

“The Legacy”
A sermon by Rev. Martin Hager
Dedication Sunday, January 20, 2002
Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-7

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: *God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, may we hear your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

“But I said, ‘I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.’” I don’t know if you’ve ever spoken these words out loud. But I suspect, everyone who has worked hard at what they do, has spoken something like that...either out loud or silently, in the quiet of the night when all the kids are in bed. How do we know what the products of our labors really are? Isaiah confessed these words boldly. No one could doubt that he was God’s servant. But, proclaiming the Word of God to those long exiled upon their return, he had to wonder. What have we learned from the exile? Some days, he thought, pitifully little, if anything at all.

This morning we celebrate the dedication of a newly renovated sanctuary. I think, like many of us here, of our past, the historic journey we have taken that brought us here. I’m a bit hesitant. Why? I don’t want anyone believing that the First Presbyterian Church’s only claim for the present is a proud past. First Church is rooted firmly in the present. We are a strongly mission minded congregation. This congregation has a beautiful ability to span the generations. I have been the most proud of First Church when I see people of maturity sharing what they have learned with the young. I have been most proud of First Church when the gifts of the young, courage, bravery, the ability to experiment and to take risks, these adolescent values, are shared

and cherished by the elderly. I would say, First Church is rooted firmly in the present, privileged to carry on ministry in the name of Jesus Christ to the people of our times, within the issues of our day. Nothing is worse than being captive to the past. Well, maybe one thing is worse: to have a past where the hand of God is obvious, and never tell the tale.

The renovation we have just completed is meant to speak of the past. It was a careful, cautious rehabilitation and renovation of an old, revered building. It was never palatial, never drew much attention to itself. But so many of us, each time we enter the sanctuary, are reminded of the Church triumphant. We catch a vision of those who used to worship here, our parents, our grandfathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters, or people who we greatly respected that are no longer here. We who are not related to First Church by ancestry catch the coattails of those who are. It's too little to say that we love the people of this church. We admire and respect them. And now that many of us have gone on, isn't it peculiar? We spot them in the choir loft. We spot them when the ushers come forward. We can barely pray in this place without remembering that the saints prayed here too. Housed in these walls are the prayers of fallible men and women. Here are the prayers of parents frustrated by their young. Here are the prayers of the young frustrated with the old folks. Here, the baptisms and funerals processed before our eyes. And if you're really quiet, you can hear the prayers still. A coat of paint won't change that.

We knew we wouldn't respect those memories if we permitted this building to collapse from neglect, and we knew too, that we wouldn't respect the legacy either, by creating some sharp departure from the original architect's intent. The architectural firm of Aude, Shand and Williams saw the ghosts, they heard the prayers of those long gone. And we thank you for honoring us the way you did. Thanks, too, for the construction firm of Bollenback and Company. You came early and never quit at 4:45. At one stage of the construction, workers were up on the scaffolding, eating the dust created by tearing the old ceiling down. The temperatures must have been well over 100 degrees day after day. We may not have

taught religion to these workers, but we did give them a ferocious picture of hell.

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But the tale that needs to be told goes beyond this building. It goes beyond the beautiful little sanctuary that was erected in 1888. Even before the “large and commodius” building at Dunedin cemetery by Joseph Brown and the charter members of the congregation, called Ebenezer and Bethsaida. The real tale is told when you take a walk through the cemetery and see all those infant graves. The real tale is told in the graves you see that were huddled near the old church.

If you read the old session minutes, you see the simple story of ministers who served, elders who served with them, and the challenges set before a simple pioneer congregation, starting out when there were only 200 people in all of Pinellas County. Most of the people who surrounded Joseph Brown knew his brothers and sisters, some knew his father. They had all lived, at one point, as neighbors in the Shennendoah Valley, that portion of the valley between Lexington and Staunton. Many of them were children of parents who were baptized at the New Providence Church, one of the oldest Presbyterian Churches in America. On the names of the original role, there is Joseph Brown’s sister’s son. Her husband James Morrison was one of the pastors that followed Joseph Brown’s father, Samuel, to the pulpit of New Providence.

I don’t have to tell the Civil War buffs anything about Virginia from 1865 to 1868. We’re not certain how Joseph Brown felt about those days. His brother, a former Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church and founder of the Bethel congregation in Clearwater wrote about that time. We know Joseph Brown’s son, Henry wrote a book entitled “A Soldier’s Tale”. He lost a leg in Lexington. Joseph Brown discovered his injured son while making rounds as a chaplain to a confederate hospital in Richmond. We know that Joseph and his son Henry, were at Appomattox for the surrender. We know too, that Joseph Brown saw the burning of the library at Washington College, his alma mater. He experienced the

evacuation of Richmond and the occupation by federal forces. We know too that the family farm could no longer provide for all of them. So he left. His wife died of diphtheria in Suwannee, and after that, he went to what now is Dunedin.

Some of the families that had been neighbors in the Shenendoah Valley were already here. They were, in every accurate sense of the word, refugees.

Joseph Brown, after completing a ministry here without pay, his health in a state of collapse, spent his final days in Austin, Texas, the home of his eldest son Henry, near his sister's husband, Robert Lewis Dabney, who was then a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Texas and a founder of a fledgling seminary later to be called Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, my alma mater.

After he left, one of his successors commented that he was really careless about keeping records. But he appealed for understanding. "He was away from his library and his colleagues," they said. The former Princeton Scholar, the Headmaster of the Liberty Hill Academy, later to become Washington and Lee, ended up here. When he died, the last visions were perhaps, not the Gulf of Mexico, but more likely his ancestral home in the Shenendoah Valley. But he left behind a congregation. Using connections he still had in Richmond, a donation of nails was sent from a Richmond foundry. The pews were hand made. There is one of them right over there.

I think of him now. I trust his life was full of modesty that characterized the men of his times. His long career as a minister to African American slaves was now being slandered by historians. He and those like them, they said, were there just to keep the slaves quiet. Or, perhaps, to sow the seeds that finally set them free. You choose.

"I have labored in vain," the prophet Isaiah said. "I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." He had to feel that way. You can be sure, he never said those words out loud. He just carried on, just one day at a time, teaching the children at the schoolhouse, convening the Wednesday night candle light service, Sunday

Sabbath, the early and late service. Just one foot in front of the other, trust God, brother Joseph. Trust God, and build a church.

In one of the letters we have from his brother William, he speaks of a young couple, who when asked if they could give to the construction of the new church, said they had planned to sell a piece of furniture to buy cutlery. “Here,” they said, “let the church sell it and use the proceeds.”

The early days were days of defeat, poverty, regret. These were the terrible days of healing the open and festering wounds of the nation’s greatest tragedy. And this is the quarry in which we were mined. “I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.”

What does God do with all of that? Does God give Joseph any sympathy? Does God scale down expectations? No. Instead God says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

“It’s too light of thing, Brother Joseph, “that you should be my servant, to rescue the citizens of a defeated nation - too light a thing, for you to raise up Presbyterians and their kinsfolk - too light a thing to heal up the broken hearts of the civil war.” Too light a thing? “You’ll excuse me, Lord God,” says Joseph, “I was thinking it was an unbearable load.” “Oh, stop,” says the Lord, “the fun is just beginning. I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The most important work on this day for us, goes beyond simply dedicating the renovation and restoration of an old building. It is time for us to cast some visions, to dream some dreams, and to rededicate ourselves to our mission together in the name of Jesus Christ. In today’s second lesson, Paul begins his letter to the Christians in Corinth by saying that each one of them has been given a spiritual gift. As this letter unfolds, Paul exhorts them to use their spiritual gifts for the common good. “It’s too light a thing” to believe somehow that we have fulfilled God’s intentions. To all our efforts, God says, “It is too light a thing.”

The Gospel reading shares a story at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. What do we see? Two actions: First, John the Baptist recognizes Jesus and then proclaims who he is; first he comes to know him, and then he shares him. "It is too light a thing" the Lord says, "to know him. You must share him."

As we recount how God has dealt with us in the past, we begin to see a future. We at First Church have earned the right to speak about hope. Hope exploded from our people at our darkest hour and under the most dire circumstances imaginable. Hope sustained our people through the agony of war, the despair of infant death, the despair of dirt poor poverty. So, the church, folks, is all about hope. It is the hope that reassures us that Jesus is always with us, that he can forgive all, that he loves us, and that he wants to be our companion in this world and the next.

You have roots here, a strong legacy. But you also have wings. We have a lot of people to thank this morning. All those who sacrificed for this beautiful sanctuary, we thank you so much. I know some of your sacrifices and I know that you really gave, not merely out of the overflow, but sacrificially.

Our roots are also our wings. In the beginning was a story of God's attempt to spare a pitifully small band of Christians from despair and hopelessness. God's adventure was to save their lives. And in the end, it will be the same. The more we see ourselves as the light to all the nations and peoples, and the more we all offer our spiritual gifts for the common good, and finally, the more we pledge ourselves to know and to share the love of Jesus Christ, the more we will be saving lives for Christ's sake and the more we will be bringing hope to this world. Brother Joseph, this is for you. Amen.