

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Holy Cow! A Sermon in Praise of Committees!”**

**Numbers 11:16 – 17
Acts 15:1 – 21**

April 17, 2016

You know, I’m pretty sure that, in the entire history of the Presbyterian Church, no preacher has ever done what I’m about to do this morning! In fact, most preachers would recoil in horror at the mere *thought* of doing what I’m about to do today! I mean, it’s crazy! It’s insane! It’s just not done! So, what on earth am I preaching about? The evils of money? The fiery pits of Hell? The joys of summer driving in the Hamptons? No, I’m afraid it’s much worse than that. Because I’m going to preach a sermon... *in praise of church committees!*

There! I said it! This sermon is going to sing the praises of committees, boards, and councils... and the meetings which those organizations hold! Now, is that completely nuts, or what? Because we hate committee meetings, right? They’re a blight on our personal calendar; they’re an intrusion into our daily schedule; they’re like an unexpected visit from the in-laws, just when we thought we could spend the evening chilling out and relaxing. Most of us would rather watch an entire season of “*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*,” than have to go out, after dinner and a long day’s work, and sit through a dull, droning, two hour committee meeting. Am I right? Or am I right?

And, it’s not that we don’t like the other people on the committee; not at all. Sometimes it’s those other people, and the relationships we have with them, that keep us from bailing out of the thing altogether! For example, I’m on the Committee on Ministry of Long Island Presbytery; which meets every month at the Presbytery offices in Commack. And those meetings last anywhere from four to six hours... and that’s not including the two hour commute for me to get there and back. And, believe me, I like and respect every other member of that committee; they’re all great people, and I truly enjoy seeing them and spending time with them. But, sometimes, when we get off on some monotonous tangent... my eyes roll back in my head, and I’m like, “*I gotta get out of here! I’m going to lose my mind!*”

And all of this is aggravated by the fact that, the more time we spend on committees and going to committee meetings... the less important and essential our own involvement with the process can seem. Again, using my own experience as an example: in 1981, the year before I left California and headed off to Princeton Seminary, I was ordained as an elder in my home church in Fullerton... to fill a one year unexpired term on the Session. And, since I was the youth director of the church, I was assigned to the Christian Education Committee. And, one of the very first Christian Ed. meetings of my tenure just happened to fall on the same night as the California Angels opening day baseball game. And I hadn’t missed an opening day game... *for fifteen years!*

Now, you know how much I love the Angels; so you know how badly I wanted to be at that baseball game. And my initial intention was to, harrumph, ahem, go to the game! But after hemming and hawing, and talking it over with Sylvia, and praying about it... I decided to skip the game, and attend the Christian Education meeting. Which I did. Now that was 35 years ago... and since then, I’ve attended approximately 19,487 committee meetings of every possible species. And

if I was faced with that same choice now? ... *I'm going to the stinkin' game, man! What do you think?*

But, seriously, when we've served on many committees; and when our lives get overly busy and filled with responsibility; and when our world makes more and more demands on our time, and attention, and energy; it just gets easier, and easier to see committee work and committee meetings as simply one more thing we have to do. And, consequently, it gets easier and easier to throw the whole thing over the side... so we don't have a nervous breakdown from being over-committed. So, when you take all of that into consideration, it's very easy to understand why so many people have kind of a jaded view of committees... and why so many of us might be inclined, sooner or later, to say something like, "*Man, I hate committee meetings!*"

Why on earth, then, preach a sermon in *praise* of committees? Well, because, in spite of our sometimes rocky relationship with committees, and the fact that we'd sometimes rather have a tooth extracted than attend a committee *meeting*... the truth is that, it is often through the pooled wisdom, and judgment, and leadership of a *group* of people, that Almighty God accomplishes His work among us. Or, to put it a little less theologically, when it comes to solving problems, or making decisions, or understanding the will of God... two heads, or five, or ten, or fifteen, are often better than one!

Not that our Heavenly Father can't do great things with and through individuals... of course He can. Over the years, and throughout the biblical witness, God has certainly raised up many men and women who've had to go it pretty much alone in their effort to serve God's kingdom. Many of the great Old Testament prophets were loners; as was John the Baptist in the New Testament. But most of the time, God gets His work done... *by committee*, if you will. And this truth is beautifully illustrated in both of our Scripture lessons for this morning.

In our text from the Book of Numbers, we have a description of God's answer to the problem of Moses' being overwhelmed by the responsibility of leading the people of ancient Israel to their new home in the Promised Land. And God's answer to the problem was to: form a committee of 70 elders of Israel, to share the burden of leadership with Moses! I suppose you could call it the very first *Session*, if you wanted to push the analogy to its limit!

"The Lord said to Moses: 'Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. ... I will come down... and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you to carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.'"

Now, obviously, the "seventy elders" of ancient Israel was a different kind of body than the fifteen elders of modern Southampton. I mean, those guys didn't have monthly meetings; they weren't responsible for coffee hour on the Sabbath; and, as far as we know, they didn't have to read the Book of Order. But in one essential way, that group was exactly the same as our elders today: together, they shared the responsibility of leadership; together, they sought to understand and enact the will and purpose of Almighty God; together, they were able to accomplish more, much more, than even the great Moses could have ever done on his own.

And then, in our lesson from Acts 15, we see another example of the Lord bringing people together in order to reach a wise decision on a crucially important question. In this case, the question of whether or not to receive gentile converts into the newly formed Christian community. Of course, we take for granted today that gentiles, or non-Jews, are welcome in the Christian

church. The vast majority of Christians in the world today are of gentile origin... as are the vast majority of Christians in this building right now. But, back in the first century world of the Book of Acts, the issue wasn't so clear-cut.

The very first Christians were *all* Jews; and, with a few exceptions, that state of affairs held sway until two things happened: first, the young church began to spread beyond the borders of the Holy Land and into more gentile-dominated areas, such as Asia Minor and the Greek peninsula; and second, several important Jewish Christian leaders had witnessed God's Holy Spirit being given to gentile converts, just as it had earlier been given to them.

These two facts caused those first Jewish Christians to take a step back and consider if, maybe, the Lord intended to bestow the blessings of His kingdom on non-Jews as well as Jewish believers. This then led to a further consideration that, if Jews are to be accepted into the Christian community... to what extent should they be expected to conform to Jewish religious practices, such as circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath requirements, and so forth.

And what's important for our topic this morning is that, in order to determine answers to these two crucially important questions, the recognized leaders of the church, who were stationed in Jerusalem at that time, people like James the brother of Jesus, the Apostle Peter, and other "pillars" of the church... these people came together in what is today known as "The Jerusalem Council;" and, *together*, they sought God's will on this subject... and, *together*, they came up with an acceptable answer.

Now, as I said, the players in this Jerusalem Council were the heaviest of the early-church heavyweights; James, Paul, Peter, Barnabas, and other world-changing disciples. But the point is that, at the end of the day, that council in Jerusalem was really just a glorified committee meeting; an amplified and magnified Session meeting, if you will... at which a group of people got together, and worked together to find answers to important questions, and solutions to difficult problems.

As it turned out, the Jerusalem Council determined that gentile converts *would* be welcome in the Christian churches; and that they would *not* have to adopt all the various Jewish customs in vogue at the time. All that would be required of them, according to James, the Council moderator, was that they: "*Abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.*" And with that brief proviso, gentiles were welcomed into the Christian family. And it all got accomplished through the work of one of the first church committees!

Let me wrap things up with a few final reflections: First of all, I hope that these biblical texts will help us to remember that, no matter how tedious or contentious our committee work may sometimes be, whether here at church or in some other area of our workaday lives... there is always great value in putting our heads together in order to seek wise and courageous answers to our various questions and problems.

Not that every single thing we ever say or do must receive the blessing of some board or committee, of course not! But sometimes it *is* quite helpful to seek the wisdom and insight of several trustworthy people before important decisions are made... because, by doing so, we usually make better decisions.

Second, we need to keep in mind that, whenever we do gather together in our various boards and committees, we are doing so in the presence, and under the guidance, of Almighty God. This is why, in Presbyterian practice, every meeting of every board and committee should be

opened and closed with prayer; God is with us, and we are seeking His wisdom as we do our work and make our decisions. Over the years I've learned that this is something that we really need to work hard to keep in mind; because, as life gets busier and our schedules get more cramped, the desire to want to just "get the job done" can render us deaf to God's voice, calling us maybe in a new or challenging direction.

Years ago, at one of my former churches, I was putting together a Session retreat at one of our Presbytery camps. Things were progressing nicely, until a couple of elders discovered that the retreat wasn't going to be a "work session," but rather a time to quietly and reflectively consider where God might be leading our church in the future. I was chastised for wasting the Session's time, and told that, if we weren't going to be doing problem-solving and other Session work, they, and other elders weren't going to attend. Well, we still had the retreat; but most of the elders skipped it, much to the disadvantage of our Session.

The point is, boards and committees are, indeed, about "getting the job done;" but more than that, they're about seeking, and hearing, the voice of God in our midst. And we would do well never to forget that.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this idea of putting our heads together to find wise answers, which is so important to *church* boards and committees; is, obviously, also important in our lives outside the church. Which doesn't mean that we should try to turn every group we're involved with into a religious meeting; but it does mean that we can always value collaboration, and try to curb any tendency we might have to take a "my way or the highway" approach to whatever it is we're involved with.

Good leaders seek the wisdom and guidance of those with whom they lead; in church, and out of church. To do so isn't just smart; it's also to lead like the leaders that our Lord raised up, throughout the pages of the Bible.

So, there you go! Write it down! Take a picture of the bulletin! A sermon in praise of committees! It may be rarer than sightings of the Loch Ness Monster... but hopefully it will help us to keep our minds, and our hearts, open to what God is saying to us!

For that is our calling as His people; and that is our quest as disciples of Jesus Christ! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!