



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 7, 2018

No Partiality
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: October 19, 2018

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:34-35).

Last Tuesday, Jon Meacham kicked off the fiftieth season of Town Hall South, that wonderful program whereby, for half a century, Westminster women have brought great speakers to engage South Hills residents in timely topics from around the country and the wider world.

Meacham was first well known as the editor of *Newsweek*, but he's since written some highly acclaimed biographies and works of history, and picked up a Pulitzer Prize along the way. One of his biographies was about the first President Bush, so he has lots of stories about the man who came to be called Bush 41.

Young George Herbert Walker Bush was the best athlete in his school, and he always won an obstacle race that the school put on every year. One time, a classmate who was rather rotund and not athletic at all got stuck crawling through a barrel that was one of obstacles. Bush decided that he didn't want the poor kid to be humiliated, so he dropped back from the front of the race and helped him out of the barrel. "Come on," he told the boy. "You and I will finish this together." The other guy got to boast that he tied George Bush in the obstacle race, but of course everybody understood the joke.

Many years later, when the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union was breaking up, then President Bush

decided not go to Berlin to celebrate winning the Cold War, because he knew that his Russian counterpart, Gorbachev, was stuck in a barrel and needed room to work out a solution in the face of the hardliners he had to confront back home. Gorbachev said it was Bush's grace that created a space for so many things to work out better on the way to peace; but Meacham told us he heard that story not from Bush, but from Gorbachev himself.

Gracious people don't have to brag and tell the world how great they are, even if they do happen to be the best or the brightest or the fastest runner in the race. They can empathize with other people's situation, and create a space where others can thrive, instead of claiming every advantage for themselves, or even for their country alone.

Meacham ended his talk with another story about Bush in his midlife years. The Bushes lost a daughter to leukemia, and of course it was the greatest tragedy of their life together. Understandably, they didn't talk much about it. At one point, Bush wrote a letter to his mother, trying to describe how he and Barbara were doing in the wake of their loss. He said of his daughter, "We can't touch her now, and yet we can feel her." Then he went on to tell his mother, "If you want to know someone's heart, you have to know what breaks it."

And we know what breaks God's heart in this world, too, don't we?

Jesus approaches Jerusalem near the end of his life, a life he will lay down for the sins of the world, and he weeps over the city. What breaks Jesus' heart is not his own

suffering, which he knows he's about to endure, but the callousness and indifference and hardheartedness of so many of the people. "If only you had recognized the things that make for peace," Jesus says. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Jesus wants to bring people together, while others make a name for themselves by driving people apart. Jesus empathizes with those who suffer and are left behind, while some care only about themselves and their tribe, and blame whoever lacks advantages for their own misfortune. Jesus focuses on what he calls "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith," while too many are content with a superficial show of religion while neglecting the substance at its heart.

The ancient prophet Isaiah cried out, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" He foresaw a time when all the peoples of the world would come to hear the good news of God's love, and live into the justice and peace and reconciliation that would follow. He said of Israel's descendants to come: "You shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you." Israel would one day become a light to the nations.

God's vision for the world has always been what in Hebrew is called *shalom*: peace and justice for all people,

and righteousness practiced together in the presence of God.

Centuries after Isaiah, the apostle Peter and others were led by the Holy Spirit to broaden their view of God's redemption, beyond the narrow bounds of their own people. Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius – two men who would have considered each as the Other, as one who was not like themselves and therefore beyond the pale of their concern – were brought together by visions from the Holy Spirit, and that was how Christianity became not just a sect within Judaism but a faith for the whole world.

Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his household, and then he shares a new insight with them: “I truly understand now that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

The implication is clear. If God shows no partiality, then surely the people of God must not show partiality either. That's a message for all time, but it's especially a remedy we need in this time of rampant tribalism, when some people pounce on differences and stoke resentments for their own advantages, and far too many go along because it's intellectually and morally and spiritually easier than sharing in the harder work of reconciliation and peacemaking and redemption.

World Communion Sunday would have us remember the things that make for peace: empathy and compassion and justice for everyone. This is God's work we're about in

the church, and if we're not really about these things, how can we possibly claim to be the body of Christ in the world?

The church is not just something we *go to*, like a movie or a concert or a football game. The church is something we *are*, if we truly want to be disciples of Christ. And if this is what we are, if this is *who* we are, then it needs to be who we are in every aspect of our lives – not just in private acts of charity, but in public efforts to do what's right for all God's people.



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