

***The Shared Life of the People of God: The Church We Build***

1 Corinthians 3:9-17

1 Peter 2:9-10

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One day the devil was feeling full of himself. So he decided to challenge Jesus to a duel on the computer. The challenge was to see who could type the entire text of the Bible the fastest, from Genesis to Revelation. And so they each sat down to their computers and began typing. You couldn't see the keys on the keyboard, they were typing so fast. They got through Genesis in two minutes. Then Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers... Pretty soon they were through the Old Testament. The Devil was sweating profusely as he concentrated on the contest. Jesus looked much more relaxed and peaceful. They were neck and neck, each keeping up with the other, word for word.

Then suddenly the computers went blank. There was a power outage. So Jesus and the devil sat staring at their blank screens, waiting for the power to come back on.

When the power came back on, the devil had to start all over again, because his computer had lost everything. But when Jesus' computer came back on, everything he had typed was still there. He just had one last chapter in Revelation, which he dispatched in a matter of seconds. Jesus easily won the contest.

You could see the frustration on the devil's face, and he turned to one of the angelic spectators and asked how it was that Jesus' computer didn't lose everything when the power went off.

"That's pretty clear, isn't it," said the angel. "Jesus saves."

I awoke this morning at 5:00 to a similar experience. I had finished my sermon Friday afternoon, saved it, and turned off my computer. This morning, when I went to turn my computer on, I got a blank screen. It seems there is something wrong with the power source. And so what I will share with you this morning is the best I could put together at the last minute.

Maybe this was God's way of reminding me that there were no computers in this church 50 years ago...

As we gather this morning to celebrate 50 years of ministry at Black River Road, I must admit that I have not generally been much of a historian. But after the last couple of months, when I have listened to your stories and read through our session minutes from the 1950s and have discovered so many interesting facts about this congregation, I might just become more of a historian. The truth is, it is fascinating to see how God has worked through the years.

One of the things that has struck me is that, though fifty years have passed, not as much has changed as one would think. We still have a dedicated Session, just as we did 50 years ago. The bulletin cover from fifty years ago is not much different from the one we normally use. We worry about making budget, just as the church did fifty years ago. We still sing some of the same hymns that we did back then.

And, of course, the truth we proclaim has not changed one iota: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life... The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want... We know that in all things God works for the good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose... There is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord... For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... Go into all the

world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit...

Some would take the fact that things have not changed too much as an indication that the church is stale and out of pace with the world. I vehemently disagree. The fact that much remains the same is a testament to this church's commitment to God's enduring and unchanging truth; it is a testament to your faithful obedience to God.

As I have had the opportunity over the past few months to reflect on what it means that we have reached this milestone of fifty years of ministry at this address, there are three things I want to share with you this morning that have left a lasting impression on me.

The first is the vision and the foresight of the faithful elders, deacons (which we had back then), pastors, and church members. The plans for this church building were underway well before 1959. In fact, it was sometime in 1953 that the congregation voted to proceed with plans to seek the purchase of land for a new church building. There were more than one option that the session considered as the location of the new church, finally settling on a four-acre plot of land purchased by Mr. Ragsdale and given to the church.

And then, of course, there were issues such as the disposal of the Hazard Street property, the raising of funds, the design and construction of the building. Through conversations I have had, I have learned that the building in which we gather today came at a cost of approximately \$150,000, \$50,000 of which was raised in cash, with the remainder being raised through the issuance of church bonds. Quite an undertaking.

Much planning and vision went into the design and construction of this church. If you'll look at the blueprints hanging in the hallway and the fellowship hall, you'll notice that the church was designed for growth; it was a commitment by the session and church members that we would be here for the long haul.

I also know that this was not a project where the church simply paid the architect and the contractor to construct a building. In fact, a good deal your own sweat and back-breaking labor made it into the concrete and the bricks and mortar and the paint. Church members would get off work and come straight to the construction site to pitch in with the building. The women of the church were right there, as well, feeding the workers and contributing whatever they could. As Ace Stubbs recalls in his letter, there were "lots of ups and downs, questions and prayers."

It took incredible patience to build the church in which we gather today.

It took dogged determination to follow through with the vision of the church's leaders.

The second thing that has impressed me as I reflect on the past 50 years, is that for the leaders and members of Georgetown Presbyterian Church, it has always been about more than the bricks and mortar. In truth, we're not celebrating fifty years of a building today; we're celebrating fifty years of ministry, fifty years of commitment to the community.

Whenever a church builds a building, it is indicating its commitment to the surrounding community, because a building brings with it a sense of permanence. When member of this congregation decided on this piece of property fifty years ago, they were making a commitment not only to Georgetown as it was back then, but even more they were making a commitment to all the future generations of Georgetown.

One of the things that has set Georgetown Presbyterian Church apart from other churches is that this congregation has always recognized that our purpose is beyond ourselves. That's why this church was the driving force behind the founding of Helping Hands. That's why this church was the driving force behind the establishment of a Georgetown chapter of Habitat for Humanity. This congregation has always seen that our purpose is beyond ourselves.

And we must never lose sight of that fact. The truth is, we have been blessed with a fabulous physical plant. But our property is not here for us to admire; it's here to serve a hub of ministry that equips you and me to take the gospel message of Jesus Christ out into our everyday lives and to send the gospel

message out into the world beyond. Our purpose has always been wrapped up in something far greater than bricks and mortar.

The third thing that has impressed me is that the inspiring example of the faithfulness of the people who have served the Lord within these walls and radiating out into the world is a challenge to those of us who are in a position to take this church's ministry into the next fifty years. I am amazed at the number of people that were here fifty years ago, who are still part of the life of the church today. By my count, there are over 50 of you who were members back then and still members today. It is a testimony to your love for the Lord and for this church and for this community that you have remained so faithful through the years.

To those whose service has kept this church and its many ministries thriving through the years, we give you our heartfelt gratitude. Thank you. Well done, good and faithful servants.

And to those of us who stand in their shoes today, poised to take this church into the next fifty years of ministry, the challenge is clear: Ours must be a vision of continuing the work of those who have faithfully served before us.

Ours must be a vision of continuing the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ;

Ours must be a vision of continuing to give comfort to those who mourn, of giving strength to all who are tempted, of giving light to those who seek the way;

Ours must be a vision of feeding the hungry and serving the poor and sheltering the homeless and welcoming the alien and visiting the sick;

Ours must be a vision of the hallowing of family life, of the spiritual nurture of young and old alike;

Ours must be a vision of spreading God's righteousness and steadfast love into the world, of extending God's kingdom and looking forward to the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

This morning I chose as the scriptures the same scriptures used for the first worship service in this sanctuary, and then for the dedication of the sanctuary a few months later. The title of my sermon is a combination of the titles of the two sermons preached on those two occasions. I chose the same scripture lessons and the same sermon titles for one simple reason: today our task remains the same. As we gather to celebrate the passing of 50 years of ministry within these walls, we must remind ourselves that the church does not consist of the structure in which we gather. The church—the true church of Jesus Christ—consists of the people who gather in the name of Christ. The church is about people, not bricks and mortar. It is about you and me acting as a holy priesthood, communicating the message of God's love to a world that desperately needs to hear that message. As Paul reminds us in First Corinthians, "We are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building... you yourselves are God's temple, and God's Spirit lives within you."

Thanks be to God for this lovely building. But even more, thanks be to God for the heart of those who have so faithfully served over the years. But most of all, may we make it our purpose to fulfill through continuing ministry the words of Paul when he said, "To God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to God be the glory in this church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."