

Reflection  
Preacher: Dave McClave  
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First, I'd like to thank whoever it was that came up with idea of signing people up to give a "reflection" rather than a "sermon" or even a "meditation." Providing a "reflection" is a much less intimidating than giving a "sermon." Second, I'd like to apologize to anyone who came today thinking that I would impart words of wisdom or offer an interesting interpretation of a Bible passage or anything remotely similar. What I have prepared, and what you will be subjected to, is merely an account of how I arrived at Pilgrim. I call it "My Path to Pilgrim."

Do you remember a TV sit-com from the late 1980's called "Golden Girls"? One of the main characters in that show was Sophia, played by Estelle Getty. She was the mother of another one of characters and was considered the "old lady" of the group. She often started her conversations with "Picture this. Sicily 1928..." I am asking you to "Picture this. East Central Ohio 1955..."

I was born in Uhrichsville, Ohio, a town of about 6,000 people then. (It has since shrunk.) I was the last of three children, each of us about 2 years apart. My dad worked in the family business and my mom stayed home. All four of my grandparents lived in town. And there were plenty of kids to play with in the neighborhood. Yes, it was "Leave It To Beaver" live.

When I was 6 we moved to the booming metropolis of New Philadelphia (population 11,000), which is the county seat of Tuscarawas County, and about 10 miles distant from Uhrichsville. Life continued as before, just with less interactions with the grandparents.

There were plenty of churches to pick from in New Philadelphia, but my parents (or perhaps just my mother) decided that we would attend the church in Uhrichsville that she had attended as a youth and where my maternal grandmother still attended. It was called the First Christian Church, and to this day I could not tell you what denomination it is part of, or, for that matter, what its creed is. What I can tell you is that it was far enough away from our house in New Philadelphia to make getting to church a painful process.

Having lived through the process of getting just one child to church, I can appreciate the difficulties my mother endured in getting three unwillingly participants awakened, fed, dressed appropriately (this was no "Come As You Are" party!), and in the car in a timely fashion. The net result is that we were rarely in the pew for the start of service. This was embarrassing for me, because even as a young boy, I prided myself on being on time.

I should note that the "We" who attended did not include my father. Given that he was born and raised in Uhrichsville and attended the Methodist church with his parents while growing up, you might think that he would have gone to that church while the rest of us went to my mom's church. But that was not the case. Somehow he was exempt from any church-going. Ditto for my maternal grandfather. I have no memory of him ever setting foot in the First Christian Church, in spite of the fact that his wife was a regular attendee.

I'm not sure the church offered Sunday School, but if it did, we did not participate. My guess is that Sunday School started before the adult worship service, which would have required even more time and effort on my mother's part to get the kids there on time. This meant that we were in the adult service for the entire duration of the service. Usually my grandmother was there, which was some comfort, because she could be counted on to have a steady supply of mints or Lifesavers to stave off (at least for a short time) the fidgeting that ensued as the pastor droned on and on endlessly. Likewise, if the church had a Coffee Hour, we did not partake of that either. The rush to get home mirrored that of getting to church in the first place, except for the fact that all participants (my mother included) were in a better mood on the drive home than on the drive to church.

The First Christian Church did not offer infant baptism. Baptism was done at the same time as confirmation. Rather than go through the baptism/confirmation process three times, my mother decided to wait until the youngest (me) was old enough to be confirmed and then do all three of us at once. As luck would have it (or perhaps by design), by the time I was the appropriate age, my oldest sister had her driver's license, and so she, not my mother, was in charge of getting the three of us to church on Saturday mornings for confirmation class. I don't remember anything about the confirmation process, except for the fact that I did not want to be there. There were certainly no field trips or service projects or – God forbid! – overnight lock-ins. I don't even remember if the three McClave children were the only confirmands. I do remember the baptism though! It's tough to forget a full-body immersion in front the congregation and wondering the whole time whether the pastor was going to screw up and drown me. That was Spring of 1969. The next, and last, time I was in that church was when my oldest sister got married there in 1975.

As you can tell, my church experience growing up was not a very positive one. Quite the opposite! The older I got, the more I viewed the church experience as a waste of time – for everyone involved. My sisters never spoke about their church experiences in a positive light, if at all. Nor did I ever hear my mother talk about how much she enjoyed going to church with us in tow. If anything, she spoke about it in terms of an obligation. I'm not sure what my mother expected us to gain from the church experience, but I sincerely doubt that she was trying to turn us against church, but that was the net effect.

Fast forward to the Fall of 1989. I was living in Lexington with my mother, my oldest sister, and my sister's 8 year-old daughter. None of us was attending any church. Out of the blue my mother announced that “we” needed to find a church for the sake of my 8 year-old niece. Say what?! My mother could see the look of bewilderment on my face and so explained that my niece needed to attend church to “round out her experience.” Whatever!

Being the dutiful son, I agreed to accompany my oldest sister on the church-shopping trips, which, oddly, did not include my mother. We visited several churches in town and were not impressed (most likely because neither of us had gotten over our own, less than positive, church experience from our childhood.) I was secretly hoping that these negative reviews would put the kibosh on the whole notion of going to church, but alas, the search continued.

While dropping off my niece at her best buddy, Ricki Mason's house, my sister happened to mention to Ricki's mother that she was church shopping. Ricki's mother is, as most of you know, Sheryl Mason, a long-time member of Pilgrim. Sheryl suggested that we visit Pilgrim. So my sister and I trudged off to Pilgrim the next Sunday and were pleasantly surprised. Not only did we find the worship service familiar, we received a very warm welcome at Coffee Hour. As my niece already had a good friend in the Sunday School, we decided that Pilgrim was the place to bring everyone – my sister, my niece, my mother, and myself. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

So why have I been attending for nearly 30 years? What was different in 1989 than in 1969? The short answer to both those questions is, “Church beyond Sunday morning.” Growing up I had an inkling that there was more to church than just an hour on Sunday morning because when we went to my paternal grandparents' house for dinner, my grandmother would talk about what was going on with the “Women's Auxiliary” at church and, of course, the church choir events and practices. My paternal grandmother loved to sing. She sang in her church choir for 75 years (from age 15 - 90) and only stopped when she had a stroke. In her later years she would joke about the fact that she and the choir director (who, apparently, had been the choir director for a very long time) knew all the hymns by heart and so they really didn't need those heavy hymnals. But because I was not having a great time at the First Christian Church, I did not entertain the idea that perhaps MORE church would result in BETTER church. That

seemed counter-intuitive. Besides, it was clear to me that my mother simply didn't have the time to devote to taking me to more church activities.

So in 1989 I found myself with the wherewithal to drive wherever and whenever I wanted to AND a group of people (Pilgrims) who welcomed whatever time, talent, and treasure I brought to the table. I found myself making the rounds of the various committees, finding fellowship and humor at all, but making the deepest connections at Antiques Show, Finance and Administration, and Pilgrim Nursery School. My fondness for these committees had very little to do with my knowledge of the focus of these committees. The best example of this is the Pilgrim Nursery School. I took over as treasurer on Jan 1, 1995 having never had any exposure to a nursery school. Twenty-three plus years later I still can't tell you what makes for a good program or what the proper class size is or what curriculum is appropriate for a 4-year old. But that's OK! I work with the books and the budgets and let other, more knowledgeable, folks work with the program.

I find this approach – sticking with what I know – a little more troubling when it comes to the “religious” side of church. When I was the moderator 20 years ago I had to meet regularly with the Judy Brain, the pastor at the time. Knowing that my comfort zone was administration, she would sometimes ask me if I had ever considered coming to Bible Study or a Lenten book discussion. I got the hint and went to a few Lenten discussions over the years. They were OK, but I never thought “Oh, I should do this more regularly.” So after nearly 30 years of coming to Pilgrim, I am starting to come to grips with the reality that I will never be a Biblical scholar or a prayer guru.

And speaking of being a Biblical scholar, for those of you who are wondering if there is any connection between the scripture reading today and my reflection, the answer is “No.” When Reverend Karen sent me the list of possible readings for today, I immediately responded that I would read from the Book of Amos. I selected Amos not because I knew something about this prophet but because I did not even know that there was a Book of Amos. Truth be told, the only “Amos” I ever heard of was he of the “Amos and Andy” radio show from the 1930's and 40's. But I didn't tell Karen that...