

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING . . .

Bethany United Methodist Church, Rochester, MN, March 12, 2003

Text: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.”

– 2 Corinthians 4:5, 7

It is not often – in fact, this is the first time ever – that I have been invited to preach a sermon that I preached 45 years ago. When Pastor Wesley Gabel called, inviting me to speak at this service, he asked that I share the vision that guided us in the early years. I immediately thought of the sermon I preached at Bethany’s very first service Oct. 12, 1958, in the Markay Dining Room’s basement party room.

Some of you were there: the Coopers, the Puders, my wife Shirley, and Dick and Peggy Boutelle who were singing in the choir at Homestead Church that so graciously sang at our first service. I hold in my hand the bulletin we used at that service, and also the brochure that had been hand delivered to every home in this area inviting people to worship with us.

Now I’d like each of you to let yourself be transported in your imagination back to Oct. 12, 1958, to that first service in the Markay Dining Room. Following the anthem by Homestead Choir, the 28-year-old preacher announces his text:

“For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.”

It was at 2 o’clock in the morning Oct., 12, 1492, that a sailor making the voyage westward with Christopher Columbus first sighted an island that is part of what came to be known as America, a new world. As the years went by, there came explorers, traders, missionaries and colonists to this new land. They found life to be hard, to be sure, but they also found rich rewards.

And now on this date, Oct. 12, 1958, a small group of hardy souls is meeting in the basement banquet room of the Markay Dining Room, intent upon founding a new church in a new community. And just as those colonists in the new world received charters from their kings in Europe, so do we today receive a charter from our sovereign, The Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ.

The three articles of this charter are stated in the introductory brochure for Bethany Church, in which we state:

ABOVE ALL ELSE we seek to bring a faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, to help people find LIFE in His name, and to establish in Sunset Terrace, Rochester, an integral part of the Church Universal.

First, Article I: We seek to bring a faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. In this we affirm the words of the Apostle Paul, “For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.” It is our conviction that this world and our community need Christ *today*. Christ is the answer to the present world crisis. Christ is the answer to the problems of our community. Christ will resolve

the conflicts and contradictions in your life and mine. Therefore, we purpose to bring a faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is my conviction that one of the basic inducements to establish a new congregation is to give every new member the opportunity to experience anew the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. It was the famous Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, who said that in the matter of faith, every generation has to begin again. Faith, to be vital, has to be more than an inheritance from the past. It comes only from a fresh personal experience of the saving grace of God.

Someone has observed that it takes just four generations to dissipate a financial fortune. The first generation *accumulates* the fortune, the second *enjoys* it, the third *dissipates* the fortune and the fourth *loses* it. It is sad to say that the same often holds true in the life of a Christian family and a Christian Church. We all have known families, Christian families, in which the faith has been steadily weakened and watered down with each succeeding generation. Churches also fall victim to the same plague. In the early days, when the establishment of the Church is a real spiritual and financial struggle, the Church has vitality, but often when the Church has become well-established, with beautiful services in beautiful buildings, the spiritual fires begin to die out.

But you and I, in establishing this new Bethany Church, have the thrill of a lifetime ahead of us. We are called of God to bring a witness of Christ to the people of this new community; we are called of God to have a new experience of Jesus Christ in our own hearts and lives, and to rekindle the fires of faith. We are creating a Church where there was no Church. We look back to no rosy past. We can't speak of the good old days, because our history is ahead of us! We ourselves are writing the first chapters!

When a thief is up to his evil tricks, he wants to leave no fingerprints, but when you and I build this congregation, we are privileged to leave our fingerprints all over the place. You who are willing to teach Sunday School have the opportunity to mold character. As trustees and officers, we will have the opportunity to determine the quality of life of this new Church. Those who have the gift of music can make their contribution in Christian song. All of us have the rare privilege of leaving their fingerprints in this new work.

What is more, we are embarking upon an enterprise that has a future. The greatest days of the Christian Church are not past. The greatest days of the Christian Church are yet to dawn. You and I have the thrill of sharing in that new day. We must not sit around *waiting* for something to happen. We need to *make* things happen. We have to plan and build with foresight. We have to make ready for the great days that are coming.

But we must be sure about one thing – this future is for Christ. It is Christ who supplies the vision, the motivation, and the plans. Our work is for Him. As our text declares, “For what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.” We leave our fingerprints, but the only portrait shall be that of Christ.

Dr. John Snape tells of three ministers who served successively as the pastors of one Church. The first came with the attitude: “Here I am: let me do all I can for you.” And the people let him. They practically worked him to death. He was a slave of his congregation.

The second pastor came with the attitude: “Here *I* am. Do all you can for *me*.” Strange to say, the people did! They praised him to his face, bragged about him to other people, gave him an all-expenses paid trip to Europe, and read with delight all the reports about himself which he sent

regularly to the newspapers. The people worked so well for him that he was called to a bigger church at twice the salary.

The third pastor came and said: "Here is Jesus Christ; let us together do all we can for him." And they did! Immediately their vision was enlarged, their evangelistic efforts quickened, and their gifts to missions doubled.

I pray that we prove to be this kind of pastor and people: that we will pray and work and give with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, for Christ and His Kingdom. Let us never forget that our charter states our reason for being: to bring a faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Article II of our charter is "to help people find LIFE IN JESUS' NAME." Our conviction is that every man, woman and child needs Christ. No matter how rich or poor, of high society or low, we need Christ. We really begin to *live* when Christ finds us.

The Apostle Paul preached so effectively before King Agrippa that he said, "Do you think you can quickly persuade *me* to become a Christian?" Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become as Christian as I am." Paul preached with urgency to slaves as well as kings. Paul was vitally concerned that everyone find LIFE in Christ.

We are going to be engaged in at least two building programs in the early years of our church life. The first unit of our building begins late this fall, and the second unit will follow in a few years. We will be up to our necks in building committees and financial campaigns to pay for these buildings but let it be clear from the outset that our charter is much more concerned about building people up than it is for the building of buildings. Our passion is for souls, not bricks; for men, not mortar. We will have nothing to do with what Bishop Gerald Kennedy calls an "edifice complex."

We believe that we are going to build a worthy addition to Rochester, "the city of beautiful churches," but if we do not build anything into the soul of this city, into the souls of the people who dwell here, then we will have failed. We are concerned to build a *Christian Church* and *Christian* men and women.

The third article of our charter is also important: We seek to establish in Sunset Terrace, Rochester, an integral part of the Church Universal.

Let us be clear on this point at the very outset. We are not establishing this church to weaken any other church. We will not attack; we are not here to tear down; we will not usurp the right of God alone to judge. We are here to BUILD!

I like the spirit of Dr. Louise H. Evans, a Presbyterian minister who wrote:

We should all realize by this time that there is no one way of casting out demons. The Congregationalists reason them out; the Lutherans stay them out; the Pentecostals shout them out; the Methodists sing them out; the Baptists drown them out; and the Presbyterians freeze them out! What does it matter, really, so long as we get rid of the devils? This conceit of method has harassed the church for too long; it is high time we conceded to each other a difference in method which is still well within the circle of God's will.

I chuckle at the definition of a solid teen-age friendship; “Two schoolgirls mad at the same person.” But it is no laughing matter when a Church fights other churches and claims to have a corner on God’s truth, and treats the rest of Christendom with contempt.

Bethany Church will not be the rival of any other church in Rochester. Rather, we will partner with them in the upbuilding of Christ’s Kingdom here. Bethany is now and ever an integral part of the Church Universal, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Here ends the sermon of Oct. 12, 1958. Where do we go from here? That’s for Bethany Church of 2003 to decide. I like the tone and temperament of the recent best seller, *Who Moved My Cheese?* Spencer Johnson, the author of this little book, predicts that like it or not, change will only accelerate for all of us in the 21st century. “The single most important thing in these times will be attitude,” he says. Some people will insist on sticking to what’s tried and true. “but you can’t stay where you are and do well,” Johnson concludes. “you have to move forward.”

This is what I have to keep telling myself even as I glow about Bethany’s wonderful beginnings. Shirley and I now are part of Mounds Park United Methodist Church in St. Paul, the church of my childhood, a congregation that nurtured me in the Christian faith and recommended me to the ministry, the church in which Shirley and I were married 52 years ago. They still give us lots of love, and we love them. A few of my old Sunday School teachers are still around, and in their eyes I’m still a kid.

Shirley and I love being part of that congregation. There’s only one thing that troubles us. Some of us are suffering from hardening of the spiritual arteries. Following a Sunday service in which there were a few innovations, a woman sputtered to me with no little indignation, “If Rev. Utzman knew what was going on he’d be turning in his grave.” Well Rev. Utzman was our pastor from 1935 to 1950. And I doubt he would expect everything to remain exactly as he left it half a century ago.

The Church of Jesus Christ is under no mandate to fossilize, to resist change. Yet the mantra of too many is:

Our fathers have been churchmen
A thousand years or so,
And to every new proposal
They have always shouted “NO.”

Representatives of older city churches in the Twin Cities participated recently in an Urban Academy. Mounds Park was represented by the Pastor, two enthusiastic teen-agers, a young mom, a recently retired Dayton’s Bluff Elementary school teacher, and the neatest white-haired little old lady modestly forbids me to identify, but one well known to those who were part of Bethany from 1958 to 1971. Her role is that of encourager, to greet the youngsters’ suggestions with open arms and help make things happen, support their proposals at church council meetings and with the trustees, and as a senior herself to persuade her contemporaries the sky is not falling and the church is not going to the dogs.

At a recent Annual Conference session there was an inspiring moment when Pastor Ruth Ramstad gave a tribute to her father, Pastor Peter Ramstad. He had attended Conference the year before and participated in his daughter’s ordination. Ruth had no idea, of course, that her ordination service would be the last time she would see him in this world. They said goodbye on the steps of the abbey church. Peter hugged her and said, “I love you so much, and I’m so proud of you.” Peter’s wonderful blessing, of course, will forever ring in Ruth Ann’s ears.

At this stage of my life, the best thing I know to do is to bestow my blessings on my spiritual sons and daughters. They don't need me as a critic, although I want to be honest with them; they don't need me to tell them with pride how I used to do it, although I did and I'm glad.

What a church of today needs from its elders is a peaceful transition of power, our blessings, our prayers. So the word of Bethany's founding pastor to you and Pastor Gabel tonight is:

I love you so much, and I'm so proud of you. Keep up the good work!

Let us pray: Dear God, it feels so right and so good to be together once again tonight, to share such wonderful memories, to thank You for 45 years full of blessings, yes, and of hurts and challenges, but most of all to offer ourselves up to faithful and trail-blazing service in the future. The transcendent power belongs to you, O God, and not to us. Amen.