

Executive Commission 2013

9 July

Opening Address by the Moderator, the Right Rev Rod Botsis

Today I want to talk about our motives. In my love letter to you was a word that we're going to try and study for the week - Philippians

Why do we do the things that we do? When ministers preach at weddings most people think the sermon is really just for the couple getting married. We think that they are the focus of the attention. But as reformed Christians and Presbyterians, we preach Christ Jesus. He is always the focus of our attention. And so at the wedding, all present are to hear the word of Christ, and what He may have to say about marriage. The same is true about funerals I think that often it is felt that the attention may appear to be on the one who's fallen asleep. "Fallen asleep". Remember that is the New Testament expression and belief and understanding of those who have died.

Again as reformed Christians our attention is on Christ Jesus. Not the one in the box but the alive and risen one in our presence. The point I'm trying to make is that whenever we gather together as Christians He, Jesus, is the focal point. The context in which we meet is much less important.

So here we are, officially the Executive Commission of the General Assembly of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in all of Southern Africa. It sounds very impressive, but much more impressive is that Christ Jesus is present. He is Lord of all and He is present now.

So let's begin with Philippians. I would like to quote from Philippians chapter 3 where Paul says this: "My brothers and sisters in Christ, it is no trouble for me to repeat to you, the things I've said before. In fact it is a safeguard for you".

I want to present to you what I think is a safeguard that I need and I think we as a denomination need. For better or for worse, you have me as Moderator for another year until July next year and my job as Moderator, in these sorts of meetings, is to bring the Scripture to us. In a sense to ask with me to say, let's look, let's discern together, is this what the Lord is saying?

Whether the context is a formal meeting such as at the Executive Commission, or whether we just, 50 or so brothers or sisters who are gathered together to celebrate what the book of Acts says, should be the agenda of every Session meeting. Or the agenda of every Presbytery or the agenda of every assembly, or even every house group.

Acts 14:27 says this "they gathered together and reported what God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to unbelievers". That's the agenda, for Sessions, Presbyteries, Executives and Assemblies. We gather here to hear what God has been doing amongst us and how He has opened through our work and his Word, the door of faith for unbelievers. So I want to be like Paul and repeat what I raised at the Assembly last year. My theme if you like, second Corinthians 5 verse nine "we make it our goal to please him". We make it our goal to please Christ Jesus. I would add to that Colossians 1:10 "Live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way" Add to that Philippians 1:27 "whatever happens conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News of Jesus" and as I quoted already, Philippians 3:16, "live up to what you've attained".

I'm sure it is sad for you, it's got to be sad for our whole nation South Africa, and I think Zimbabwe and Zambia would share the sadness as we watched how some of the Mandela family in the last week or two have not lived up to what they've attained. As one commentator has said," how sad that the person known as the world's greatest reconciler should have his family so un-reconciled to one another at this time" so cheekily I want to say, we need a safeguard.

And here is a safeguard of all our behaviour. Make it your goal to please Jesus. Live a life in every way that is worthy of Him. Conduct yourself in the manner worthy of Him. Live up to what you've attained. You are a friend of Christ Jesus, you have been born again to a different set of rules, of ethics and behaviour and standards. You are Christians.

So today Philippians 1:27 "whatever happens conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the good news ". He says that because just a few verses earlier, chapter 1 verse 15, he raises the ugly and awkward question about our motives.

The reason we do things, and he says this, some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry. Some preach Christ out of love for Christ and love for the people of God. Some he says, preach Christ out of selfish ambition. Selfish ambition! How twisted to use the gospel of salvation for selfish reasons! But Paul says it can be even worse because some preach hoping to use it to stir up trouble for others. And those others are in chains like himself. How is it that we as Christians belong to the greatest reconciler in all the world, Christ Jesus, and we are un-reconciled with one another? Because of selfish ambitions!

There is a poison that seeps in amongst us as a church. Not just our church, but we are our church, so we address what is here amongst us. And I have no doubt in my own mind that the Spirit sifts motives for doing things. In writing to my children early this morning, I said to them, pray for daddy because I am teaching about motives. But the most obvious question to ask yourselves, with what motive are you preaching about motives. Ask them to pray for integrity and consistency in my life this week and for ever.

I think he wants to sift our motives. Why do we do un-Christian things when we wear Christ? Literally, Romans tells us that we've put on Christ. It is like we wear the jersey, and the jersey says on the front, I play for the team. But then we have selfish ambition and we hold the ball to ourselves and hog it all to ourselves and try desperately to bring glory to ourselves. It is as if we had a uniform on us saying Christian but our motives are selfish. Proverbs 14: 12, there is a way that seems good to people but in the end it leads to death. It brings to me things that I think are good but may lead to death. This morning I watched someone have muesli and fruit for breakfast. So healthy , you can see he looks healthy. What seemed good to me was bacon, bacon fat on toast with butter. It will lead to death. Hopefully not this week! But you can understand that there is a way that seems right to us and so we are convinced it's right, but God is saying it leads to the death of oneself. Selfish ambition simply destroys the work of the Spirit in the church. You cannot hold to Ephesians 4 "make every effort to maintain unity of the church" and hold selfish ambitions.

There is a way that seems good to us but leads to death. We walk on the cliff edge of selfish ambition and so we need a safeguard. The safeguard is, make it your goal to please Him. Whatever happens, live your life worthy of Him, whatever happens in your ministry,

Let me talk to Ministers first of all, if your ministry is a good place or your ministry is in a bad place, if your colleagues seem to be doing better than you are or you are doing better than they are, whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner that you can stand before Christ and hear Him say, well done. Some grow in spite of bad ministry because God has chosen that. Some do not grow in spite of faithful ministry because somehow that's the mystery of God. Whatever happens in your private life, your marriages may not be good, the children may be faithless, your private managing of money may be chaotic, or you may be riding on success at every level. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of Christ.

Rightfully and fairly the Ministry committee of our church refused to admit to the status of the student of Ministry to the selection conference, someone from the Cape Town Presbytery, a young man, simply because he was not part of the Fellowship of Vocation for 12 months. He was part of the Fellowship of Vocation for eight months.

The news came that he was not going to the selection conference. This meant another whole year of waiting for his life, and even though he had attended more Fellowship of Vocation in this Presbytery, because they have more here than other presbyteries have. He had not done 12, he had only done eight.

You are not going. I asked Patrick, how do you feel? With great wisdom beyond his own years, he said; Rod there are two ways I could respond. I could respond petulantly like a child with something snatched from him, or I could respond that Christ has allowed this and I will wait on him.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of him. Selfish ambition is as old as sin. Adam and Eve gave in to the evil one because Genesis 3 says the disobedience that was offered to them looked good. It looked good to them. The disobedience of what was offered them, we were told, was pleasing to the eye and offered them to be like God. Well I can't imagine any more ambition than to be like God. So their own selfishness made them take the bite and we know the results.

Again you got to know James chapter 1, verse 14, where James says "that each one of us is led astray, dragged away from God's way for our lives by our own evil desires". Another phrase for our own evil desires. Selfish ambition!

Elders, please don't think I am only talking to the Minister. Selfish ambition! Please understand that the book of Philippians is the only New Testament book that is specially addressed to elders, to overseers and deacons. So this is for you too. I want to give you a couple of examples of what I think is selfish ambition, but really the examples are weak. Much more important is each of us should be saying now, Holy Spirit please bring to my own mind those places in my life that are selfish ambition. Let the Spirit dredge your own heart and mind.. You do your own work with Christ. But elders and leaders of the church, when you have called someone to be the Minister of the church, and the minister is now inducted into the parish and begins to make some suggestions, and he or she, most often she, is told this is OUR church. Or by one or two particularly strong members who may not even be elders, this is MY church. We do things for OUR way. That is selfish ambition.

It is a disease. When I was a young minister in the church, the General Assembly declared a year of evangelism where every church was to come and run a year of evangelism. When the instruction

arrived on the table of our congregation, the session clerk said; Evangelism! We tried it here and it doesn't work. We're not doing it.

Early in my ministry of Bellevue the session clerk lost the plot badly because he was unhappy with me personally. It all started out of kindness. He thought I was working too hard. So one day standing with my diary in my hands, making an appointment with a member, trying to find a place, he snatched the diary out of my hand and said this young man is far too busy, he needs a rest. I said to him afterwards, don't you treat me like that again. I'm not your son. I'm your Minister.

Then he wrote letters to 60 of our members secretly inviting them to start a new Presbyterian Church in Bellville. I heard about it so I said to the elders, the only thing that I can do is to go to the meeting that he is calling. They thought I was a bit silly, but I duly knocked on the door, exactly at the time of the meeting. There were five cars outside so I thought this would be interesting. When the door opened to my knock the Session Clerk stared at me. Must have been like Rhoda looking at Peter's ghost. What are you doing here? I said I believe is a meeting here about a Presbyterian Church in Belleville. I'm a Presbyterian and I'd like to hear about. The only members at the meeting were himself, his wife, and one inquisitive woman. The bigger shock for me was that the other motorcars belonged to one of the ministers in the presbytery and seven of his elders who came secretly into my neighbourhood to start another church right under my nose.

Ministers, selfish ambition is when you force your ideas and programs on a congregation and you blame the congregation when they fail, and you've not worked with the people. Selfish ambition is when you go to a Presbytery meeting already thinking you wish you were on your way home. You have entered selfish ambition.

Selfish ambition is when you leave a Presbytery and you say, that was a waste of my time. I have come to understand the Presbytery to be an operating theatre. All of us are the surgeons and nurses in that theatre and we are simply taking care of someone who is very ill. That could be a person who has lost their mind and has behaved badly. It could be someone whose heart is broken and needs tender care. It could be someone who through their own selfishness is simply not thinking correctly and needs some serious surgery. But the day will come when you will need surgery and you better hope that your brothers and sisters who gather around your life don't say, this is a waste of my time.

Selfish ambition is just being like the priest and the Pharisee and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan who simply look away to keep their own hands clean and their own money in their own pocket. Selfish ambition is when you do not pay your assessment and you don't explain why. You simply keep silent.

Paul says, some preach to stir up trouble. Can this be true? Sadly I have to say yes. As ministers and elders out of selfish ambition we have abused the pulpit. We are no different from the Corinthians, the Philippians, the Ephesians. We are very young in Christ. Our maturity is very thin because of selfish ambition. So let me ask each of us generally and myself specifically. When you speak about the UPCS, when you speak about ministers in this Church, when you speak about the Central Office and the staff at the Central Office, when you speak about the Associations to which you do not belong, when you speak about the moderator and clerk of your presbytery; do you use words that build those people up as Ephesians 4 tells us to, or do you know in your heart that you speak to stir

up trouble? Do you take secret delight when you hear that things are not going well in someone else's Ministry?

Is there racism in our denomination? Without a doubt. Both ways by the way! And let me say sooner or later the level of white participation in our church will likely simply dwindle to very little. So racism is not a major issue although it is there. There is a far more insidious slippery, enemy than racism. Racism is a big fat ugly brute that you can see. Selfish ambition is a slippery poison that seems right as we taste it but it poisons the heart.

We've been saved by grace, the unselfish un-ambition of Christ Jesus. By grace. But there is a phrase about the law of Christ. Not the grace of Christ. The law of Christ. Galatians 6: Carry each other's burden and you will fulfil the law of Christ. Each one should look after his own life and look at his own actions without comparing himself to one another, says Galatians 6. And each one should take the load off another as well.

So mature Christians, ministers, elders, leaders, Christians generally: We carry our burdens, we test our motives and actions living worthily for Jesus and we pick up the burden of someone else as well.

I hope that when you get back to the school for tea you are the last in the line because you say to everyone else, please go first. One of the things I am not enjoying about being Moderator is I get pushed to the front of the queue at meals. Now in my Greek tradition the men eat last.

One of my favourite hymns which I wish more of our black members would sing is "Make way make way for Christ the King". But this has ceased to be a favourite of mine because this Free State Presbytery at Constantiaville opened the church a few weeks ago. I got to the lunch queue late. I went to spend a penny, the queue was quite long and one of our brothers picked me out as the Moderator. He called out, "make way make way for the Moderator" and pushed me to the front of the queue. I hated it.

When I got to the front of the queue, here stood a man shorter than me. Older than me beautifully dressed in a suit, quiet, smart dignified. I bumped into him and said I am really sorry. And he said to me "it's okay Moderator I can see you are very hungry". And he smiled with a big smile. Then I realised he was totally blind. And he was teasing me. He could see nothing. But he somehow felt my embarrassment and softened it with a moment of humour at his own expense. He carried my burdens. He did not have selfish ambition to say the disabled must come first.

Could it be that here in this Executive Commission some of us are blind because we do not want to see our own selfish ambition? I ask you to use this safeguard, make it a goal to please Jesus and live a life worthy of him.

I end with this. Peter is questioned by Jesus. Do you love me, do you love me, do you love me? And I think that something rises within Peter when he sees John. In a moment of selfish ambition he says to Jesus "what about him?" Why are you nagging me, what about him? And Christ's answer to him is "what is it to you Peter, how I treat John? You must follow me." Today we look at motives as we follow Christ. Tomorrow we will look at our attitudes. How we live out what we do?