

Reflections for October Newsletter

I love reading the magazine printed by our denomination, The Presbyterian Outlook, for many reasons. The main one is its stated mission which appears under the title: leading conversations in the church and beyond. Sometimes we forget that we are a connectional church and become very so focused on our local issues that we forget how far beyond those concerns the church is called to move. The magazine publishes articles from across this country and the world featuring the activities of both large and small congregations. But what caught my attention this month was the editorial by Jill Duffield titled “Bumper sticker theology”. It caught my attention because the large print of the title pointed out a truth that I often notice, not just in the “bumper stickers” on cars (including my own), but on the caps, T-shirts and other logo bearing items of clothing that people are choosing to wear or display these days. Many of these bumper stickers have conflated their political views with some theological statements. The one that was cited to begin the article was: “Heaven has walls, hell has open borders.” This actually is a highly charged political statement more than a theological one, although I question whether or not those reading and reacting to it understand that truth. I am very uneasy with this or any so-called theology which can be offered on hats, mugs, memes and other things other than: “God loves the world.” God’s will, character and plans do not lend themselves to being summed up in a sentence or two, especially not the ones used to prove a point or state an agenda. If actual select and beloved biblical quotes themselves don’t move us to act in ways of peace and goodwill, how could slogan we devise or come up with be a guide to the life abundant? If we look at the Greatest Commandment and that like unto it, they are brief. They easily fit onto T-shirts and other items; yet they take a lifetime of practice and daily attentiveness to God, self and others in order to actually occasionally—and even then it is through the grace of God and the gift of the Spirit to sometimes, at least partially—follow. So why do we think we can wrap up the mind of God in a tweet, a post, a bumper sticker or a T-shirt logo? What is at stake is far too important to summarize on an adhesive sticker, no matter how satisfied or righteous we feel about what it expresses when we display it. The problem with this type of display/theology has several layers. Some of these are: it may indicate a disdain; it is certainly provocative and designed to garner reactions. How is this helpful? A problem with this type of flippant theology is that it is the equivalent of putting fingers in our ears and shouting “la, la, la, la!” at the top of our lungs. It neither invites nor offers thoughtful discussion, prayerful discernment nor compassionate conversation. The higher the shock value of the sentiments displayed by the sticker or meme sentiments, the lower the loving relational possibilities they provide within a community. We are living in a time and culture that encourages us to desire to outdo one another in the outrageous, in the clever, in the self-versus-other-defining slogans. We want a quick, easy to run test that separates out the “other”. We now define ourselves by this “tribe” id badge which is found on what we wear or carry; not on our identity as the claimed children of God found in Christ who came to minister

to the vulnerable, the outcast, the widow, the orphan, and yes...the resident alien. Because you see, I too participate in this bumper sticker theology with my own bumper sticker. It reads: "God bless the people of every nation." When I placed that on my 2005 car, it was not the political statement that it probably is seen as now as it is also found on my 2018 bumper. Yet it still expresses a theological statement for me. For me, God is sovereign over the world and all peoples, so my prayers that God bless all are inclusive. God's desire is to redeem the world. It seems to me that we as disciples are called to be better than the culture around us. (Remember that be "in the world, but not of the world" instruction given to us?) Rev. Duffield suggests that we imagine what would happen if instead of wearing different logos we sought to engage in conversations—meaningful discussions---compassionate discussions of all the questions involved. These conversations or their results would not fit on bumper stickers. They probably wouldn't make neat slogans. They would require intelligence, hard work, imagination and love to come up with solutions. They might require some repentance for past errors; they might require some changes in attitudes toward the other; some acceptance....but the result might just be the gift of grace that disciples of Christ can bring—the balm in Gilead that Jeremiah was seeking for a sin-sick world that is focused on winning instead of loving.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby

During the month of August we gathered these items for the H. H. Beam Elementary School as our contribution to the School Tools effort which has grown and is so widely publicized. Because H. H. Beam is our near neighbor, we take the items we collect directly to them just before school opens. In addition to a wide variety of items from crayons, pencils, markers, notebooks, folders, construction paper, notebook paper, rulers, pencil boxes, back pack , etc. there was a \$75 cash donation.

Continuing with our tradition of collecting non-perishable items for CAM during the month of August, we delivered 3 boxes and 5 large bags of canned and boxed food items to them at the end of the month. There was also a cash donation of \$20.