

Our Story

There's been a good deal said these past few weeks about this being my last sermon, so in the interests of full disclosure, let me make one thing very clear. This is not my last sermon. My last *sermon* was the one I preached here on August 12. So if you've come today to hear my last sermon, you're out of luck, though you can still go to the church's website and watch that sermon. Which, actually, was one of my better efforts, if I do say so myself, and as a preacher I'd just as soon go out on that high note. So I'm not preaching a sermon today, at least not a sermon in the strict sense of the term. What I have for you instead is more of a reflection. A reflection born of my years in ministry, all my years in ministry, including the last 17 or so here in Philadelphia.

The particular direction of these reflections was largely prompted by something that Sarah Weisiger said to me a few weeks ago following our most recent new members class. You see, for several years now, we've shared the history of this congregation with our new members not by sitting around a table and talking about it, but instead by getting up and taking a walking tour of the church, along the way looking at a number of objects. Objects chosen not for their artistic value, as we more often do, but for their historical significance, and specifically for the stories they tell about this church and its long and distinguished history.

We start our tour in the narthex with the plaque commemorating the meeting of the first presbytery on American soil in the year 1706, a meeting that took place at Old Buttonwood, the original location of this church on the corner of what is now Market and Bank Streets. We then move on to that white marble plaque over there on the Wanamaker wall which was erected in memory of the Rev. Gilbert Tennent, the first pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, the founding of which marked a significant watershed in the history of American Presbyterianism. In fact, that plaque may well be the oldest single object in this building, and certainly the oldest in this room. That plaque is a big deal.

Next we move out to the center of the sanctuary and look around at this very impressive building, and reflect upon the enormous difference between this structure and the much simpler buildings that preceded it, and think about why that's so. What happened that the church went from worshipping in a plain and relatively unadorned meetinghouse to this far from plain and very much adorned edifice? Certainly something happened. Hint—this building was completed in 1872.

Then we look at this pulpit that was erected at the time of the reunion of First and Second Churches in 1949, with the names of prominent First Church pastors listed on this side, and those from Second on this side, and talk about what was happening in the city that led the two

churches to merge at that particular time. Then we wander on through the pastor's study with its burning bush carved into the fireplace, and finally end our tour in the Beadle Room with its portraits of three distinguished former pastors of the church, and one very famous chandelier, a chandelier that once hung in the house of the President when the seat of the nation's government was still here in Philadelphia.

After our tour that day, Sarah commented that I was obviously really into all this history, which, of course, is absolutely the case. I really am into all this history, which is precisely why I was attracted to this church in the first place. Because of its history. But more importantly, I don't just think of it as "history," at least not what most people usually mean by that term. Because to me this isn't just "history"; it's who we are. It's our story; it's certainly a big part of my story. It's how I think, how I make sense of the world, and how I understand my place in it. That's why I think of people like Gilbert Tennant, and James Wilson and Thomas McKean (signers of the Declaration of Independence), and Albert Barnes (pastor of First Church from 1830-1868), and so many others, not just as figures in history, but as fellow members of this congregation, people just as real to me, and just as much a part of who I am, as any of you. Because in a very real sense, all that's happened here over the years has made us who we are.

I came by this way of looking at the world quite honestly, having inherited it—I'm quite sure—from my father, for whom history—and its sense of a great big world out there—was his escape from the parochial constraints of growing up in the rural South in the early years of the 20th century, and from the suffocating ignorance there born of the lack of any real sense of history, by which I mean the lack of any understanding of what had actually happened in the past as opposed to what people may have imagined to have been the case, or what they would have liked to have been the case. As a result, my father's view of the world, rooted in a firm grasp of its history, was considerably different from that of most of the people around him, and that was especially so of my father's view of the war—I trust you don't have to ask which war—and its consequences, consequences that were still very real in his day. As in fact they are still today, consequences that have been greatly exacerbated by a very distorted sense of historical fact, of what had actually happened.

I'm just as skeptical as my father was about a great deal of what passes for knowledge and truth in our world these days, and not just in the world of politics either. My skepticism extends to a good deal even of what I hear in the church—not just this church, but the church at large—all too much of which is based on very little more than just wishful thinking, what people would like to believe is true, or even worse, reflects just flat out ignorance of our own tradition, what in fact the church has historically maintained as the truth, whether Biblically or theologically.

I'm really not sure why we've become so casual about the truth, and maybe it's no worse than it's always been, but I sense these days that there is a growing sentiment among us that thinks that if we really believe it, if deep down inside we *really* believe something is true, why

then it must be so. And if that's so, if my believing something makes it true, then why bother going to all the trouble of sorting through all those cumbersome facts, why spend all that energy trying to figure out what really happened in the past, why go to the effort of digging into what the Bible actually says, when we already know what we think it should say?

Which brings me to our Old Testament lesson for today, the opening verses of the 38th chapter of Job, one of the truly great chapters of the Bible. Here, Job has been haranguing God for chapter after chapter demanding an audience with God to discuss his (ie, Job's) troubles, troubles that are, Job is convinced, the result simply of some mistake, since it's very clear to Job that there's no good reason why he should have suffered so grievously. But despite Job's pleading, chapter after chapter there's no response from God. Silence. Until here, finally, when God explodes and responds to Job out of the whirlwind with a harangue of God's own, essentially demanding to know who Job thinks he is to question God like this. What do you know about this world and why things happen or not? "Where were you," the Lord asks most famously, "when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you're so smart! Who determined its measurements? Surely you know!" And it goes on and on in that vein for several more chapters.

The point is not—as is sometimes suggested—that Job has no business questioning God. The point is that Job has no business speaking so confidently of truth on the basis of nothing more than a gut feeling, on the basis of no real knowledge at all. Because the truth is serious business. It makes a difference. It is, in the famous words of Jesus from the Gospel of John, the truth that sets us free. Sets us free from the captivity to ignorance and superstition that has been the bane of human existence over the entire course of human history and is so still today.

The truth matters, the truth is all we've got, which is why it's so important when we make claims for the truth, especially here in church, that we know what we're talking about, that we've gone to the trouble of getting our facts straight, and if we're talking about the Bible, that we've taken the time to read and understand what the Bible actually says. I don't just mean quoting a verse or two. I mean a serious wrestling with the text until we've come to a serious understanding of what's going on there. And that's not easy to do. It takes hard work.

But it's important, because it's only when it becomes clear that we know what we're talking about, only when it's apparent that we're not just blowing smoke but talking about things in our world on the basis of something than just a feeling, only when our claims are founded on the solid foundation of actual knowledge, only then that people might just start listening to what we have to say. Just like they listened to Gilbert Tennent and Albert Barnes and others of that great cloud of witnesses of those who have gone before us and who built this church and this nation.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*