

DR. MAC AND A PROMISE WORTH KEEPING
Ordination and Installation Sunday – January 22, 2012 – 2 Timothy 4: 1-8
The Church of the Covenant

I have told the story before of the former pastor of this congregation, Dr. Happy Harold McConnell, affectionately known as “Dr. Mac” and how he was my liaison in the Candidates Committee of Washington Presbytery, the committee that works with pre-ministers until they are ripe and ready for ordination. Dr. Mac and I had spoken frequently; I am a dear friend of his son, Steve McConnell, who came and was our preacher for the 50th anniversary celebration of The Church of the Covenant last year. Well anyway, Dr. Mac., who was both a character and also amazingly direct, pointed his boney finger at me in the Candidates Committee meeting and said: “Stu, you may be called to be a minister...but are you called to be a PRESBYTERIAN minister?????” I almost fell out of my chair. I mean, I had been raised all my life in the PC (USA) and felt called by God to be a minister, so it never even dawned on me that I would be called to be anything other than a PRESBYTERIAN minister. Your best friends ask you the toughest questions and what Dr. Mac meant was that he knew I was rather conservative in my beliefs and that those beliefs might from time to time not always “fit” with everything in the Presbyterian Church. So was I called to be a Presbyterian minister? Good times and bad? Rain or shine? When I agreed and when I disagreed? When the church did what I wanted it to do and when it did what I didn’t want it to do? Was I here for the long haul? Or was I just going to be a flash in the pan, come for a time, and when things got a little dicey up and leave? Because you see this ordination vow that we take as elders, deacons and ministers really is important. We are vowing this in the presence of God and in the presence of the church and we are swearing fealty not only to God and Christ and the Holy Spirit but also to a particular group of people. To you all, and to God, we are making our ordination vows. So, in effect, asks Dr. Mac, are you going to be a sprinter who tires out or gets discouraged after the first 50 yard dash? Or are you going to be a long distance runner and trust that the Almighty and Sovereign God has a mighty plan to use you as part of a particular church and you make it to the end of the race???? So, Stu, you may be called by God to be a minister...but are you called by God to be a PRESBYTERIAN minister?????? Is this a promise worth keeping or not?

So this turned my nice neat little church world upside down. And I had to pray and to pray; and to pray some more. Lord, am I called to be a Presbyterian minister? Or some other denomination? Am I called to be a Methodist? Or non-denominational? Am I called to be a Baptist (Dear Lord, please not that!) Am I called to be a Presbyterian? Or one of the Heinz 57 other varieties of Presbyterian? And I believe God answered my prayer, not as I had asked, as in “show me where I am to be”, but rather answered my prayer by telling me what I am to do “be a force for renewal in the church”. How often we ask God one question but He answers it quite another way. And as I thought about it and meditated about it I realized that it was not about me always agreeing with everything and everybody all the time, rather it was being a source of the strengthening and renewing of the church –growing us spiritually, growing us numerically, growing us as disciples. --Growing in the Spirit of God right where God had planted me. Boy, that was such a gift from Dr. Mac. It has allowed me to be committed to the Presbyterian Church especially in those times where I disagreed with it; because my sense of call is not always to be in agreement with it; my sense of call is part of God’s plan to renew it and bring the church back to the place where it was decades ago when this sanctuary would have been filled to overflowing.

So some of you might be sitting out there today saying to yourself, “I disagree with something in the church.” Good for you. It is not about agreement. It is about the strengthening and the renewing of the part of the Church of Jesus Christ which is called Presbyterian; it is about what God is doing and what we can be doing; it is not about always agreeing. As a matter of fact, if I asked people to raise their

hands when I asked you if you agreed or disagreed with a certain statement we would discover, I think, amazing agreement on things like Jesus and God and prayer and mission and Christian Education. Agreement in essentials; charity and forbearance to one another in non-essentials. One of your ordination vows today asks you to affirm the essentials of the Reformed Tradition. On these we will all be amazingly in agreement. Steve Warren is teaching a very interesting class on Heresy right now. I was taught in seminary and I believe it to be true that heresy isn't only not believing in the essentials, but heresy is raising a non-essential to an essential and demanding that everyone believe this or are heretical. Baptists don't believe in dancing or card playing. But if we elevated dancing and card playing to essentials, and forced everyone who likes to dance and play bridge to stop we would be making Christianity about something it is not. And by the way, if we kept elevating non essentials to essentials eventually we would have a congregation of just one person left –the one person who agreed with everything.

Notice, please, that the first question in our ordination vows is about Jesus. And HE is the first and most important essential. For "Jesus is Lord" is the most essential statement of believing there is. When HE is our essential and when HIS presence binds us together then indeed we are one, we are together, and we have our unity in HIM, not in the things about which we may disagree.

Now I must say that there is a HOLY POWER in us keeping our vows. We are people of the promise; God has made a new covenant with us in Jesus Christ and He has chosen us and He has knit us together with His Spirit. *"You have not chosen me", says the Lord, "but I have chosen you."* God has reached out to us in relationship; in a covenant; in a Holy Promise made to us and sealed in the blood of Jesus at the cross. When we were yet sinners Jesus died for us; we hadn't figured it out; we will never entirely figure it out until we sit at the feet of our Master in heaven. He has made a vow to us, if you will. He has created us through His Son Jesus to be the church. We are in covenant with Him through Christ our mediator; We are in covenant with one another through Christ our mediator of the new covenant. God has picked who is where; God has picked who He is in covenant within His church. God is the picker and the chooser; we're not. And God has chosen this motley crew of people to be The Church of the Covenant. The ones we like; and the ones who push our buttons; the ones who agree with us; and the ones who disagree with us. The ones who are exactly like us; and the ones who are unlike us. God has assembled us together by the precious blood of Jesus and the power of His promise in the new covenant to us. He has positioned us right here in The Church of the Covenant exactly where we are. Its like this –you can't pick your relatives any more than you can pick your church family either. You know, everybody's got an Uncle Bill like I do, who hits the lingenberry wine a little too much at the Broberg Family Christmas Party and starts pontificating about all manner of politics, religion, whatever, where he would say "Now Imma gonna tell you...." Now I choose to love Uncle Bill though often I didn't agree with him. Can't choose your family; can't choose your church family either. God chooses them both for us, and positions us according to a Sovereign plan right where we are for a great and mighty purpose. And by the way, it IS the love of Christ and the love for one another that keeps us together.

So Jesus will keep His vow to us; that much is very certain. But the question is –will we keep our vow to Him and to one another????? Our scripture from Second Timothy where the Apostle toward the very end of his life, is understanding that in the end it really is about faithfulness; it is about sticking to it; it is about not falling away; not getting discouraged; not letting those folks who are part of your church family ever get you down; its about the long run not the short run; its about a long distance race, not a sprint. He says to young Timothy: *"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."* (2 Timothy 4: 7) You observe the life of the Apostle Paul and you see that very few of the churches he founded exactly kept the precise faith he had entrusted to them. Not the church at Corinth,

not the Galatian Church, not even the church at Rome. The early church, the earlier, purer church, the church in those generations right after Jesus, even they didn't get it right. I'm glad I don't have to get it perfect until that day when I sit at Jesus' feet and am perfected by Him. Not about that. Its about have you fought a GOOD fight (not a nasty church fight)? Have you finished the race (and it's a long distance one not a sprint)? Have you kept the faith? Have you kept your promise? The promise you have made to Jesus? And the promise you have made to The Church of the Covenant, the Body of Christ, for all its flaws, that is Presbyterian? Have you kept your vow?

In the Presbyterian Church we stress what is referred to as *"the perseverance of the saints"*. If indeed you are saved and sanctified by the presence of Jesus Christ and the sure and certain sign of that is you indeed will persevere and you will get to the end of the race of life having kept your vows and promises to the Lord and to His church. And this perseverance is indeed an essential tenet of the Reformed Tradition. In the act of ordination we will invite elders who are ordained to come forward to lay hands on those to be ordained and installed today. And we will see a great cloud of witnesses assembling around those who will be taking their ordination vows today. As they have fought the good fight and as they near completion of the race of faith, we will see a whole host of elders "once an elder, always an elder, everywhere an elder" who have KEPT THE FAITH. They are making it to the end having kept the faith. We shall see a whole host of elders coming forward, saints who are persevering, who can say with truth and conviction with the Apostle Paul –*"I have fought the GOOD fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."* Oh, that we might be as they are.

Dr, Mac, thank you for teaching me that there are promises worth keeping. May I finish my race, having kept the faith, for Lord, I really, really love these people, all of them, every one of them, the ones I agree with and most especially the ones I do not. Because in the end loving those with whom you disagree is the only way you persevere. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*