

PCUSA Director Preaches Opening Worship Service for Israel Palestine Mission Network Meeting

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THE PROPHETIC WORD

Sermon Delivered by Reverend Dr. J Herbert Nelson, II at the Opening Worship Service for the Israel Palestine Mission Network Meeting on Wednesday, October 12, 2011 in Louisville, KY.

The Confession of Our Hope

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope (Hebrews 10:23)

I come to you this afternoon with a concern that you will not give up the labor of faith that drives your work. These are the words that I would use to paraphrase the writer of Hebrews as he expresses a concern for the struggles that life is bringing to the lives of God's people. In this text the church is reminded that faith, hope, and love are important factors in living their life for Jesus Christ. He reminds them of the great sacrifice seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by God Almighty.

He writes;

19 Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful;

We hear warnings and encouragement throughout the text. I was moved by these words to reflect on the old song I use to hear in my younger days while visiting the African Methodist Episcopal Church with my father for Watch Night Service, "Get right with God and do it now." At one moment in pondering the scriptures read for your hearing, God's illumination suggested that our need to walk carefully in the calling to serve Jesus is important so that we are not broadsided by its dangers or staggered by faith's pitfalls. What a delicate balance to live out in our faith response to God. However, I could not take my eyes off of the words, "*let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*" As I read other translations I noticed that the word confession was replaced by the word profession. Notably, the King James Version uses the word profession. It reads; Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised; 10:23b - KJV). I recognize the struggles that we Presbyterians have with the King James Version of the Bible. We prefer the scholars' bible The New Revised Standard Version. However, when I read the word profession it reminds me of our faith professions as Presbyterians regarding the work of justice and authentic community building. "Profess" implies that we proactively engage our faith perspectives through our mouths and actions. This means our faith is not simply confessed after something occurs, but instead it is professed (put forward or initiated) on the front end of our claim.

I believe the work of the Israel Palestine Mission Network is couched in proactive engagement. The reaction that I received from a few Presbyterians who heard that I was coming to preach the opening sermon of your gathering, made me aware that you proactively profess your advocacy on behalf of fair and just Israel-Palestine relationships. And, this is not uncommon for Presbyterians who take seriously a connection to justice issues. We affirm in the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness those issues and relationships that call for a transformation of powers and principalities (including the Church) in an effort to support the poor and

oppressed across the globe. We affirm the Christian belief that God through Jesus Christ cares deeply for all people. Our faithful response as Christians is to continually be called out of our own way of life to confess the power of Jesus Christ to overturn earthly sin of institutions, governments, powers, principalities and ungodly people. These challenges are not easy, but are the cornerstone of a our faith work together.

I was challenged on the floor of a Presbytery meeting during a presentation on behalf of the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness. A PC(USA) member rose to speak during the question and answer period of my presentation. She expressed her dismay that the PC(USA) was involved in politics. She felt that our Church had no role in challenging the politics of our day, because it was divisive. “We have experienced too much division and your office is perpetuating the problems that already exist, she said. I provided a reminder for her that Jesus died a political death. He was railroaded through a makeshift court while vacillating political leaders washed their hands of his impending execution. The military taunted and beat him while marching him up Golgotha’s height bearing a cross. He was publicly executed although he was innocent of any crime. Jesus’ followers and the ones who opposed him were faced with unrest and fear. They retreated into hiding in order to save their own lives. The military was of the government. Pontius Pilate was of the government. The execution chamber known as the cross was the signature of government’s capital punishment laws. The government put our Savior to death, because of his impact that led to uncovering of the deceit of the people. Thanks be to God the redemption of sinners (like you and me) through Calvary’s cross was divinely designed to set us free to offer a living word to a fallen humanity through him that we might engage the political and the personal; the powerful and privileged; with both possibility and hope. *Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.(Hebrews 10:23)*

Last week our office sent out an action alert e-mail to our constituents within the PC(USA) calling for President Obama to refrain from veto of Palestinian Statehood at the United Nations. The Palestinians’ application is presently being considered by the Security Council Committee on Admission of New Members, which met for the first time on October 7th to address a number of procedural issues. There is no formal deadline announced for the Committee to report back to the Security Council body. The Middle East alert emerged from discussions with the Stated Clerk; the PC(USA) Ministry at the United Nations; and the PCUSA Middle East Staff Team. Our support of the action alert is based on the PCUSA’s policy over the years advocating for;

1. The PC(USA) support of self-determination for Palestine
2. The PC(USA) implementation of UN resolutions – UN resolutions have long called for two states and Jerusalem and environs being an international city.

We recognize in this advocacy that;

3. Membership does not preclude a need for negotiations on issues such as final borders, right of return, settlements, Wall, etc.
4. Membership may level the playing field – The expectation and hope is that negotiations would take place between member states of UN

It is important to note that the PC(USA) Ministry to the United Nations is a connectional component of the work of our denomination. Therefore, we are called as an Office of Public Witness and advocates for just Middle East Peace to support the work of our ministry partners. Emails have ranged from jubilant support to angry criticism. This is a highly charged issue in our denomination, but Jesus calls us to Speak Truth in Love to Power, even within our own ranks. Our challenge is to not give up or be defeated in our efforts by opposing forces to the will of God we are called to express, but to stay at the table and declare we are not moving until God’s truth marches on.

As we view our text from Hebrews it is understood by some scholars as a call for holiness. I agree that it is.

But, holiness without wholeness in a community is foolishness. We cannot say get right with God on one hand while declaring that our role as a denomination is to gather rich Presbyterians to go on mission trips for the purpose of cleaning up the mess that we could have prevented by strong advocacy at the United Nations. This type of thinking is symptomatic of our internal struggle as a denomination and the reason why many justice driven advocacy groups within the PCUSA are constantly under pressure to step back from pressing for justice. I stop by today to encourage you not to get up from the table with opposing groups. I encourage you to be honest with friends and foes of our denominational policy. Most of all I encourage you to follow the faith and hope found in Jesus Christ that leads us to know that even the impossible is possible when we trust the God of the ages.

On yesterday, I faced a court hearing on my arrest with ten other religious leaders now known as the Rotunda 11. We were arrested for praying in the United States Capitol Building in Washington, DC on July 28, 2011. Our purpose for appealing to Congress through prayer in the Rotunda was due to the political morass we witnessed in Congress regarding the authorization of a spending cap for the President and the attempts to balance the federal budget on the backs of poor people. I was informed that Dick Gregory (activist, civil rights leader, comedian) was in the courthouse. and wanted to meet me. He was arrested earlier that day for protesting British Petroleum. Someone told him about our protest and Jim Winker of the United Methodist Washington Office came to me with his request. I was honored to meet the man that I heard speak my freshman year on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, NC. We talked about his arrest and the Washington Interreligious Staff Community's (WISC) work in raising the level of commitment within mosques, synagogues and local churches. His comment was that "this government is coming down." He mentioned being in New York City with the Occupy Wall Street crowd the day before. He witnessed rich people distributing food to the occupiers. He spoke of how different this protest is from the civil rights movement. Then he said, "Rich Anglo Americans are on the streets of New York supporting the Occupiers. When rich White people see the injustices and decide to take a definitive stand it is a statement as to how the comfortable are now uncomfortable with the barriers placed on full participation in the process of our government. This means something big is on the way."

I contend that the governmental transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya that represent a break from domination towards a more inclusive government for the people, of the people and by the people is a global fight. Our desire for freedom and peace in the Middle East is no less important to this global struggle for freedom. All of these struggles are a part of God's desire for us to affirm community peace and justice as a standard for humanity. The Israel Palestine Mission Network has an important role to play. The challenge now and in the days ahead is to remember the words of this scripture;

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope (Hebrews 10:23)

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