

January 26, 2020
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Presbyterian Women's Sunday

First Presbyterian Church
21 Church Street
Pittsford, NY 14534
www.pittsfordpres.org
(585) 586-5688

Rev. Carol Anne Strawbridge

Sacred Struggle

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Imagine one of those beautiful Rochester early November days. There is a slight chill in the air. Falling leaves are swirling on the ground. It was on one of those November days in 1872, that fifteen Rochester women opened the door of a barber shop and boldly announced, "We are here to register to vote." No doubt, the daring declarations of the new visitors stopped all conversations inside of the barbershop. **Women didn't register to vote in 1872! Women didn't vote in 1872!** Yet..... 15 women filled the room with an outrageous announcement: "We are here to register to vote." Somehow Susan B. Anthony and her friends convinced the perplexed registrar to register them for the upcoming election. Was he convinced by Anthony's argument that the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted four years earlier, had stated that all citizens could vote? Whoops, it actually said that all male citizens could vote. Was the registrar frightened by her bold threat to sue him? Did he just want to get these fool-hearted women out of the barber shop as quickly as possible? Who knows.... but days later, on November 5, Susan B. Anthony and her friends proudly entered the polling station in the 8th ward of Rochester, the area we now call Corn Hill. The women cast their illegal votes. However, it was not a vote without consequences. Nine days later the women were arrested and Anthony was tried, convicted and fined one hundred dollars BUT.....Women had voted and a movement was ignited!

On August 10, 1920, forty-eight years later, the 19th amendment was ratified. This amendment gave women the legal right to vote. Almost daily, I cross the Genesee River by driving over the Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony Bridge. I am sure some of you do as well. I confess that, as I do, I give absolutely no thought to the brave challenges that its namesakes faced no thought to the tension that their fight must have created within families, communities, and, yes, churches. This bridge is literally a concrete reminder of people determined to travel from injustice to justice—determined to bridge the gaps in our society between those with privileges and those without. We know from history that the fight for women suffrage was just that—a fight. It was a hard fight with the bottom line being, "Who are citizens and who are not?" "Who are we as a country and who are we not?"

Just weeks ago, we welcomed in 2020. We also welcomed in the year of the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, the amendment that granted women the right to vote. I remember the stories of my

grandmother. She proudly recounted the first time she voted. At age 28, in November 1920, with an infant in her arms, she voted for the President of the United States. My grandmother's voice echoes in my ear every time I vote. She was determined that her two daughters and five granddaughters understood that voting was a privilege and should never be taken for granted.

For if you had been living in those years, when women were demanding the right to vote, you would have heard voices from all sides of the issue everywhere you went—including the Christian church. Many heard in their Sunday School classes that women should stay home and tend to their families. Others heard from their pulpit that women were inferior to men with no ability to decide the best candidates. Yet others, specifically the Quakers, understood women as valuable creations of God and, thus, passionately worked for the women's suffrage movement.

As we stand here on Presbyterian Women's Sunday, 100 years later and just down the road from the commencement of this suffrage fight, we shake our heads in amazement that this would even be a dispute at family dinner tables, community picnics..... let alone church potlucks. But it was! People struggled to discern: What was right.....what was righteous.... what was best....who they were as citizens of the United States....who they were as people of a just God.

Last summer, Presbyterian Women from throughout our country came to the Finger Lakes region to learn how the people of our region have shaped our culture. They visited churches in Genesee Valley, Geneva, and Cayuga-Syracuse Presbyteries, exploring how congregations have been involved with the justice issues of history. The visiting group was impressed with our western New York resolve to struggle with hard issues.

Trying to discern who we are and what our role is in history is not easy for anyone, including Christians. In fact, for Christians, it is a spiritual journey, a sacred struggle. It is a struggle that is as old as the Christian church itself. In the lectionary reading this morning, we are privy to a letter that the apostle Paul sent to the Christians in Corinth around 56 AD. Paul has learned from Chloe's people that there was much quarreling in the Christian community in Corinth. Well, first of all, who is this Chloe? And who are her so called people? To be honest, we don't really know. Chloe is only mentioned once in the bible—in the scripture verse that I just read. Scholars believe that she probably hosted what is called a House Church. The early church met in private homes. The new faith movement didn't need large spaces, but it did need safe havens—sanctuaries from the brutal persecution of the Roman government. It is widely believed that Chloe opened up her home to such worshipers. In Paul's letter, he tackles the "Who are we" struggle straightforward. Apparently, Chloe's people had written to him claiming that some of their church friends maintained that they belonged to Apollos. Others declared that they belonged to Paul. Still others professed allegiance to Cephas and, yes, some even professed to belong to Christ. No doubt their struggles were honest, their opinions were authentic, and their efforts legitimate. Paul, however, clearly frustrated, clarifies the confusion with one question "Has Christ been divided?" It is as if Paul is shouting: Christ is the one and only...live as Christ has showed you...love as Christ has called you...let go of your silos and be in the words of Paul "united in the same mind and purpose of Christ." It seemed so clear to Paul, but we know, it is just not always so easy.

In 1809, Pittsford Presbyterian Church also began as a house church. Ten people meet in the home of Glover Perrin. Without a doubt, those ten folks worked to ascertain who they were as a new Christian church. In 1816, the congregation moved into its first building. It became

fully Presbyterian in 1869. In 1890, the congregation acquired its first pipe organ. It's entertaining to imagine sitting in the middle of the 1890 Annual Meeting, the meeting just after the pipe organ had been purchased. Imagine the hard seats. Imagine the fancy hats. Imagine the outhouses. Imagine the debates. No doubt, there were words exchanged over the budget, and a long conversation about who could and who could not play the new organ. Since it was 1890, it is conceivable that a debate about who should and should not vote might have been part of the agenda as well. It is, after all, who we are as Presbyterians. We believe that God reveals Godself in history through the faithful discernment of the gathered faithful.

Pittsford Presbyterian is about to begin a discernment process. It is called Vital Congregation Initiative, lovingly known as VCI. It will help us discover who we are as a congregation in **this** period of history. We will discern how we, men and women, youth and children, can be a **vital** presence of Christ—here in Pittsford, New York, now. It is a grassroots kind of process with tools from the Presbyterian Church USA. It comes with no expectations from the national church. Together we will endeavor to uncover God's vision for our congregation. During Lent, small groups from our congregation will meet at various times and various places. There will even be an on-line group. It is the model of the first Christian church: a small group of folks discerning who we are as a congregation and how we can serve God in this time and place in history. The VCI team is hoping that every member in the congregation will join a small group, share their thoughts with the group, and have fun together. Today, in Fellowship Hall, you may sign-up for a group. The apostle Paul tells the Christians in Corinth and us, to be united – not uniformed – but to be united in the mind and purpose of Christ. As Christians we are called to continually explore and discover what that means...for it is how we live in the light of Christ with vitality. Amen