

February 20, 2005
Dr. Craig Dykstra

“The Buoyancy of God”

I wish I could have read to you the whole Letter to the Ephesians, and not just the small portion you just heard. It is such a wonderful, powerful, and, indeed, beautiful letter. In brief compass, it conveys the whole of the Christian gospel—the entire fullness of the good news of the unfathomable depth and infinite reach of the love of God for every human being and for all of creation. And it tells us all we really need to know about what it means to be the church.

According to the Letter to the Ephesians, something quite new and wonderful has happened in human history. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, there has come into being a new reality: the church, the living body of Jesus Christ, a communion and fellowship with God that is open to everyone. In Christ, the true wideness of God’s love and mercy is made plain. The promises of God to the people of Israel are now known to be poured out on all peoples. No longer, says Paul, are any of us “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). No. In Jesus, something new has happened. “He came and proclaimed peace to [those]who were far off [as well as] to those who were near; [and] through him [we all] have access in one Spirit to [God] the Father” (2:17). Now, says Paul, we are all “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6).

This tells us what it means to be the church. It means to be together as members of “one body and one Spirit”—the very body of Christ living in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the whole thing, by the way, is nothing but gift. Make no mistake about it, says Paul, “this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8-9), who “out of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ” (2:4-5).

Whenever a congregation in the Presbyterian Church launches a search for a new pastor, the search committee has to put together a document that conveys to prospective candidates something about the character and identity of the congregation. This document is then put on the denomination’s website and also sent to hundreds of people around the country. Our church did that when we went searching for our new senior pastor a couple of years ago and brought us Lewis Galloway. Now we have done it again as we search for two new associate pastors. And each time, in these documents, we have described Second Church as a “centrist” congregation. This is not a phrase these committees made up themselves of course. We have used it for many years now to describe our congregation to other people and to ourselves. But when our search committees and the Session decided to talk this way about our congregation to people who might become our pastors, they did so only after thinking long and hard about what we mean by this. And I have had the privilege of sitting with them as they did.

Well, what do we mean when we say we are “centrist”? And does what we mean have anything to do with the Bible’s understanding of what the church is all about?

To many people, the use of the term “centrist” seems, at first glance, to be an effort on our part to locate ourselves somewhere on a political spectrum? Moderate, rather than conservative or liberal? Independent, rather than Republican, Democrat or Libertarian? But that is not what we are trying to say about ourselves, is it? It would be a shame if it were. For one thing, it is false. We could not possibly locate ourselves as a church in just one such place. Look around. We are all of the above. More importantly, however, that is not where our identity lies anyway. We are a church! As the body of Christ, we belong to God alone—never to any political party or cause.

Well, then, is “centrist” an indicator of where we stand on some kind of theological spectrum? Not too liberal and not too conservative? Not too heretical, but not too orthodox either? This meaning of centrist brings to mind the passage in the Book of Revelation, where the church in Laodicea—a rather wealthy and powerful congregation, by the way—is told by God’s angel: “You are neither cold nor hot... So, because you are lukewarm ... I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:15-16). When we use the word “centrist” do we mean we are a church that’s too wishy-washy theologically to have any deep convictions at all? No! That is neither who we want to be, nor who we are.

When we call ourselves “centrist,” we have in mind something much more constructive, something that reflects what we think it means to be faithful to God and to God’s will for us as a congregation. For us, the word “centrist” points to a way of being a congregation that is rooted in a particular set of convictions about the nature of God. A set of convictions that are, in fact very similar in character to those conveyed by the author of the Letter to the Ephesians.

There are certain things which we as Christians, who follow Jesus and learn from his life, death and resurrection, come to know for certain about the nature of God.

We come to know

- that God is love;
- that God’s love is steadfast and everlasting;
- that God’s love is offered to everyone, and never gives up.

We come to know

- that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
- that God’s love will go so far as to suffer death on the cross for all humanity,
- that God’s love is so powerful, it overcomes every defeat imaginable and brings about new life in every circumstance.

That is what we know. And therefore God’s church—Christ’s body—will be marked by this same love, this same deep mercy, this same amazing grace.

A “centrist church” is a church that is centered in Jesus Christ. It is a church that reflects in everything it does—its worship, its preaching and teaching, its fellowship, and its mission—the wide, wide reach of God’s love and mercy.

Now that is a very bold claim for any church to make. And it is a claim we dare not make with any hint of boasting. At the same time, it is a claim we dare not deny. For if we deny it, we deny the very gift which God has given us—his own resurrected Son, the Christ in whom we live and move and have our being.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul explains all this in Ephesians:

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . . [It is] by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God . . . For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Eph. 4-5a, 8-10).

“Saved by grace, through faith . . . , we are what God has made us.”

Our forebear in faith, John Calvin, the great Reformation theologian, said that “we shall have a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.”¹ To have faith is to know something. It is to know God’s love in a deep and abiding way. Faith is the firm and certain knowledge of God’s love, grace, peace, and mercy. That is the core conviction, the deep knowledge that gives a “centrist church”—a church centered in Jesus Christ—its character and identity, its way of life. But how do we come to that knowledge?

Years ago, when I was a seminary student, I worked for a time at a local YMCA, teaching swimming lessons. My young charges were three and four year olds. Each Saturday morning at 9 a.m., down the steps they would come from the locker rooms into the pool area, towels in hand, and wander over towards me at the shallow end of the pool. I had not previously taught swimming to children this young, but it was clear that it could not be done through group lessons. These children needed to learn one little person at a time.

You know how little kids are when they are cold and a least a little bit nervous. They clutch up and shiver. They hold themselves tight and grit their teeth. Well, it is a law of nature that you cannot swim while cramping your body and gnashing your teeth. So what I would do is take one child at a time off the edge of the pool and into my arms. Holding them close, I would carry them gently into the water. As we went, I tried to make them smile and ease them into relaxation. Along the way, I would dip down into the water, allowing them to feel the warmth of it and the flow of it across their skin. After a while, I would sink them lower and let them feel the water buoying them up. Eventually, I could lay them on their backs and, holding my hands beneath them, get them to begin to relax their knees, let loose the muscles in their necks, and slowly draw air into their lungs. At first, of course, when I would remove my hands, they would panic a bit. They would clutch up again and start to sink. But sooner or later, they would all finally get the feel of what it is like to float. And at that point, they could roll over and start to learn to swim.

The first priority in teaching children to swim is to teach them to trust the water. Somehow or another they have to come to know something. In a deeply somatic, bodily way-and in a way that is strong and personal enough to address their fears-they must come to know the buoyancy of the water. The buoyancy of water is not something you can teach children-or anyone else, for that matter-by giving a physics lesson in a classroom. No. They have to come into the water, and they have to experience for themselves the power of the water to hold them up.

So it is with the life of faith. At the heart of Christian life, there lies a deep, profoundly personal, and almost physical knowledge that is the knowledge of the buoyancy of God. It is the knowledge-not just the hope or the trust, but the knowledge-that in every possible circumstance, in life and in death, we are upheld by God's own everlasting arms.

Faith is the knowledge of the Buoyancy of God. It is this knowledge that gives form and substance to our entire way of being in the world, to our very existence. And it is all a gift. It comes by grace. As long as we try to be the creators of our own lives-or of our church-relying only on the power of our own wits and striving, we will fail. We will be overwhelmed by the very fearfulness of it. We become frightened and defensive. We start to clutch up, grit our teeth-and we sink. But if we can just relax enough into God's good grace to receive our lives as the gift it is, an entirely different dynamic begins to take over. Instead of working frenetically and compulsively to harness our own powers and energies, we are somehow set free to let them flow-and also to draw upon and share in the multiple energies and capacities of all the diverse people of our congregation, of the whole body of Christ and, indeed, of the world. Then, in that freedom, we are able to be the kind of people we truly want to be.

In the deep knowledge of God's all-encompassing grace, we are truly able to love and care for others-for anybody, be they Democrat, Republican, conservative, liberal, or anyone anywhere on any kind of spectrum whatever. It no longer matters, really, whether they are friend or stranger, neighbor or even enemy—for now we know that, like each of us, they are all beloved of God. And because we know that, we are free and able to really listen to one another, across our differences, with respect and attention, and, indeed, even appreciation and love.

Because we know, deep in our bones, the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God, we are free and able also to be God's own arms wrapped around a whole city; and to be God's hands and feet stretched out across continents, feeding the hungry, giving generously to strangers who need our care, providing a healing presence in the lives of those who suffer or are grieving, making peace in the name of Christ.

Oh what a joy and precious gift it is to have even a taste of the truth and reality of this new thing that the Letter to the Ephesians describes: the church, the body of Christ.

When Paul prays for his readers in his letter, he is praying not just for first century Christians in a port town on the Aegean Sea. He is praying for us as well: that *we* may be strengthened in *our* inner being; that Christ may dwell in *our* hearts through faith; that *we* may know the love of Christ and be filled with all the fullness of God.

And because Paul prays for us, we may pray with Paul, saying: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7.