

Marking the 325<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Congregation, All Saints' 2023

### *Perseverance*

In his inaugural sermon at First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte in 1972, the late Carswell Hughes began with a question, "The members of every congregation ought periodically to ask themselves: What is it that makes us a church? What are we as a congregation to do? Or better yet, what are we as a congregation to be? Today as you begin the slow and sometimes painful process of breaking in a new minister, you should ask yourselves these questions and then recommit yourselves to what you feel called to do and be."<sup>1</sup>

It put me in mind something I said the day I first met you. I probably ought to say this more often, at least to myself, if not to us all, "The minute we say that we are a church, we have articulated a fully developed mission statement. We *know* what we are supposed to do: To share the good news of the Gospel, to feed the hungry, to befriend the lonely, to share the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ widely. What remains is to figure out *how* to do it."

Or something like that. I've noticed that every time I repeat it, the *what we are supposed to do* bit shifts a little, this way or that, but it always ends with the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. I could probably stand to add a clause about the Holy Spirit, if we're being theologically correct.

It has been on my mind because today is the Sunday after All Saints' Day, a day on which we remember those we have loved and lost, and give thanks to God for their lives. It is a day when we think about *what it means to be church*.

It has been on my mind because today we culminate a year of observances that began last fall as we gave thanks for 150 years of ministry in this building, and ends today as we give thanks for the witness of 325 years of this congregation.

I cannot think of a better day than All Saints' to remember that we drink from wells we did not dig, and harvest from vineyards we did not plant.

We have so much for which we may be deeply *grateful*, as we remember *what it means to be church*.

For those who want to plumb the depths of our history, we have remembered a great deal this year. Much of our early history is lost to the mists of time; we date the formation of this congregation from 1698 because that is the year that Jedidiah Andrews was called as the first pastor of this congregation. Since we do not have a better one, I suppose that is as good a date

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<sup>1</sup> Carswell Hughes, *A House Called to Holiness*

as any. That said, I am sure that our forebears must have been organized for a while by then to call a pastor, and besides which, congregations are not defined by their pastors, or at least they should not be.

Indeed, our forebears could quickly have answered what made them church, and despite the names carved into this pulpit, it wasn't their pastor. They would surely have been well-versed in the teachings of John Calvin regarding the marks of the true church, "The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which these marks exist."<sup>2</sup>

But, absent listening to what I am sure were the stem-winding sermons of Mr. Andrews, what *actually* made this congregation tick in those early days?

We surely haven't survived 325 years on sermons alone!

Any answer we come up with will necessarily be somewhat inexact, but we do know what the Presbyterian churches that were birthed from *the mother of us all* did. As the Presbyterians arrived on the frontier, schools and hospitals followed them. If we pan forward to the era remembered in Jesse Garner's recent lectures about our history as part of the settlement house movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, we see that that attention to *care for the community* continued to define the common life of this congregation. We could conclude that it all comes down to sharing the good news of the Gospel, feeding the hungry, befriending the lonely, and sharing the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ *widely*.

But our past would teach us another lesson: We do well to remember how very tenuous the life of this congregation has been, again and again. Congregations are not defined only by the high moments of their existence, but perhaps more deeply by the valleys. Over the course of more than three centuries, we have been to the brink as a congregation not once or twice, but *many* times. This congregation has witnessed a revolutionary war, a civil war, two world wars, a Typhus epidemic, an Influenza epidemic, a Covid epidemic, a great depression, a great recession, stagflation, inflation, urban decay and urban renewal, and the occasional bad boiler and leaky roof.

Our history has *not* always been a story of going from strength to strength.

And yet, *325 years*.

Arguably, it has more frequently been a story of *perseverance*.

It is no secret that congregations everywhere are working harder than ever in the face of shifting culture to maintain that which has been meaningful to us in the past. And far from bromides espousing some golden era of the church, our actual history bears out that it has

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, [Institutes of the Christian Religion](#), 4.1.12

*always* been an extraordinary work in progress to live into the vision of church as each generation has received it. We remember where we have been as we peer into a future where the church must again and again ask, "What does it mean to be church?"

What has sustained us in the past is surely instructive for the future that God holds for us.

Here we receive the wisdom of the preacher of the Letter to the Hebrews. The two short verses we read this morning, grounded in Jesus Christ, offer us admonition to persevere as we run the race that is before us. Bear in mind these verses do not just plop down from scripture for our convenient usage on anniversaries and All Saints'. If we dig deeper into the text, we see that the admonition to persevere begins two chapters earlier, where the preacher exhorts the congregation that it is through the blood of Jesus Christ that they may come into the sanctuary in a *new* and *living* way. From there, the congregation is reminded of the great cloud of witnesses, not vaguely, but *particularly*. A roll-call of the faithful is read: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab. Deep into Israel's family history, the congregation is invited to *remember* their past as they look into the future, to a race yet to be won, a race that must be run despite the apparent weariness of the runners.

One of the great motifs of the Bible, the golden thread that connects sometimes confounding and frequently disparate stories, is that we trust in a God who is faithful to us, despite our failures of faithfulness to God.

The memory of who God is, of who God has been for our forebears, and who God is even now, for us, defines our future. Because God is who God is, we look into our future, not naïvely or fatalistically, but sustained by the *hope* of God's faithfulness, and the *hope* of the resurrection. Because our past points to our future, we can readily say that our memory *is* the future.

But.

But, as we contemplate what it is to *be* church, I am struck by the words of Lady Julia Flyte in Evelyn Waugh's masterpiece, Brideshead Revisited, where she muses, "Sometimes, I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on either side that there's no room for the present at all." *We are church in the present-tense.*

We are the future our ancestors could have but dreamed about.

We are the past that those who come after us will someday remember.

But above all, we are the church *now*, and there is urgency to the calling that we have received.

Faithfulness to that calling is a matter of *perseverance*.

When being church spans *centuries*, it is a case of doing one thing, and then another, faithfully, *for a very long time*.

Being church is an exercise in giving generously, check after check, dollar bill by dollar bill, click by click, as one does now.

Being church is one phone call and then another, one text, and then another.

Sending one note, and then another.

Offering one expression of love, and then another.

And yes, it is one sermon, and then another. And one trip to the font, and then another. It is joyful feast of the Lord, followed by joyful feast of the Lord.

We were reminded of the words of Dorothy Day recently. “Young people say, ‘What good can one person do? What is the sense of our small effort?’ They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time; we can be responsible for the action of the present moment but we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform all our individual actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.”<sup>3</sup>

Which brings me, finally, to the corrective clause that I wish to add to my very first admonition to you: Being church is resting *in* and bearing witness *to* the communion of the Holy Spirit.

The thing about that Communion is this: It is the nexus of past, future, and present. It is where we are connected to the dreams of those who handed the baton to us, and where we embed the hopes the Spirit dares to dream in us for those who will yet come.

What a wondrous calling!

What a holy undertaking!

So, dear cloud of witnesses, let us persevere in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Heath Carter, *Steadfast Through the Storms: A Lecture on the 325<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Philadelphia’s First Presbyterian Church*. Sept. 21, 2023.