't." No you can't have everything, hoard everything, own everything. Yes, there are all kinds of laws in both Old and New Testaments, but they all boil down -- as Jesus says in Matthew's account only -- to this: Love. Love God. Love your neighbor. And, as it turns out, these two aren't all that different. Love, you see, isn't an interior emotion, affection, or attraction in the Bible. It's an action, a behavior, a commitment to seek the good of another no matter what. To love God then, *is* to love God's children and seek the best for them."<sup>iii</sup> (unquote)

So Jesus passed his test about the law. He tossed off a final riddle about whose son the Messiah really was just to leave his testers in a bit of a muddle.

But Jesus not only passed the test, he gave us the answers to life's challenges and questions. What does God want of us? To love God fully and completely and to love our neighbors as ourselves. How can we live successful lives? To love God fully and completely and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Why are we here? To love God fully and completely and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We started off talking about our Disciples heritage. Let me go back to that briefly by quoting a statement that's not a creed, but a theme statement for our denomination. It goes like this:

*"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."<sup>iii</sup>*

That's who we are called to be. Amen and amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" Wikipedia..org

<sup>ii</sup> David Lose, "The Law of Love," Workingpreacher.org.

<sup>iii</sup> Disciples.org