

Honoring the Past; Embracing the Future

Matthew 13:52

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First of all, I want to thank the Centennial Committee for inviting me to be a part of worship today. It's been wonderful to see you all again and to have the chance to play bells (one of my favorite things) and to sing with the Bluegrass Band. Last night's dinner program was a lot of fun and Dave Porter and the Committee should be commended for the amount of work that went into the night, especially given the changes that had to be made at the last moment due to Covid absences. And of course, as I've told Larry Casey many times, I know just how much work goes into making a video presentation and he has created a number of superb videos over the past year which we have not only been able to enjoy but will make a wonderful video archive of the church's history and again, I'm so pleased to be able to be a part of this.

Before I read the scripture for today, I want to take a quick look at two documents from this church's history.

The first is the Church Covenant added to the by-laws soon after the church was incorporated in the 1950s. I don't know this for sure but my guess is that the Church Covenant was probably in use even before that time because the church was originally organized by the Seventh Day Baptists and Baptist churches have covenants rather than creeds so it may have come into being fairly early in the church's life.

This covenant has always been a favorite of mine because of its straightforward approach to church life. Instead of dwelling on what church members are supposed to believe, it focuses on how church members should behave. Let me read to you the second and third paragraphs:

We promise* (and I love the footnote that admits the failings of human nature by giving us an out — we promise or at least express our intent, you know whether we manage to or not...) to walk uprightly; to be just in our dealings, and faithful in our engagements, to avoid unkind gossip, hatred or excessive anger. We promise to cultivate courtesy and Christian sympathy, to be slow to take offense and eager for reconciliation, to remember each other in prayer, to comfort and aid one another in sickness and distress.

This document reminds us that faith is not just belief that resides in our heads; it is a way of life that is manifested in our hearts. The church is a place, it declares, where the Christian principles we profess will be visible in the way we behave toward one another here.

The second document is a more recent one — the Mission Statement - added to the by-laws in 2013. The Mission statement reiterates that focus on behavior that we saw in the older covenant, but it adds something not found in the covenant that is reflective of the changing world of the 21st century in which the Mission Statement was written:

The last two lines of the Mission Statement read:

“We affirm the inclusiveness and the power of God’s love and dedicate ourselves and our resources to making that love manifest in our community and throughout the world.”

By 2013, the church had moved into a more globally aware society where inclusiveness no longer meant just Presbyterians sitting beside Methodists in our local pews but now it means a radical witness to the breadth of God’s love in an increasingly diverse and fragmented world.

In these two significant documents, written at two very different stages of the church’s life, we see the embodiment of today’s scripture lesson which we find in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, verse 52.

Jesus says to his disciples: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

It is, as you may have heard (!) the centennial of the church. One hundred years ago in 1922, a number of faculty from Alfred University gathered with Booth Davis, the president of the University, to discuss the possibility of starting a Sunday worshipping church for students, faculty, and staff who were not Seventh Day Baptist. I want you to imagine for a moment that you have been magically transported back in time to find yourself sitting in that company of founders. Last night we saw a re-creation of what might have gone on in that original meeting, but this morning I want you to imagine yourself in that company before the meeting actually starts. As everyone does before a meeting convenes, the group is making small talk and you listen attentively trying to find a place to connect with their conversation, a place that feels familiar to your 21st century world.

One person says to President Davis, “You know, I really appreciated your convocation address this year. You were quite forthright about the problematic behavior we have been seeing among students these days, behavior that endangers our campus life.” Ah, yes, you nod. Here is something that you can relate to — the challenges of student misconduct on campus and in our community. You think of the problems we face every year with students: drug and alcohol abuse, raucous parties at night, internet addiction that interferes with their studies, intolerance and incidents of violence on this campus and others, and you nod your head in agreement... until you hear the speaker’s next words:

“Yes, President Davis,” he says, “you hit the nail on the head when you said, [and I quote] ‘Ourcollege life should [not] be compromised by a few soft, silly-headed couples that must always be seen together about the campus, in the library.... strolling about the streets. A healthy resentment by the student body of such silliness, will soon put a stop to a proclivity to ...handholding which has sometimes become painfully disgusting.’”

Before you can wrap your mind around hand-holding’s danger to campus life, the group has moved on to talk of other things.

“It looks like Brooklyn won’t be taking the National League pennant this year,” someone says. Ah, yes; you can always talk about baseball. That’s been around for over a hundred years, but, you remind yourself, pleased with your baseball knowledge, that they must be talking about the Dodgers because remember, the Dodgers played in Brooklyn before they moved to LA in 1957.

But just as you open your mouth to make a comment about the Brooklyn Dodgers, the speaker adds, “No, no chance of a pennant because the Robins just aren’t very good this year.” The Brooklyn Robins? Have you ever heard of the Brooklyn Robins? Believe it or not, in 1922, the baseball team in Brooklyn went by the nickname the Robins, having also tried out the Grays, the Bridegrooms, and the Superbas. It wasn’t until the late 1920s that the team settled on the name the “Trolley Dodgers,” shortening it to “the Dodgers” in 1932.

“Not much hope for the Robins,” someone else says, “but at least we have football.” Before you chirp up about the amazing Buffalo Bills, you stop yourself remembering that professional football wouldn’t be organized for another 40 years so you realize the group must be talking about college football. Sure enough, the committee chats excitedly about AU’s prospects but unfortunately, 1922 would turn out to be a mediocre season for the team. In fact, unbeknownst to those football fans sitting in your meeting, AU’s team would be so bad that decade that in 1927, Alfred’s team would make it into Ripley’s “Believe it or Not,” who called them the “Scoreless Wonders.” In 1927, Alfred failed to score a single point in any of their nine games, yet were still able to claim one win on the season because a game with Amherst was canceled and Alfred was awarded a forfeit. It was not a good decade for the church’s football fans.

As their chat continues, you come to realize that the lives of our church founders sitting in that meeting 100 years ago were significantly different from ours: not only was there no NFL, there was no television to watch it on. There were no computers, no smart phones, no email to send out the minutes of that meeting. The top grossing movie in 1922 was a *silent* movie — talkies wouldn’t come out until the next year. The AE Crandall Hook and Ladder fire company *was* already in existence but it fought fires with a hose cart pulled by six men, and many students at the University had arrived at the beginning of the semester in a horse drawn carriage that brought them to the village from the Alfred Station train depot. To remind us just how different their world was, in 1922 only 1% of all U.S. homes had electricity and indoor plumbing.¹

It was a very different world in a lot of ways when this church was founded, and yet, as you sit in that meeting thinking that you have nothing in common with our ancient forebears, their conversation turns to serious matters and suddenly you feel a bit more on solid ground. Alfred University was at the forefront of working for racial and gender rights, and at that meeting in 1922, you might have heard the members share their concerns about the rise of the Ku Klux Klan because in the early 1920s, the Klan was experiencing a revival as a new generation reacted to surging immigration. The Klan would soon boast five million members and control the politics of Indiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado. You might hear them worry about the growing disparity between rich and poor in America. The famous Roaring Twenties roared mostly for the top 1% of Americans while the rest of the country, especially farmers, struggled to make ends meet. Perhaps they discuss environmental concerns. Yes, in 1922 people were concerned about the environment. Just that year, Amelia Maggia had died of radiation poisoning from the paint that she was using on her job opening people’s eyes to the ways in which human advances were poisoning the earth. And you might have even heard them worry about the

¹ *All the facts on this page are from an assortment of online sites of the history of Alfred University, the village of Alfred, and the US.*

future of the Christian church. We think of “the olden days” as days when churches were crowded with people and flush with young families, but in the 1920s, young people were turning away from the church. World War I had left many disillusioned with religion, and advances in science and technology promised a secular salvation that appealed to the younger generation. In 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick, a preacher in New York City delivered a sermon called, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in which Fosdick argued for a new way of thinking about God that would make sense to the modern ear. Does that sound familiar?

Yes, the church of 1922 was very different from our church of today and yet it was also fundamentally the same. The members of that founding congregation looked to their faith to make sense of a changing world, just as we do now. They searched for meaning in a world where human life had been diminished by war, racial hatred, and poverty, just as we do today. They too, needed guidance in raising their children; they too, sought wisdom for their ethical dilemmas, they too, longed for comfort in their suffering, hope in their despair; and they came to worship because they believed that in this place they would hear a saving word that could make their tomorrows bearable, maybe even beautiful; just as long for today. The trappings of their lives were very different from ours but the needs of their hearts were exactly the same.

Lots of organizations and institutions have centennial celebrations and the purpose of those celebrations is, in some respect, simply to announce to the world, “Look! We have managed to survive for a hundred years! Congratulations to us!” For a church, however, a centennial is a time to recognize that the institutional life we are celebrating today, all of the trappings of the church — the building, the pews, the music, the rituals, the names on the membership rolls, the names of the people standing in this pulpit — these are really only the external expressions of something much older than even a century. If we think that 1922 feels far away and unfamiliar, imagine if you were transported to an upper room in Palestine in the years following Jesus’ ministry: the food, the language, the political system, the dress, the entire world view of the times would be completely and totally foreign to you, and yet when you sat in that room and everyone bowed their heads to pray, you would be completely and totally at home. You would in that moment understand that the love of Christ transcends all time and cuts across all cultures; that it has the power to speak to every human heart whether the heart lives in 33 AD, or in 1922, or right now in 2022. Whatever the date, we as human beings are a people who need to love and be loved, who need to know that we are not alone in our suffering but that there is someone with us who understands; we need to believe that our lives have meaning and purpose, and that the presence and persistence of God’s love with us in Christ can not only help us to endure the darkness but can carry us back into the light again. These things are timeless.

When Jesus said that the scribe retains the old as well as the new, he doesn’t define exactly which parts of the old are to be kept and which parts of the new are to be welcomed. As in so many of his teachings, we wish Jesus could have been a little more specific — and because he left his parable open-ended, many church people throughout history have believed that the old he wanted us to keep was the old way of doing things, the old rituals and the external forms that are so comfortable especially to people in their elder years. But because those external trappings inevitably change over the centuries, I have to believe that what Jesus wanted us to keep was not the archaic habits of an outdated time and culture but the timeless message of God’s love and the ever-present possibility of new life in Christ. In fact, we are freed as a church to constantly try new things and learn to speak in new ways because we trust in the power of God to be able to transcend time and culture in order to speak to the human heart wherever and whenever that heart may dwell. We can write the good news on a scroll; we can carry it on horse, we can send it by passenger pigeon, we can telegraph it in Morse code, we can twitter it or

Zoom it — it doesn't matter how the good news gets proclaimed as long as people in every age hear the truth of it: our God is a God of steadfast love who will forgive you, renew you, and remake you. In Christ, you will find hope in your despair, joy in your sorrow, strength in your weakness, riches in your poverty, peace in your turmoil, light in your darkness, and the promise of life even in the midst of death.

For 100 years, this church has been proclaiming that saving message and countless numbers of people who have passed through these doors or been the beneficiaries of this church's ministry have known healing and hope because of the congregation's dedication to that calling. And the task ahead for this church has not changed since 1922; it has not changed since the time the first disciples gathered in the upper room. Our task is not to ensure the survival of this institution — you are not called to go from here worrying about whether this church will make it to 200 years — your call as a church is simply to heal hearts, mend spirits, bring hope to the hopeless, and practice the radical reconciling love toward others that you yourself have known in Christ. It is to take the oldest of messages and proclaim it in new ways so that the word of Christ continues to be at work in the world through the Union University Church.