

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Meditation for the Interfaith Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving
November 25, 2010 at 10:00 a.m. in the Old Broad Street Church
Scripture Readings: Genesis 12:1-3 and Matthew 5:13-16

WHEELS WITHOUT COGS

As a youth, I learned to drive in a car with a standard transmission, a stick shift, and so more than a few times I signaled embarrassingly to pedestrians that I was a novice driver when my transmission emitted that grinding sound of gears that have not meshed properly. When the shift goes well, the cogs on one gear wheel link smoothly with the cogs on another for more power or more speed. The cogs sticking out from the wheels enable the gears to mesh so they work together to move the car. Without the cogs, no linkage and, therefore, no movement. Without the cogs, each wheel would just spin by itself accomplishing nothing.

By the mid 1930's, the cog had acquired a negative meaning.¹ Industrialization had made workers feel like moving parts in giant mechanisms they could neither understand nor control, and so to be made just a cog in the machinery was to be dehumanized. When I came of age in the late 1960's and early '70's, it was good to be independent, bad to be just a cog. In 1969, the psychotherapist Fritz Pearls offered what I have seen called "the Gestalt Prayer":

I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped.²

We may have thought we were moving toward freedom to be ourselves in a world that rewards conformity, and in some ways, we were, but biblically life is a relational concept, a matter of love, friendship, and community. Nothing, not even being a mere cog in the social or business machinery, is more impersonal than the false liberty of being autonomous in isolation from each other. But we have continued to move apart. The front porch has been replaced by the deck behind the house, and so people walking by go un-greeted. As one author has noted famously, more people go bowling today than in the years my youth, but the bowling leagues have shrunk to almost nothing. Seeing this change as illustrative of our isolation, Robert Putnam titled his book, *Bowling Alone*.³ The subtitle, *The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, sounds to me optimistic because I'm not so sure about the "revival" part. Is that not the question and the challenge? I think Putnam would say, Yes.

Gear wheels without cogs would just spin independently, never touching, never linking, and so never grinding but also never moving the car. Each would just do its own thing, spinning autonomously. We are here this morning to give thanks together, which is right in itself, and it's needed – our coming together with our distinct beliefs, histories, and viewpoints to be thankful to God. But you know what? We need to risk grinding the gears. We need to come together in ways that require us to reach out to each other and mesh to get something done. I am not talking about uniting our faiths, homogenizing our beliefs into one set of tepid affirmations that would speak profoundly of no one's faith but would avoid controversy with platitudes.

I hear young adults and some not so young accusing the world's religions of fomenting and even causing the world's conflicts, acts of terrorism, wars, bigotries, and seemingly endless cycles of revenge. They are saying humanity would be much better off with no religion. Are they naive? Yes. Have they put the cart before the horse? Yes. Do they not see that people misuse their religions to justify and inflame the conflicts and that without the religions, people would find other ways and means? Apparently not. We live in time when many prefer simple answers, no matter how simplistic and, therefore, false. But I offer two suggestions before we dismiss the charges out of hand.

First, don't we need to examine ourselves and see if indeed our faith has become partisan? I am a Christian, but, I contend, I am not a Christian partisan. I neither need nor desire to fight, put down, or conquer other religions. That Christianity in the West has fallen from its high throne, I regard as a good thing that offers us a time of opportunity to become the kind of faith we should have been from outset and should have continued to be throughout the centuries of our history. Christians were never called to rule but to serve, to give not to take, and even to sacrifice self-interest and prestige for the sake of others who may not much like us. So, as a Christian, I need not and must not misuse my faith to foster contempt for Jews, fear of or hatred for Muslims, suspicion of Buddhists, or scorn for the Unitarians, and so on. Will I adopt their faiths or call them the same as my own? No, we don't need to pretend to be the same to respect each other. Plus, there are histories not to be ignored — histories of cruelty and murder that do not go away simply because we choose not to learn them.

So, what about my contention that I not only can but must be Christian without becoming a Christian partisan in conflict with the religious of other faiths and the irreligious, too? Well, where are the cogs? I can be nonpartisan just by not being hostile, but am I not then just a wheel spinning alone, not harming anyone else but not touching, either, not meshing gears for the benefit of the community, the nation, and the world? Sure, if we reach out, the gears will grind now and then. But one interfaith service once a year is a start not

a finish, and if nothing more happens, it will become just a conceit that grows boring over time and is forgotten.

Secondly, I don't think it's sufficient to dismiss the charges of religious hate mongering simply by saying, rightly, that people would find other ways to fuel their prejudices and hatreds without religion. Don't we need to produce positive evidence? If you unknowingly drop your wallet and I pick it up but keep it, would you accept as justification my argument that if I had not, someone else would have? No, and neither is it good enough to say that without religions, people would find other justifications for their cruelties and wars. Yes, they would, but ought we not rather to be showing them that our faiths can heal wounds, redress grievances, foster mutual understanding with respect, and work together for the welfare of people in distress?

Worship is the most difficult venue for bringing together people of different faiths, and had it not been urged upon us as a ministerial association during the split, I would not recommend worship as the place to start. Why not? Worship takes us to the very core of our faiths, where we differ most and where we hold our own beliefs and practices most sacred, and where we are profoundly aware of approaching God. This service in its inception and its early years was negotiated part by part and sometimes line by line so we would, as one rabbi put it, do together the things we could do together. I suggest to you this morning that, if we will, we can find productive ways to mesh our gears in service to people in a time of great need, and we can produce evidence that different faiths, which do not share core beliefs, can even so work together toward shared goals of service, social justice, and community strengthening.

I think it is at the level of secondary beliefs that we can come together, reach out, touch, and mesh gears to move forward something worthwhile. Because of what I believe about God and what I believe God has done and has promised to fulfill, I am moved to care about certain things and to feel myself called to turn caring into responsive action. You may hold somewhat different or even very different core beliefs but also be moved by your faith to care about some of those same needs and distresses in our world. So, even though we cannot worship together except, maybe, in very limited and carefully monitored situations (like Thanksgiving), we can work together. We do not have to keep spinning separately, wheels without cogs, not grinding, but not meshing to move anything forward, either. So, let's see what more we can do together in this time of unexpected need for many who had thought they were well enough off and, for those already struggling, desperation.

Thank you for coming. Happy Thanksgiving, and God bless you.

Notes:

1. Oxford English Dictionary: “fig. One who holds a necessary but usu. insignificant position in a large organization or group. Freq. **a cog in a or the (. .) machine**, etc.”
2. Frederick (Fritz) Pearls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, p. 24, reprint 1992 by Gestalt Journal Press, originally published in 1969.
3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.