

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
October 2, 2011

Ephesians 1:15-23; 4:1-6, 14-16  
"The Kaleidoscopic Church"

### Part 1

The church is a kaleidoscope. The form and color of the church is only seen when it is held to the light of Jesus Christ, its founder and head. The church began as one entity and with every turn – sometimes centuries – it changed. The pieces in the kaleidoscope are denominations but they are always part of one, beautiful and colorful mass.

Someone asked me why there were so many denominations and asked if I would preach a sermon on the church. This is random as far the lectionary readings go but it aligns later with World Communion.

There are many expressions of the church. There's Presbyterian and Episcopalian, among the most difficult to spell. The American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church takes the prize or the longest name. There's Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and so on.

As we know the Church began at Pentecost – the first kaleidoscopic picture – as recorded in the biblical Book of Acts. The Church spread throughout the known world at the time, reaching into North Africa and Europe. Popes were in Rome (mainly), the West, and Patriarchs were in Greece, the East. There was one Catholic Church.

In 1054 there was a split called the "Great Schism," between Western and Eastern churches. The Roman Catholic Church remained in the West and North Africa and Greek and other Orthodox churches emerged in the East and North Africa.

The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 with Martin Luther hammering 95 theses against the Roman Catholic Church on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. He did not retract his so-called "protests" so the church excommunicated him.

Thus, began a whole new branch of the church which developed into four main strands: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist. Presbyterian emerged from the Reformed branch, Episcopalian from the Anglican and the Mennonites from the Anabaptist. The churches were scattered around Europe and spread to the New World and thus began the US church story.

Denominations emerged prolifically when the constitution of the US allowed freedom of religion. In former times it was assumed that civic harmony depended on religious conformity. There should be "one king, one faith, one law," in the phrase of Louis XIV. Thus, we had national churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church in France and the Church of England in England. Religion was seen as the warp of the social fabric, the

glue that held different estates together and balanced conflicting interests. Religious diversity was equated with civic unrest and upheaval. The idea that a nation could tolerate not only different Christian churches but also radically different religions was considered lunacy up until the Enlightenment.

Modern Americans who have lived under the Bill of Rights and its guarantee of freedom of worship have difficulty realizing what a truly radical experiment the First Amendment was when proposed by Madison and Jefferson. Once the Constitution was ratified, the government was forbidden to intervene in matters of personal faith. We saw the growth of many varied expressions or denominations of the faith.

The diversity of the church continued with immigration, the internet and post-denominational factors. I'll speak about these in up-coming sermons leading up to Reformation Sunday on October 30.

The United States is also known for associations of denominations, like the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals, that foster toleration among the different expressions of the faith. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is very accepting of other denominations and is a member of the National and World Council of Churches as well as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Most churches in the world are celebrating "World Communion" today. It's a sign that we are together in our missional concerns for the world and particularly in ministries of peace and peacemaking.

I'm thankful that there is an expression in the kaleidoscope, the Presbyterian Church (USA) that appeals to me and my understanding of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. I also appreciate different expressions.

Dirk Wierenga traveled the country interviewing Presbyterians and wrote a book called *Presbyterians: A Spiritual Journey*. It's a marvelous book, full of stories and colorful pictures printed on glossy paper. It's on the small table as you enter the Fellowship Hall.

He tells a story that affirms the church at large. He writes: "While standing in the checkout line of a supermarket in San Bernardino, California, I overheard a conversation. The woman behind me had just run into an acquaintance, a young man probably in his mid-twenties who was having trouble with both his marriage and the law. The woman asked the man if things in his life were improving. He said they weren't; his wife was leaving him, and a warrant was out for his arrest.

"This wonderful woman, whom I'll call Rose, responded by saying, 'You gotta go to church, 'cause if you do and you put your faith in God, good things will begin to happen.' Rose's strong faith so moved me, I turned to her after the young man left and said that I couldn't help overhearing what she had said and that I was humbled by her faith.

“Suddenly here we were, two strangers in a grocery store talking about our common bond: our faith in God. When I turned to leave, she grabbed my arm and simply said, ‘God bless you.’”

I used to have lunch from time to time with a jazz musician who is member of a Presbyterian church in San Francisco. He had a checkered past life and was being renewed and healed in the church. I asked him what the church was for him. He said it was family. When he looks out at the congregation on Sunday he says to himself, “This is my family. I can count on them when I’m hurting and they can count on me.”

The biblical Greek for church is *ekklesia*, the new assembly of Christ, a visible community of faith. It is inseparable from two other biblical concepts in the Greek: *koinonia*, which is community, and *diakonia*, which is service. The church, therefore, is a communion of persons in relationship with Christ and each other, committed to service. The church is the “body of Christ.” *Koinonia* knows no national, social, racial, or economic boundaries. Without it, there is no church. *Diakonia* has no boundaries with whom, and for whom, and to whom it ministers.

Thank God for the church as place, as people, as denomination, and as unity with the church universal and with all religious communities of the world affirming love, compassion, peace and justice. Amen.