

CHURCH OF LAST RESORT
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Christ the King / Reign of Love Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 23:1-6

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

Colossians 1:15-18

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in the Beloved all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through love and for love. Christ is before all things, and in the Beloved all things hold together. Christ is the head of the body, the church.

[And, let me just say, if Christ is the head of the church then any church not ruled and permeated by love would be a church in name only. That's at least one take away from that lesson for today.]

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Forty years ago this past September, I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in So. California. I had a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy from a prestigious liberal arts college in Illinois. I had a Masters of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, the most prestigious evangelical seminary in the world. I had a promising career ahead.

And then nine months after my ordination, the world I counted on ended. I lost the love of my life. Heaven and earth collapsed. I tumbled into an abyss.

Over the next six months my body kept going but my spirit was as good as dead. I trekked through Canada and then across Europe looking for something I never found. When I came back to the States I drove aimlessly about staying with friends and relatives here and there.

And then in late November, thirty-nine years ago this very week, on a whim, I took a rambling route from Washington, DC to my parents' home in Youngstown, Ohio for Thanksgiving. That rambling route happened to carry me across the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. And there I saw something I'd never seen before—the Blue Ridge Mountains and those legendary rivers swirling together at Harpers Ferry. And just like that something awakened and called out to me.

On a hunch—and with no other place to call home—I rented a room in a large house across from the Fort Drive-In Theater on route 340 and took a job as a pruner in an apple orchard. It paid \$1.25 an hour.

I was outside nearly every day, often in freezing cold. I worked with a group of good hearted, hardscrabble, chain-smoking, illiterate men. And somehow my

broken spirit began to heal. I was 27 years old. One of those men took note of my single status and suggested I check out Shepherdstown where, as he put it, *co-eds abound*.

And so on a cold December day with a light snow falling, I drove for the first time across the treacherous and thrilling Halltown Pike into Shepherdstown—not to check out co-eds so much as to check out a rumor, a rumor of a quaint and charming small town perched on a bluff overlooking the Potomac.

I turned off of Princess onto German St. and thought I'd driven onto a movie set—two compact blocks of 19th century storefronts and sundry rooflines. After a 25-cent cup of coffee at Betty's, I walked about and came upon this church. I opened the front door and walked in.

At that point in my life I had been in so many different churches I'd lost count. And at that particular time I really wanted nothing more to do with church. I was disillusioned with life in general and the institutional church in particular.

But I was curious. I was curious about this peculiar looking church, looking more like a New England Quaker Meeting House than any Presbyterian church I'd ever seen.

When I opened that door and walked in, it never occurred to me that this was a "church of last resort." But, as it turns out, that's what it was for me.

And ironically, it's what many others know it as. Over the years quite a few of you have told me that just when you'd given up on church, someone said to you: *Before you give up entirely, check out the Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church.*

Thirty-nine years ago I opened the front door to check out this church. It was a Saturday. No one else was here.

I saw tired blue paint peeling off the walls. I saw a faded, threadbare blue carpet. I saw these worn pews without cushions, without white painted ends and without that slight angle inward—just straight and hard.

I saw a tattered curtain around a small choir loft with a huge organ console oddly perched in the middle. I saw a foreboding dark mahogany pulpit here and behind it two tall chairs and a sofa all upholstered with black cloth. And I saw the old rugged cross hanging in this arch dead center.

I should have turned and left.

But I stayed.

I stood under the balcony trying to take it all in. But, as it turns out, something was taking me in—a certain spirit that—I would learn later—arose from the wounded and dying sons of this nation who lay on this floor in the fall of 1862 bleeding and pleading for peace.

Little did I know that I was standing on holy ground, in a true house of prayer, a hallowed place of peace.

As I stood here that cold December day I had no idea that the current pastor, the Rev. Frank Pyles, whom I didn't know, would unexpectedly resign four months

later, leaving this church in the lurch. Nor did I know that at his suggestion I would be asked to preach here until a real minister could be found.

No, I wasn't insulted in the least. I had no intention of staying with this or any other church. In the meantime, though, the temp pay was good—\$35 per service which converted to \$35 per hour, which breaks down to one dollar per person in attendance, a pretty good deal for all.

The congregation was small in 1975. But their hearts were big and full of grace. Even though I was a wreck and not much of a preacher, they took me in. They saw more in me than I saw in myself. They cared for me, said nice things about my obtuse, rambling sermons and unwittingly mended my broken heart.

I couldn't believe what I'd found.

Months later I went back to California for a visit and told my new best friend all about Shepherdstown and this church. I couldn't wait for her to see it. And so in March of 1976 Paula flew "the red-eye" from San Francisco to Washington, DC on a one-way ticket. Paula was 20 years old. And all I can say is: for a 20 year old, she sure had a lot of gumption—and faith, not to mention hope and love.

We were married here Oct. 17, 1976. After 37 years of marriage, I can tell you this: Paula's faith, hope and love inspire me still.

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The prophet Jeremiah had it right. When God sees us out wandering and lost, the Holy One calls forth shepherds to find us, take us home, mend our wounds, and lead us to green pastures and beside still waters. Thirty-nine years ago, the small, humble community of faith in this unassuming place became my shepherd and led me home.

Churches can be cold, rigid, dogmatic and sanctimonious places. You know, museums for saints.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

For church can also be a community of broken people, you know, a hospital for sinners, who know life is hard, sometimes very, very hard. Yes, we know life is hard. But through Christ, the Beloved, we know something else. We know something else and believe it with all our hearts. We believe it even when some of us can't. We believe grace abounds. Which means now and then we catch a break.

It's not magic. It's not angel's work to do. It's what we are called to do for each other and for neighbors near and far in the way and in the spirit of Jesus, who is the head and heart of the church.