

“PREFERENCE OR PURPOSE: TWO VERY DIFFERENT CHURCHES”
by Rom A. Pegram (1/28/18)

One time, a man was answering questions for a national poll. When asked for his church preference, he responded, 'Red brick.' Oh, if it could only be that simple...

Preference is something that the Supreme Court of the United States has declared is ... '*a very strong belief, held with great strength.*' However, they have also determined that a preference is '*a strong belief, but a belief that you will change under the right circumstances.*'

I'll tell you right now that ... I'm praying that is so! And, I'm praying that 'the right circumstances' might just be *a true love for both God and for one another.* What would that look like in worship? Well, as we begin today, I'm going to go out on a limb here, but my hunch is that many who are visiting churches on this very day are entering into worship asking similar questions to what Paul did in his letter to the Philippians. Listen:

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? ² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. ³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. ⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. – Philippians 2:1-5 (NLT)

We've been talking about LOVE as a missing element in worship. But, if we are worshiping as we should be, then LOVE *has* to be present—*no exceptions.* But, what would that look like? I believe today's story will tell us. First, however, let me begin with a few comments—a few observations from a pastor's experience over the years.

I've seen it many times. The details always vary just a bit, but the basic story is the same...

- The Church is in decline.
- Empty pews remind us of how far we've come—especially those who remember the days when the pews of churches were nearly full ... every Sunday!
- Current parishioners wonder why the offspring of long-time church members don't attend...
- The Church, *as many of us have known it*, is dying...

That's the basic story... Now, there are 2 CHOICES churches face when this happens:

- 1) *We can keep doing things the same way that we've done them for years:* same songs, same liturgy, same pace, and all *that will guarantee ... the same people*—everything exactly the same. And you know that, because with the reality of death, there will be no one left after awhile... OR...
- 2) *WE CAN CHANGE...* *Change?* The very idea brings *fear* to many hearts...

Folks, today we're talking about worship and we're talking about the presence of God's LOVE as a reality in worship ... and what that can look like. Let me begin our story today by talking first about a church we will call...

FIRST CHURCH: A STORY OF PREFERENCE! I have identical twin cousins; we've always been close. They had fun growing up together—dressing alike, switching places for tests they didn't like, or dates they weren't sure of. They looked identical on the outside, always enhancing their likeness intentionally by the way they dressed...

But, once I came to know my cousins a bit better, all I had to do was spend a couple of moments with them, and I knew who was who. You see, everything about them seemed to be identical ... except their personalities. One was a little more serious than the other. On the outside, they were incredibly alike. But, on the inside, they were a bit different...

Today, I'm going to tell you about two churches that remind me of my identical twin cousins—both from the same background; the people from similar socio-economic groups; the pastors even went to the same seminary and preach in nearly identical ways. The services are so similar you'd be hard pressed—if you heard a recording—to tell which church it came from, but the similarities are only on the surface. Here's the story:

FIRST CHURCH came to a crossroads awhile ago... *The younger generation wanted the church to use more up-to-date songs!* 300 year old songs played on an instrument that seemed just as old was just not their 'cup of tea.' They wanted lively music with understandable lyrics (to them, you understand); things like 'here I raise my Ebenezer' or 'naught be all else to me' were just not speaking to them. For the younger generation, it wasn't a matter of a band aid; only major surgery could help make worship meaningful to them...

The older folks, on the other hand, were perfectly content right where they were. "These songs were good enough for Grandpa and Pa and for me. They'll be good enough for you. The majority of us here at First Church are happy with the way we do things. It ain't broke; don't try to fix it" is what the younger generation continued to be told; and the reality is that many feel this way in the Church today...

Quite the dilemma ... but, then something happened; *the pastor negotiated a truce!* Somehow, he convinced both sides to 'give a little.' If only a compromise could be reached, eventually everyone would be satisfied. If it meant some measure of 'peace' in the church, both sides agreed to meet half-way and would try to cooperate. SO, they began mixing the praise & worship songs ... along with their hymns—a praise band to lead the praise songs ... and the organ to accompany the hymns. Everyone got what they wanted and everything was great, right? WRONG!!!!

At FIRST CHURCH, it was a disaster! No one—and I do mean no one—was happy! If there was unrest before, now it was worse—far worse! For those of a more traditional

background, 'at least they sung reverent songs before!' For those who'd pushed for the updated music, they still had to put up with the 'archaic stuff.' When the praise songs were sung, the traditional crowd stood stoically, refusing to participate. When the organ began to play, the younger folks rolled their eyes...

When preference comes first, we reluctantly act out of necessity. But, here's my question today: WHERE'S THE LOVE? Let me briefly tell you about what we'll call...

SECOND CHURCH: A STORY OF PURPOSE! In many ways, their stories are similar; SECOND CHURCH came to the same crossroads as FIRST CHURCH: *some folks wanted change; others did not.* But, the way they handled the situation was completely different ...

There was no compromise, no truce was signed, no peace treaty rendered. Instead, they went forward in genuine LOVE and concern for one another! Those who loved the wonderful old hymns did not really *want* to change; those songs were almost as much a part of their heritage as eating and breathing. Those songs were a sacred part of their lives, but at the same time they realized that change was necessary if the Church was to live on ... after them. So, what did they do when they'd reached the same crossroads? **THEY EMBRACED CHANGE AS SOMETHING THAT WAS GOOD AND OF GOD!** They willingly set aside their own preferences in order to help the next generation of believers—new songs, sung with gusto ... by aged voices; those who were mature in the faith welcomed the new words and melodies with open arms—nothing short of a miracle!

What happened because of their wholehearted acceptance of the changes was unexpected and every bit as much a miracle! The younger folks, when they realized how much the older ones had given up to accommodate them, suggested that maybe some of the old hymns were still pretty good ... and the organ was an O.K. instrument after all. Ross Peterson, SECOND CHURCH's most outspoken advocate for new songs in worship, suggested this. He said, "Let's still use hymns with an organ on a regular basis." Those who looked closely noticed that 83 year old Ethel Burgmeier had tears in her eyes as she walked across the room and hugged Ross after his comment...

Unlike FIRST CHURCH, there was no fighting or kicking or screaming at SECOND CHURCH. Unlike FIRST CHURCH, there was an amazing absence of hostility at SECOND CHURCH. Now, some handled the changes better than others, but *they all chose to love one another in the midst of change ... and THAT made all the difference!*

When purpose (God's Purposes) comes first, we eagerly act out of LOVE!

So, what does God think? When it comes to worship, do you think God is more concerned about *our* preferences or *His* purposes? Don't kid yourselves; *what we're talking about is a simple choice...*

- Will we choose to LOVE in the midst of change...

- Or will we choose to cling to *our* preferences—having a witness that truly lacks LOVE?

What does God think today? I think here's what God might tell us:

- *Shame on you who've walked with me for years ... and still don't see that MY LOVE is what really counts in your walk with me—in your worship of me. It's not the details of how you worship ... or even where you worship (John 4:21-24) ... but how you love one another in the midst of worship!*
- *And shame on you who are newer to the Church and want to tell those who've worshiped me for decades that they've been wrong and new ways are the only ways that are right; again, MY LOVE is what really counts in your walk with me—in your worship of me—not the details of worship!*

Folks, I think we've come to the point as a congregation that we know that CHANGE *has* to take place if we're going to have a church of tomorrow; the real question today is this: HOW ARE WE GOING TO CHOOSE TO TREAT ONE ANOTHER IN THE MIDST OF THE INEVITABLE CHANGE TO COME? As we finish up today, let's be reminded once again of God's word through Paul (Philippians 2:1-5) and have the attitude of Christ Jesus!

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? ² Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. ³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. ⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. – Philippians 2:1-5 (NLT)

Folks, Jesus loved us beyond our imagination. With God's help, we need to be doing the same for all who enter into this place...