

"THE CHURCH THAT FAITH BUILT"

TEXT: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for...the conviction of things not seen".

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."

(Hebrews 11: 1; 12: 8)

INTRODUCTION

One of my heroes in the ministry, the late Ralph W. Sockman, once observed that "this metropolis is the nation's most difficult mission field". His successor after 44 years at Christ Church in this city was the late Harold A. Bosley who once remarked to a group of us that "if a Church can survive for a decade in this city in this day and age, it's a miracle".

Our Church has survived fourteen decades - 140 years in "the nation's most difficult mission field". We have reason to celebrate. There have been many miracles performed here across those 14 decades by men and women of great faith in Jesus Christ - "the same yesterday, today and forever". Some of those men and women of great faith are here with us today.

DEVELOPMENT

Somewhere deep within us is a need to know our past - historical, cultural, religious, personal. It shouldn't surprise us that, since Alex Haley's personal search for his roots, the libraries and public record offices all over this land have been flooded with request for information. Perhaps the reason Roots has so captured the imaginations of people is that it sounds that note to which we respond instinctively: how do I know where I'm going unless I know where I've been.

In Roots there is that heart-warming scene where grandma Kizzy explains to her son, Chicken George, why she could not have married a man named Sam. "Sam wasn't like us" she says...

"Nobody ever told him where he came from. So he didn't have a dream of where he ought to be goin'"

TRANSITION

Today, as we celebrate our 140th anniversary as a congregation, I hope that you will come to have a new awareness of and an appreciation for your "roots" as a Church - in this city, in this Yorkville community, yes "in the city's most difficult mission field". "Where you came from....a dream of where we ought to be going".

Friends, in these moments this morning, I feel the past and the future meeting. I believe there is a power in the human spirit to break through the barrier of time. Down the aisles of this beautiful sanctuary walk countless footsteps of worshippers no longer seen. I can visualize some of them I have known in my ministry. Paul Otto can do the same. There is with you in the pews the warming presence of those who have loved this Church even as you love it now. Voices now heard only beyond us...sing triumphantly with our own. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow".

HISTORY

Those of you who know your Methodist history know that the first Methodist Church in America was erected on John Street in NYC in the year 1768. That's where it all began.

When in 1817 it was rebuilt, not all of the original timbers were used and our economical church fathers held fast to that which was good and durable. Years later, those timbers, hewn out of solid oak were used in the construction of our church building. Today, our building has a supporting beam for the pulpit from one of those old timbers - a direct connection with the early roots of Methodism in America. ...with John Street Church.

Someone said to me recently, "Man...that's what I call real faith...standing in a pulpit, that's supported with a beam that's over 200 years old!"

In the early 1830's, around the area from 83rd to 86th Streets as we now know it, and between the East River and the "railway" -- now Park Avenue - a small residential hamlet called Yorkville was growing up. Prior to the building of the railroad, the village had been connected to the city by stage coach. With the coming of "rapid transit" in the 1830's, new buildings were built and property values began to climb. And dwellers in the close, crowded, hot streets of the city to the South began to long for the fresh air to be found in Yorkville, a place well situated, on high land, and easy access for men of business.

Methodist services were conducted in a vacant room at Third Avenue, nearly opposite Hazard's Tavern (85th Street) - "the second story, over a rum-selling grocery. The congregation was five." The official registration of our Church with the City and County of New York took place on March 10, 1837. At that time, Dr. Richard Seaman, the minister, bought 4 lots of ground on 86th Street, "near the railroad". The first Church building of wood was completed in August of 1837 (it was moved from the Bowery to Yorkville) - and it shared the 4 lots with 2 houses and the parsonage. There were 20 members, and a debt of \$3,400.

Our congregation grew slowly at the beginning; by 1853 there were 100 members. Then began the decline in membership - the peak and the valley effect evidenced ever since. Here are some lines from some of our early records:

"The preachers in those days were poorly paid. The Conference gave to the Church for their support a missionary appropriation of \$200 per year, and to the preacher, including house rent, \$550 - a portion of which was obtained by his own solicitations from other churches in the city...in addition to the salary a donation party was given annually at the parsonage, which, as a social gathering, was always a success, but frequently failed in adding anything to the purse or the larder of the preacher".

"The inconvenience and discomforts of worshippers on those days were numerous. The Church was lit by half-dozen lamps swung from the ceiling, whose light fought a losing battle with the darkness. Seats were high-backed and uncushioned. The stoves, great devourers of wood, but poor radiators of heat, encouraged the shivering audience with promise of warmth; and when the winter storms beat upon the exposed situation of the Church, the aged roof dropped streams of grief and the decaying frame groaned in agony of dissolution."

"The pastor's wife frequently swept and cleaned the audience room; the lamps were trimmed by the pastor himself; or by some of the official brethren. There was a sexton, but he - like the rest of

the society - needed reconstruction."

"Yet, through all discomforts and discouragements, the pastor preached three times each Sabbath, exerted all of his influence by exhortation and personal appeal to bring into the fold those who had gone astray, and everywhere commended Yorkville as the brightest and best place to live in, and the Yorkville Church as the sure way to the only pleasanter place he knew of - heaven".

"In the Spring of each year there would be numbers admitted by transfer, but at the same time as many would remove by certificate. Yorkville seemed to be a way-station for migrating Methodists".

The result of this constant change of membership created serious problems. There was loss of interest...back-sliding...dissatisfaction. The Church became embarrassed in its finances. The building was in a state of dilapidation. Talk of merger with the Harlem Church was heard. Others felt we should merge with the 50th Street Church. The salary of the preacher was in arrears. Here was a total eclipse of faith after many hard years of struggle. But as they came to the end of their second decade, they were determined to continue this Church and after much prayer and hard work, the fruitage began to appear and the harvest gladdened the hearts of those who remained faithful.

On January 30, 1859, we dedicated our second building, this time of brick, costing \$9,800 with a \$5,000 mortgage. And like today, we had a friend down at the Bowery Savings Bank and the Bowery took on the \$5,000 mortgage. This second building quickly became too small and during the pastorate of Albert D. Vail, the third Church was built.

In 1884, with membership now in excess of 700, the great Church, on the corner of 86th Street and Park Avenue was dedicated for worship. It must have been a sizeable edifice for the pictures we have of it are quite good. The Church continued to prosper through the years that followed - into the 1890's and into the 1900's. There's a copy of the budget presented in 1897 in the booklet that will be available to you after the service. Gas and fuel were under \$100. The "good ol'e days!" In November of 1904, the pastor, Dr. Thompson wrote the following lines which I could use in next month's parish paper:

"Our beloved Church has still a glorious mission in this community. Never, I believe, in all its history has it been more thoroughly organized, or have more efficient leaders and dedicated laymen been at the head of the different departments. The financial condition was never better than now. Our present need is that every man, woman and child who is enrolled as a member of this Church shall be a live member, and by his sympathy, prayers and hearty cooperation seek to enlarge the work of the Kingdom of God in this community. Support as far as possible the work of all organizations of the Church. Come to the services regularly, and make it a point always to greet strangers with a good warm handshake. Keep your eye open for changes in residences in your community and be quick to invite new comers to your

Church if they shall have no church relation. Let your pastor know about them too, that he may call on them early".

Growth and prosperity continued for our Church, which was strong up until the 1920's. Then with times of change sweeping the country and city, and the Church building on the corner in great disrepair, Dr. Peter C. Weyant, the pastor, led the congregation in erecting an apartment house on the corner and a new smaller Church building on East 86th Street.

The architect for our present building was Henry C. Pelton, who also designed the Riverside Church for Harry Emerson Fosdick in the 1930's. A week-long series of events culminated with the dedication of our present building on January 9, 1927. Wrote the Evening Sun, (December 31, 1926):

"This is the Church that has built a 15 story apartment house on East 86th Street and Park Avenue, alongside of its new edifice, and thus has made it financial future and prosperity safe and secure".

Wrote the New York American, January 1, 1927:

"The Church auditorium is of Byzantine architecture and is of a very unique design, differing in many respects to any other Methodist Church in the East. Its pulpit is designed after the 11th century pulpit of the Church of San Mimiatto Al Monte of Florence, Italy".

In October of 1929, things changed in this city and country. In the months that followed, the country slipped into a terrible depression. The depression years followed too soon on the enormous financial commitment involved in the 15 story apartment house. In those years, we were known as the Church in Methodism with the largest debt. The arrangement did not fulfill the hopes of those who built it that, in time, it would pay for itself and undergird the Church's finances.

Membership had begun to fall off in the 1930's, and World War II saw a further decline. By the end of World War II, there was no full time pastor. In August of 1946, Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam appointed a energetic, naive young minister by the name of Otto who was serving as an associate minister at Christ Church, park Avenue and 60th, with Ralph Sockman. He appointed Paul Otto to come here to close the church within six months, channeling the few parishioners who were still here to other congregations in the neighborhood. However, Paul Otto did not heed the episcopal directive to close this Church and along with a group of determined laymen they started the task of rebuilding the congregation. In response to urgent appeal, financial support was received from the City Society of the Methodist Church, thus making us a "mission" Church. It was during this period that a layman by the name of Russell, Paul... joined the congregation, adding his strengths to the few remaining loyalists.

In the decade of the 1950's, our Church began to rise from what had seemed ~~like~~ certain extinction to new levels of service, to new heights. How it was done is worthy of another sermon - perhaps a book, someday - but it is described for you in several paragraphs in the booklet to be distributed. A financial adventure of great daring was undertaken. The name of Paul Russell is linked with it. It was Paul who guided the fortunes of this Church successfully through

the fifties and the sixties - and in April of 1966 the Park Avenue Methodist Trust Fund was established, the income of which now benefits the work of the United Methodist Church in the Conference and in this city.

I have often felt through the years that by every sociological or financial rule this Church should have perished long ago, and the continued existence of it across 140 years is to me rationally inexplicable, except to say that faith on the part of its people has kept it alive. It is truly an adventure of great faith, perhaps the greatest thing that any of us will be a part of in our lives. God, whom we worship and see revealed in Christ, has blessed us in our adventure of faith. For this we are thankful.

The other day I was walking across 85th Street (between First and Second Avenue)...north side of the street...as I breathed a prayer as I passed 339 East 85th Street where Annabelle Johnson lived for so many years in this 20th century, and past 335 E. 85th Street where Jane Jones lived in the last thirty years of the last century. Both women left the Church much of their worldly possessions - one a housekeeper from Wales, the other a nurse from Canada.

CLOSING This history of a Church is not simply a record of struggles to pay expenses, to build buildings, to make ends meet. You know this. The real history of a Church is that which cannot be so easily written, nor comprehended by the unsympathetic heart. History is made by the spirit that lives and loves, is plunged into the abyss of despair, rises to high hopes, dreams great.. and through all of its tossing and struggles holds fast to God and discharges the Commission He has given us in the person of Christ. "Go ye"..."Come, Follow into the world"

It, above all other organizations is here to give itself and spend itself and its good in the Name of Christ. This is the history which we all write, even the very least of us. Let us write it in our day and in the years to come as ably as our forbears have written in their time.

PRAYER By faith in You, O God, great things have been accomplished in this place. Move in our hearts. Take our memories and our dreams and let them be consecrated to You. Go with each of us as we depart from here to serve You -

"To give, and not to count the cost,
To fight, and not to heed the wounds,
To serve and seek for no reward, save that
of knowing that we do thy will"