

“Where Do We Go From Here”

- David Sollenberger – May 23, 2021

Acts 1: 2:-11

Good morning, it's good to be with you all today... As has been said, you're hearing from me today because I happen to have been called to be Moderator beginning this summer. Now I know what you're probably saying, You're saying, Dave what are you doing as moderator... there are probably two dozen people in this congregation alone who are more qualified to be moderator than you, and I'd say, I totally agree with you...I didn't ask to be moderator. I was raised to believe that when the church calls you to do something you do it, even though you may have no clue how to do it. I have said in other occasions that the Church of the Brethren historically hasn't called story tellers to be moderators... they usually call seminary professors or denominational staff or pastors with more advise and wisdom than they know what to do with... But for some reason, it was one of those “And now for something completely different” moments in the life of the church.

And just to let you in on the inner workings of this position, one of the responsibilities is to choose a theme for the year that I serve as moderator.... Something that I think we should focus on during the year. Now that certainly opens up possibilities...and frankly I just recently settled on one. That's kind of a sermon for another day, actually. Not sure it's been approved by the powers that be...at least formally.

Actually, I'd been doing a lot of thinking about what the church needs to focus on, to work on so to speak...For a long time, it was this notion that we've got to stop imitating the world... It was going to be something like, another way of living... but that's already taken as one of our tag lines, and it's maybe too vague... there's lot of ways of living differently... And what I'd like to see us live differently is in how we treat one another because that seems to be the problem right now... Another way of treating each other... maybe a little TOO specific.

So I went back through the archives to see what other moderators seemed to have thought were what the church needed during their time. And discovered that this concept of Annual Conference themes only started in the 1950's... actually with Ralph Schlosser, who was a legendary Bible professor at Elizabethtown College, and was moderator in 1952. He was, by the way, known as Uncle Ralph, to our family... since my mother was actually his niece... He was my grandfather's brother... and apparently came up with this notion of a theme for the year.... His theme was Teaching Them to Observe All Things...which probably was not a shocker, since he was in the education field.

But reading through the themes over the years has been interesting... seeing what each moderator apparently thought the church needed to focus on that year... things like Seek First His Kingdom...To Heal the Broken, Set Free to Serve, Called to Make Disciples, Would that you Knew the things that make for peace...They're all worthy goals, some of them phrased more elequently than others.. William Beahm's in 1954 was Win Men to Christ. Not what we're looking for... a worthy goal but just a little too narrow, Brother Beahm. So I tried to come up

with something that's direct, to the point, and represents something I think the church ought to be dealing with. Kind of the question, where do we go from here... Some churches are ready to abandon their heritage as part of the Church of the Brethren faith tradition, others can't wait until we can just be this small holy huddle of like minded Brethren, others have decided to just ignore all the controversial stuff and focus on continuing the work of Jesus...in their neighborhood and in the world... But a lot of us seem to be asking, where do we go from here.

And I think there are some parallels between that question and the period of church history that we've just been through after Easter.. It's the same question that I THINK would have been asked by the disciples right after the resurrection of Jesus. Where do we go from here ...Jesus is gone, well kind of, except when he shows up now and then, but they must have been wondering what his future plans were, and what exactly does he want us to do.

In the text that we read, it says that Jesus hung around for 40 days... So what happened during those 40 days. The only thing we're told is that he talked about things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. Well that's kind of vague...Short on details there, Brother Luke.

A few Sundays ago the Junior Highs curriculum that I teach when I'm in North Manchester suggested that we ask ourselves what would we have asked Jesus during those 40 days. And while I don't want to be critical of the disciples, I know they had a tough job, not a lot of training, no Youtube tutorials about how to actually be a disciple,...But I think the Jr. High class at the Manchester church came up with better questions than the disciples did. Their first question they said, would have been, Ah.... What just happened? What do you want us to do? Tell us more about this kingdom that you kept referring to. How does that work?

Instead, the only question that the writer of Acts tells us they asked was, Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? There must be some explanation for that question beyond what we're told because clearly God's game plan hadn't sunk in yet.... Maybe the other questions were even less insightful and Luke spared them the embarrassment of sharing them? Who knows?

One Bible commentary writes that their using the word restore, shows they were still expecting a political and territorial kingdom for Israel, and the reference to " at this time," indicates they still expected it to happen right away. The commentator further quotes John Calvin as saying that when the disciples who had been instructed by Jesus over the course of 3 whole years, ask a question like that, they betray, in his words, no less ignorance than if they had never heard a word he was saying. There are as many errors in this question as there are words. Sounds like John Calvin was related to my grandfather, Ralph Schlosser's brother ... Ira Schlosser, whose favorite expression they tell me was, "Anybody would know that."

With that level of comprehension it made the Holy Spirit's work a lot tougher to establish the church of Jesus Christ... It IS a miracle that the church survived.

But getting back to our task... where do we go from here... We don't have Jesus in the flesh to ask those questions about what should we be doing... we have to discern it in community with

the help of the holy spirit, the words of the gospel and our understanding of our calling as disciples of Jesus, and children of God.

From my vantage point as the moderator elect, we're kind of in as much disarray as the post resurrection disciples...

Now I know you all, here at Elizabethtown have recently heard some sermons about what's wrong with the Church of the Brethren, and... what, you didn't know anyone else was listening? You know you're on the world wide web? Things get out... Okay, actually; it was a series of very insightful critiques of where we are as a church body... but I kept saying, "What about all these places where faithfulness actually is happening...?..." Oh I know there were some positive elements brought out but like all institutions these are difficult times... There's a lot of Brethren asking when will we restore their version of the kingdom of Israel?.

But one of the things that I have always said we do too little of is confession. If there's one thing that I'd like to rail against is the arrogance that has become so fashionable in today's society, and that has leeches into the church. Too many of both conservative and progressive Brethren are SO sure they have it all together and understand God's will so clearly that many of them, not all, but many have no hesitation to demean those who have a different understanding of Scripture, or what ministry to concentrate on, how to approach a theological question. We've become fixated on the notion that everyone must agree, or else we can't work or live or even worship together. We surely can't call ourselves Church of the Brethren, if we don't all agree on everything. Even though it says in Romans 12, that we should live in harmony. Well, that's an interesting concept. So what is harmony? Anyone this side of Josh and Elizabeth Tindall know it's the opposite of unison. Unison is everyone singing... or doing the same thing. Singing different notes, in harmony with one another is not uniformity- neither is having different understandings, different priorities, different gifts and contributions to the church's common vision.....

A few months ago, David Steele, our General Secretary wrote in one of the stewardship newsletters a list of things for which he believes we as a church ought to be confessing.

It's a pretty good list:

- 1) failure to build up the body thereby contributing to division,
- 2) casting judgments on others and believing that we are right,
- 3) putting personal needs and preferences before the needs of others,
- 4) wielding power and influence against others,- not for others, but against others.
- 5) using social media to tear down brothers and sisters in Christ,
- 6) believing that enforcing polity and policy will fix division and brokenness,
- 7) withholding prayerful (or other) support from the family of faith,
- 8) harboring a simple lack of grace and forgiveness,
- 9) diminishing the personhood of others and not loving our neighbor as ourselves,

Actually, that's a pretty good list...and I must confess that I'm guilty of oh, maybe 6 or 7 out of those 9... okay that's on a good day.... Probably most days all 9 of them.

And maybe the disciples during those 40 days spent their time in confession. They didn't exactly have Jesus' back... when the going got tough. Maybe they spent that time in spiritual reflection, in massive amounts of prayer and reflection about what was their new task, struggling with their calling to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, trying to grasp that whole atonement thing... figuring out how to share the concept of Jesus as Lord, in the face of death threats, having spent 3 years listening and watching and learning from Jesus. Trying to decide if they really wanted to risk death for the sake of this new understanding of faith, through this Jesus fellow. Maybe they were discussing whether their compelling vision involved sharing Jesus in the neighborhood. Wouldn't that be a hoot if we uncovered that in some dead sea scroll? We don't know what all went on during those 40 days...

So what are WE focusing on during this time of re-grouping... assuming the pandemic is basically over, or at least winding down, as we hopefully affirm our compelling vision at our annual gathering in July, and we commit to striving to intentionally be passionately living and sharing the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. Words by the way from the proposed compelling vision.

There's a lot for which we indeed need to be confessing... But there's a lot for which we need to celebrate as well, because the harmony we're looking for exists when different congregations express their faith different ways. ... It happens when a congregation in Colorado convinces churches to open their parking lots at night to people living in their cars, when a congregation in San Diego houses and cares for people fleeing violence in their home country, who are seeking a new life in here in the U.S., when a congregation in Virginia helps turn an abandoned school building, used clear up until the 1960's as a segregated school, into a new community center for the whole town. And when a church not far from here provides a playground for kids in the neighborhood. Imagine that.

We can be Jesus in the neighborhood, we can be innovative adaptable and fearless like the Compelling vision asks for, without falling into the world's expectation that we all have to think and act alike on every aspect of our central focus of faith, that of the transformational relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The whole analogy of parts of the body from has been pointed out so often...

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

we do need the ear, and the eye, and the nose and the throat because none of them can sustain a body by themselves. Differences should not cause divisions, they should cause dialogue, they should lead to a sharing of perspectives. And they should be couched in the acknowledgment that we don't have all the answers, we're not God...in fact, God, as far as I know, has not resigned, there's no need to apply for the job...

When we appreciate and love each other, and work together on that which we find common ground as Brethren, we can do what we've been doing well for over 300 years, even when we don't have the same understanding of Scripture... making a witness to the love of God, offering

the grace that Jesus modeled to the adulterous woman and the corrupt little tax collecting tree climbing thief named Zacchaeus.

How did a bunch of disciples who after 3 years still hadn't grasped the essence of God's vision, manage to take the message of Jesus first to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the Gentiles on their way to the ends of the earth, and share God's love to the world?

Despite their "slow to grasp the kingdom" mind set, God empowered them through the Holy Spirit to do much more than they were qualified to do. And the rest of the book of Acts tells how they did it, and how the message of Jesus spread literally to the ends of the earth, at least the earth that they were aware of.

And maybe that's where we are as well, ordinary folks, also, "slow to grasp what the kingdom of God is all about", but yet empowered by God through the Holy Spirit, and our collective communities of faith, to somehow become those innovative, adaptable and fearless disciples.

When we appreciate and love and embrace one another, and work together on that which we find common ground as Brethren, we can do what we've been doing well for over 300 years...sharing the message of Christ's peace, that all war is in fact sin, according to what we read in the New Testament, offering a cup of cold water in the name of Christ- sending relief supplies to Europe after World War 2, modeling the kind of community that embodies Christ's love for all, refugee resettlement, prison ministries, disaster response, offering the grace that Jesus modeled to the sinners among us... and we know who we are...

So where DO we go from here? Is it just sharing Jesus with the neighborhood...or is it also time to also share Jesus in our relationships with one another? Or can we do both at the same time? That's what I would ask Jesus, if he would stop by for another 40 day visit. Oh wait, he never left... that Holy Spirit thing that enabled those disciples in the post resurrection era to share Jesus' message with the whole world, is also at our disposal, as we are Jesus in the neighborhood, and Jesus to each other. You can phrase it in any way that you like.. you can make up your own Annual Conference theme, but what I think it all boils down to is the notion that Christ calls us to embrace and love one another, and to be a people of faith called to live and work in harmony... not uniformity. May it be so.