

Who Is "We"?

I had a very interesting experience earlier this week that I'd like to share with you this morning. I attended a dinner party that was being given in honor of a Presbyterian minister who was in town for a special occasion. I didn't know this particular individual, never having run across her in the course of my years of ministry, but the other guests that night all seemed to know her quite well.

And it was quite a group. At the table, in addition to the guest of honor, there were two members of the Presbytery staff, two former moderators of the presbytery and the current moderator, two senior staff from a denominational agency, the pastor of one of the most prominent churches in our presbytery, and last of all, clearly the odd man out, me. Pretty much literally the odd man out, since of the ten people around the table that night, I was one of only two men. Everyone else at the table was a woman. I only make note of that to remind us all just how much things have changed over the past forty or so years in both the church and the larger society. For the fact is, had I attended such a gathering in the church forty years ago, at the front end of my ministry, everyone at the table would almost certainly have been men, and probably all white men at that. Every single one. Times have changed!

Which raises a question that I'd like for us to think about today, and that is how do you know what someone means when they use the word "we?" You see, when someone says "I think..." or "I believe..." it's perfectly clear what they mean, just exactly who it is they're claiming to speak for. Themselves, and no one else. No one would question their ability to do that. But when someone says "We think..." or "We believe..." or "We know..." it's never quite so clear what that means, just who it really is they're speaking for. I don't doubt but that every one of those men at my hypothetical forty years ago dinner party would have felt perfectly comfortable using "we" to speak for the whole church at the time, and sincerely believed they were doing exactly that, but were they really? Did they really speak for the "whole" church? And if the folks around the table where I was the other night had spoken of the PCUSA as "we," as in fact they did, who would they have meant by that? Who would their "we" actually be? How do you ever really know? Ever really know just exactly who is "we."

There are three things that I suspect have prompted my thoughts along these lines this week. The first has been this year's Constitution Seminar which concluded yesterday and where we looked at the three stages of constitution making in U. S. history. The first being the Declaration of Independence and its severing of our ties with Great Britain in 1776, the second the adoption of the Constitution in 1787 and its implementation in the years following, and finally, the ratification of the 14th Amendment in 1868 in the aftermath of the most destructive war in United States history, an amendment that casts the entire Constitution in a new light, or would have, if it had ever been fully implemented. Three quite distinct stages, and one way to look at each of those stages and how they differed, is to look at how they use (or did not use) the word "we," and just exactly who they meant by it.

For example, when Thomas Jefferson wrote the words in the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." he may well, and no doubt did, think of himself as speaking for everyone in colonial America, indeed for all right-thinking people everywhere. But it's all too painfully obvious to us that he really didn't. I mean,

how on earth does a man who owned slaves say with a straight face that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them, life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness..." unless he doesn't really include them within the "we," as in fact Justice Taney explicitly stated in the infamous Dred Scott decision. But if Jefferson didn't include slaves, then who else did he not include?

Then, when James Madison and others penned the preamble to the United States Constitution beginning with the words, "We the people of the United States..." by design it's less clear just exactly who that is, this "We the people," than it is what they're actually doing, which is establishing the institutions of governance, institutions which Madison and others hoped would then be able to paper over the inherent ambiguities that existed in that "we the people," ambiguities that Madison was himself painfully aware of. His hopes, perhaps predictably though tragically, were dashed, and those inherent ambiguities—most of all, the continuing reality of slavery—eventually brought the whole house down in the Civil War.

It was to settle that very problem once and for all, that the 13th, 14th, and ultimately 15th amendments were added to the Constitution, no longer settling for another ambiguous "we," but spelling it out in terms that allowed for no such ambiguity, not "We this..." or "We that..." but "*All persons* born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States..." All persons, not "we," whoever that is. Which should have finally settled the matter, but while we may have ratified the amendment, we never really accepted it as the law of the land, certainly not in my part of the world. Even today, it's still a real question just exactly who is this "we?"

The second thing that has prompted these thoughts is the problem that's so painfully apparent in the scriptural book from which we've been reading our epistle lesson throughout this Easter season, the book of *1 John*, one of the shorter books in the New Testament, but also one of the most important. There's no book in the Bible where the word "we" plays such a big role. In fact, just in our short reading this morning from *1 John*, just 9 verses, the words "we," "us" and "our" occur over 20 times. It's very clear here that the problem that's causing so much trouble in this community of believers, a problem threatening even to tear the community apart, all comes down to just exactly who "we" is, and who then has the right to speak for "us."

As I mentioned last week, the writer of this book, a man identified only as "the elder," blames the trouble in the community on outside preachers who have painted a picture of Jesus which simply doesn't correspond with the man that the elder and other older members of the community had actually known, or at least heard about first hand from the so-called beloved disciple, the founder of their community, their church. From what we know of the early church, I don't doubt but that was a big part of the problem for them, these outsiders. But I suspect it wasn't the whole problem, and maybe not the biggest problem.

In fact, the more I've been reading *1 John* at the same time I've been doing the reading for our Constitution seminar, the more I've begun to sense that the problem here—as the problem so often is in the church—is another case of the "ambiguous we." The problem here of an older generation thinking that by virtue of its long years of service and experience that it speaks for the community as a whole, that is to say, it speaks for the "we," while a younger generation has come up and begun to think for itself, and believes it has the right to be a voice at the table for that "we" as well. So the real problem here may not be just who's right and who's wrong, as much as simply who's we.

Which brings me to the third reason I've been thinking about that question, who's we?, which is the fact that this church is on the verge—and I mean the verge—of extending a call to someone

to become the next pastor of this historic congregation. I am absolutely confident that the Pastor Nominating Committee is going to choose an extremely qualified person, and that person is going to make an excellent leader for this congregation, and do a great job here as your pastor. This is a great time to be a member of First Church.

When your new pastor arrives, naturally you're all going to want to welcome him or her to this congregation, and you're going to want to share your history in this church, your sense of its place in this community, your vision for its future, as you certainly should. But when you do that, I want you to be very careful how you use that little word "we." Because we all think we speak for everyone else here in this church, in this community, even in this nation, and the simple fact of the matter is we don't. Our "we" is not everyone else's "we." It just isn't. Which is why what—in the end—makes us a church is not who "we" are or what "we" do or even what "we" believe, as much as it is who He is, what He does, and what He believes. That He, of course, being Jesus Christ, and He alone. Jesus Christ is the He that makes us a we.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forevermore...*