

Mark 12:28-34

Romans 12:1-8

August 27, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Sunday, April 6, 1862, Brigadier General Adley Hogan Gladden was congratulating his Confederate troops for their early morning success in an opening skirmish in the battle of Shiloh in Tennessee. At 8:45 a.m., just after he encouraged his soldiers by saying, "So forward, let us go, there's more to be done, my boys," a mortar shell hit and destroyed General Gladden's left arm. He was placed on a flat board and carried to the headquarters of General P.G.T. Beauregard, where Dr. Samuel Choppin quickly amputated General Gladden's arm. He was transferred to Corinth, Mississippi, where he died of his wounds on Friday, April 12, 1862.

Brigadier General Adley Hogan Gladden commanded the First Brigade, Second Division of Bragg's Corps of the Army of the Mississippi. One month earlier, General Braxton Bragg himself called for General Gladden to report to Corinth, Mississippi with 15,000 men from Mobile and Pensacola, and named General Gladden Governor of Corinth.

A.H. Gladden was born in South Carolina and served in the Palmetto Regiment in the Mexican War. He moved to New Orleans in the early 1850's and became a successful cotton merchant. He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. He was also elected to the Secession Convention from the Parish of Orleans in Louisiana.

Brigadier General Adley H. Gladden's brother was named Daniel Webster Gladden. He named one of his six children after his deceased brother, Addley Hogan Gladden I, born December 1865 (my great-grandfather). Addley Hogan Gladden II was born in Homer, LA in February 1889 (my grandfather). Addley Hogan Gladden III was born in New Orleans, LA in March 1920 (my father). Philip Knox Gladden was born in New Orleans on February 4, 1956. Brigadier General Adley Hogan Gladden was my great-great-great uncle.

Two pictures of "The General" (as we call him) hung in our house when I was growing up. One shows Colonel Gladden in his Mexican War uniform, the other in his businessman's suit. We used to make what we jokingly referred to as "the pilgrimage" to the Shiloh National Battlefield, about halfway between Memphis and Nashville. We would visit the Gladden monument situated on Gladden Road. We would go to the museum and look at The General's artifacts, some of which my father (named for The General) had donated.

The General is part of my story.

Another part of my story is the former Presbyterian Church in the United States, which was called the "Southern Presbyterian Church." The PCUS was formed in 1861

and the national church didn't reunite until 122 years later, in June 1983. Although I am not a descendant of any Presbyterian preachers in the old Southern Presbyterian Church [when I told my grandfather in New Orleans that I was going to seminary, he said, "Well, we've never had any preachers in the family. But you know what they say — if you look back far enough in any family tree, you'll find a preacher and a horse thief!"], I guess I do belong to a long line of southern Presbyterian ministers. I was baptized, confirmed, nurtured, and educated for ministry in the old "Southern" church, but Nancy and I were ordained sixteen days after reunion in June 1983.

On November 29, 1860, Reverend Doctor Benjamin J. Palmer, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans preached a Thanksgiving Day sermon that clearly supported secession. On that same day, A.H. Gladden and nine other men from the congregation wrote Dr. Palmer and asked him to publish his sermon, which was based on verses from Psalm 90 and Obadiah. The sermon is a mixture of prevailing theological thought in the Southern Presbyterian Church and logical reasoning. Dr. Palmer was said to have preached "hell-fire and damnation" against the abolitionists, and said, "This argument, then, which sweeps over the entire circle of our relations, touches the four cardinal points of duty *to ourselves, to our slaves, to the world, and to Almighty God*. It establishes the nature and solemnity of our present trust, *to preserve and transmit our existing system of domestic servitude, with the right, unchallenged by man, to go and root itself wherever Providence and nature may carry it.*"¹

Presbyterian preachers in the antebellum South used the Bible to defend slavery. As one scholar put it, "Southern Presbyterian ministers were compelled to defend and even justify slavery from a religious standpoint. Those Presbyterian apologists turned to the Bible to justify the South's peculiar institution and defend the piety of the southern way of life. To defend slavery was to defend the very essence of the southern way of life. Religion and its spokesmen held the responsibility of infusing the southern culture with the moral strength of divine support, thereby confirming southern values and solidifying the southern position."²

Ninety-four years later, in May 1954, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States met in Montreat, North Carolina. The report of the Council of Christian Relations to the assembly included a section entitled "The Church and Segregation." The assembly adopted a measure that called on churches to examine the prevailing practice of segregation in Presbyterian colleges and universities, synods and presbyteries, and local churches. The recommendations were based on theological reflection, scripture, and coming changes in American culture. The first recommendation of the Council of Christian Relations was "that the General Assembly affirm that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics and that the Church, in its relationship to cultural patterns, should lead rather than follow."³

On July 2, 1954, the session of this congregation met and adopted a resolution opposing the recommendations of the General Assembly regarding "the abolition of segregation in all phases of church activities." Following some "whereases" with some general theological, biblical, and cultural references, the session resolved: (a) That it is

opposed to the abolition of segregation in the Wallace Presbyterian Church; (b) That it refuses to comply with the request of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church In The United States, to abolish segregation; (c) That it views with extreme disfavor those who would imply by spoken or written word that the abolition of segregation is a necessary prerequisite to Christianity; (d) That a copy of this resolution be sent as an Overture to the 1955 General Assembly, requesting the repeal of the recently passed resolution regarding segregation.

Interestingly, the minutes note that “The Pastor requested that the Clerk be instructed to record him as dissenting from the decision. The request was granted on motion and vote.”⁴

It’s an age-old question: How much does our involvement in our culture shape and determine our understanding of the Gospel and how we live out the Gospel? The line from the General Assembly Committee gets at the heart of the matter: the Church, in its relationship to cultural patterns, should lead rather than follow. But, sad to say, lots of times the church doesn’t lead . . .

Over the years, I’ve heard plenty of people gripe and complain about how “the church” has watered down the gospel or accommodated the gospel to the surrounding culture. For thirty-four years now, I’ve carved out time during the week following the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to answer phone calls and talk to people one-on-one about statements, actions, and recommendations coming out of the General Assembly. Most of the time, the concern is that the church is giving in to the surrounding culture in regard to this or that issue.

But what if we in the church are more often resistant to the new way of thinking that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings, because we are so awash in our cultural customs and beliefs and practices? As someone has said, it’s like the fish that doesn’t know it’s surrounded by water, because it’s always been in the water and doesn’t know anything different.

In my study Bible, the heading over Romans 12:1-8 is “The New Life in Christ.” Listen again to what Paul says to his fellow believers: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2) The dictionary defines “conform” as “to adapt oneself to prevailing standards or customs” and “transform” as “to change in character or condition.” That is both the challenge and the promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul holds out to us this morning — not to adapt ourselves to the prevailing standards or customs (the way we’ve always done things before?), but to be changed in character and condition and conduct by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God.

Many years ago, Nancy and I attended an alumni luncheon at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. Dr. Randy Taylor was the speaker. He worked for years for the reunion of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and was elected the first moderator of the newly reunited church. Dr. Taylor told a story from when he was in seminary in Richmond in the 1950’s. There was an exchange student from France which, he said,

was unusual for two reasons: (1) there weren't too many exchange students on campus and (2) she was a woman studying at the seminary. One night at supper, some of them asked her what differences she had noticed between the church in the U.S. and in France. She said (remember, this is Richmond, VA in the 1950's), "I have noticed that here in the U.S. in the Presbyterian Church, smoking cigarettes is perfectly acceptable, but drinking wine is frowned upon. Where I come from in France, the church frowns on smoking, but drinking wine is perfectly acceptable." Dr. Taylor said she paused, then said, "I guess it all depends on what grows in your elders' fields."

Romans 12:1-2 is an important hinge-point in Paul's letter. He begins this new section by saying, "Therefore . . ." Everything Paul is getting ready to say about our new life in Christ and how we view things and how we live hinges on what he has already said about our human sinfulness, God's grace in Jesus Christ, the power of the cross, our need for salvation, our being put in a right relationship with God through Christ's death for our sin, the power of the resurrection to make a difference in our lives today as well as in the future, and the gift of God's Holy Spirit to help us live the kind of lives God calls us to live. That's why Paul encourages us — even begs us — to adopt a new way of thinking in Jesus Christ. More than that, Paul says, when we have a new way of seeing things, we will actually do things that are different from the culture around us.

In Jesus Christ, God gives us a whole new perspective, if we're willing to look at things from God's point of view. Several years ago, I bought an electronic device at Best Buy after Christmas. When I got home and took it out of the package, I realized it was not what I needed. As a bunch of us sat around in the den and visited, I tried to put the packaging back together the way it had been before I opened it. I worked on it for about 45 minutes, but could never get the package to fit neatly and tightly. At that point, Jackson happened to walk through the den, saw what I was doing, grabbed the box from me, and in about 15 seconds had completely repackaged the item just like it had been originally. Then he looked at me and said, "You were doing it all wrong!"

He was right! But I couldn't see it. I needed a new way of seeing things. That's what God offers us in Jesus Christ — a renewal of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect. That's what Paul is talking about — seeing things in a new way through Jesus Christ. Of course, as someone has said, many times when we complain, "I just can't discern the will of God for my life," what we really mean is, "I just don't want to conform my life to God's will." Next Sunday's sermon will be based on Romans 12:9-21, where Paul lines out what it means to act out of a new way of thinking in Jesus Christ.

Six months after the PCUS General Assembly in Montreat called upon congregations to abolish segregation in their worship and ministries, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The sermon, based on Romans 12:1-8, was called "Transformed Nonconformist." I doubt this sermon was in any way related to the specific recommendations coming out of the Presbyterian General Assembly. However, considering the cultural mood and prevailing practices of the time, it's interesting to hear Dr. King's words. In his sermon

he said, “Everywhere and at all times, the love ethic of Jesus is a radiant light revealing the ugliness of our stale conformity.” He concluded his sermon with these words: “We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to it echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-saving music of eternity? More than ever before, we are today challenged by the words of yesterday, ‘Be not conformed to this world; but be yet transformed by the renewing of your mind.’”

As individual Christians and as a church, let us pray that in Christ God will give us a new way of thinking so we can be about the business of doing the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Let us pray: Loving God, transform us with your love. Transform our hearts, that we may love generously. Transform our eyes, that we may see your grace. Transform our hands, that we may serve others. Transform our spirits, that we may be the body of Christ, gathered to worship and sent out to serve. Amen.

NOTES

¹Edith Anthony Purvis, *The Gallant Gladden* (Columbia, SC: Palmetto Bookworks, 1996), various pages.

²Russell Pepper Dill, “A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Pro-Slavery Sermons by Presbyterian Clergy in the Antebellum South,” (Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1994) at www.digitalcommons.lsu.edu.

³Presbyterian Church in the United States, Division of Christian Relations, “Report of the Council of Christian Relations.”

⁴Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC, “Minutes of Session, July 2, 1954.”