

“Baptized into the Church, For Better or Worse” The Rev. Christine Chakoian
Acts 4:32-37
I Corinthians 3:10-17
Annual Meeting of the Congregation

First Presbyterian Church
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As most of you know, I'm working on a history of our church. Art Miller, member of this church, archivist at the college and historian of all things Lake Forest is writing the first draft. I'm adding color, anecdotes, and, well, theology. For two weeks I sat in an office at McCormick Seminary surrounded by books, reading everything I could get my hands on about the people who laid the foundation for this church and then built upon it. Having spent so much time with them, I cannot help but feel them all around us now, in this dear place, their faith and trials whispering to us through the tangible things they left us.

Today, on the occasion of the 149th Annual Meeting of our congregation, I want to begin to take stock of the legacy we've inherited, and the meaning of the church for our time.

I think it was in 1909, exactly 100 years ago, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our church, that former pastor James Gore King McClure reflected on the character of our church. He said, first of all, that from the beginning our congregation has welcomed Christians of every denomination; and we have never been particularly interested in theological litmus tests. Instead, he said, “this church has extended the right hand of affection to all who believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, never hampered in its giving of fellowship by any thought whatever of Apostolic Succession, or of the Historic Episcopate or of a definite form of Baptism, of a specified method of government, or an elaborate creedal statement.”

If not these things, then what is our identity based on? McClure summarized the church's essence this way: *We are “a company of believers in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with [our] children, associated for the purposes of worship, fellowship and the work of the Kingdom.”* That's who we were then; and, by the grace of God, that's who we still are today. And I credit our founders for doing exactly what the early

church felt moved to do: bringing their best to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's look more closely at what they did and what it means for us today.

The first thing the builders of our congregation did was to start with a reliable foundation: the foundation: Jesus Christ our Lord. Now, that may seem obvious, but even in those days there were other options. Theirs was the age when scientific discoveries first cast questions over the Biblical stories; and many believers set aside their Christian faith for secular humanism. Theirs was also the age, especially later in the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, when material success became a "god" for many. Church founder and lumber magnate Devillo R. Holt would later reflect,

"I found in this young, bustling city a great number of young men like myself, who had come West to make their fortunes and were intent upon accomplishing their purpose. I also found among them a great variety of ideas as to what success meant and as the the best method of attaining it. Some were striving to get the most out of life as they went along, plunging into all kinds of life and action that would attract attention to themselves and make their presence and friendship in demand wherever the gay and festive crowds gathered. Others took a more somber view and thought that success depended upon the number of dollars they might accumulate, and they bent their whole energies to that end, regardless of what others might think of their ways or of what their influence might be upon others. ...

"I found also quite a different class, who, while ambitious to succeed had other views of success than personal popularity among men or the amount of wealth which they might accumulate, for even at that early day in this city of youthful ambitions and opportunities, there were a goodly number who had early been impressed with the fact that selfishness and greed and personal popularity were not the most noble and desirable evidences of success ..." (Holt scrapbook, Chicago History Museum).

Holt and others founded this church seeking this kind of company: “*a company of believers in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” This was the solid foundation on which they built this congregation.

Then they set about building: they, with their children, came together for three purposes: they “*associated for the purposes of worship, fellowship and the work of the Kingdom.*”

Worship was central. As a child in the early years of our church, Grace Farwell would later remember the decidedly unpolished but heartfelt worship in those days (*Chicago Yesterdays*, “Early Lake Forest,” 240-1):

“There was old Dr. Nicholas, a retired clergyman ... who used to go to sleep in church, and often he would take out his false teeth and put them in his pocket. At the right of the pulpit, ... in the front pew, sat a man named Stripe, a house-painter, and his large family. He was English ... and his wife was fat and ruddy. Of his numerous children, I remember the names of two, Violet Stripe and Ida Centennial Stripe, because she was born in 1876. ...

“The specialties of the various families seem vivid to me still; there was one family, prominent in every way, where the son played the organ violently, working the pedals with his feet and shoulders as well, while the daughter sang soprano, showing her fine row of white, large teeth, and striking triumphantly the top note, never quite on top.”

For better or worse, worship has always been the primary purpose for which we gather, then, as now, the wealthy and working classes, young and old worshiping side by side, bringing what we have, building what we can on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Christian fellowship was their second purpose – through Sunday School from cradle to grave, and weekday Bible studies and prayer meetings. Even

then the youth group met on Sunday nights. Grace Farwell again recalls the rhythm of the week:

“The life centered around the church, naturally, and everybody went to the services on Sunday, and to most of the other weekly meetings, from Wednesday evening prayer-meetings to the young people’s meeting on Sunday night at seven. Each family, from father to the youngest child, took some part, either singing in the choir, teaching in Sunday School, praying or speaking in the prayer-meetings, or reading a verse at the young people’s meetings. ...”

This was not perfectly accomplished either. Some people were comfortable with prayer and teaching; others dreaded being called on; still others were perhaps too proficient. She recalls with amusement the Ward family:

“Mr. Ward was always to be depended on for the longest extemporaneous prayer, and he moved himself so much that he invariably wept. One Wednesday night he prayed with extra fervor for my cousin Fannie and me, entreating the Lord ‘that his two young friends who were going to Paris to school, might return safely and uncontaminated.’ And we giggled out loud.”

For better or worse, the fellowship of faith, cradle to grave, has been our second purpose. Over the years, members of our congregation brought their earnestness and humor, their love for the Lord and their desire to know Scripture, and built on the foundation of Christ.

And third, our founders built up this congregation for the work of the Kingdom – what we might call mission and evangelism. At that time, the salaries and maintenance of the church were funded by pew rentals; the Sunday morning and evening offerings were dedicated to mission. Their early benevolences included building a church for the freed slaves who came to live in Lake Forest; sending money to victims of the San Francisco earthquake,

denominational causes, and foreign missions. Beyond the official work of the congregation, individuals within our church stepped up to the plate in amazing ways: building hospitals in Persia, establishing Association House in Chicago to help immigrant families, founding Sunday Evening Club which later became the television program Thirty Good Minutes.

Not everything was successful, or clear. There were battles over which benevolence to choose over another, people who severely disagreed over whether to support the spiritual work of evangelist Dwight L. Moody vs. the social services efforts of Jane Addams' Hull-House, and especially how to sort out the concerns of business over labor. At one point, Dr. McClure went so far as to invite labor leader Eugene V. Debs to this pulpit to defend the agitation leading to the Pullman Strike. Dr. McClure believed that the church was a place where differing opinions about the work of the Kingdom should be heard.

For better or worse, the work of the kingdom has been our third essential purpose, even when we strongly disagreed about its concrete nature. Our congregation has brought a passion for philanthropy, mission and justice, and an urgency of building on the foundation that Christ laid down for us with his life.

The foundation of Jesus Christ. The purposes of worship, fellowship, and the work of the Kingdom. These are the things our founders used to build our church, and who we are today we owe to them and to their clarity of purpose.

And now it's our turn to build on everything they've done. Oh, we'll disagree over plenty of things, I have no doubt of that. Some of our efforts will be less than perfect, the good Lord knows. But in things essential we have held fast: to be a company of believers associated for the purposes of worship, fellowship and the work of the kingdom. It sounds a lot like the purposes of proclaiming the gospel, providing a community of spiritual

nurture, and promoting God's justice. Or my short-hand for all of that, which is worship, faith formation and mission.

The question for us now is simply this: how will we build on what we have been given? What materials will we bring for the work of the church of Jesus Christ? Our Scripture passage both warns us and encourages us – whatever we bring will be made clear, for better or for worse – the substance of our passion and gifts and commitment to our Lord.

I can't know what our legacy will be. But I do know this: it is our time to build, and the future now depends on us. Amen.