

“Westminster – Our Goodly Heritage”
Psalm 16; Matthew 4:18-22

The cold eye of history draws revisionists because we naturally wish to explain noteworthy events with superior individuals or fortunate circumstances. But like the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, or those pilgrims climbing aboard the Mayflower, there was nothing special about the twenty-three individuals who met at Greenville’s First Presbyterian Church on Mother’s Day, 1947. They were not defined by wealth, education, or even religious fervor. Ordinary people, for different reasons they answered First Church’s pastor, Charles Nabers’s call to begin a new church in Greenville’s rapidly growing, distant suburb of Augusta Road.

By July 20th, there were 101 of them, and First Presbyterian purchased a lot at the corner of Augusta Place and Augusta Drive. At this July 20th organizational meeting, Mrs. D. W. Cochrane, chair of the committee to name the new church, reported that approximately eight or ten names had been submitted, but she delicately concluded “none of which were considered particularly suitable.”

Also, it was decided plans would be prepared for the basement of a Sunday School building where the new church would meet. In the meantime, a tent was erected on the site. It served ably except for the Sunday the snake slithered in, and when it turned cold and the piano froze. Of course, when it came time to add onto the Sunday School basement, it had to be demolished. As church member Ken Fryfogle noted, “There was no square corner in the whole building.”

This year marks the 71st anniversary of Westminster Presbyterian Church. The beauty of this sanctuary, filled pews, numerous mission projects, and a healthy budget can lead us to coat our past with a veneer of prosperity and progress. But the truth is more turbulent, and more encouraging.

Our founders were good, ordinary church members. Unwelcome snakes, frozen pianos, and even a couple of church fights populate our history. And yet, a powerful message runs like a theme throughout our past. For seventy-one years, God has taken ordinary people with ordinary talents and ordinary materials and done extraordinary things. For seventy-one years, members of this church have allowed God to use them, and the powerful ministry emanating from this community of faith is the result. Today, people all over the world have heard the Gospels preached, been fed, received the touch of a loving physician, had a place to turn for mental healing, watched their pre-school children grow intellectually and spiritually, been comforted and loved because individuals worshipping here at 2310 Augusta Road were not deterred by projects seemingly beyond their financial reach, building with no square corners, or snakes and frozen pianos.

Westminster's past is a gift to those of us who today call her our church. This morning, in this Epiphany Season, as we recall the three gifts the wise men brought to Jesus, and knowing that Westminster's forefathers and mothers have provided us with what the psalm calls a "goodly heritage," I want to note three gifts our spiritual founders gave to us here at Westminster.

The year was 1968. Meals on Wheels, a small, struggling organization with a mission of providing nutritious food to the elderly was desperately searching for a home. Twenty-some churches had turned them down. These were logical decisions. One could readily see how the program would devour space, especially dominating a church's kitchen facilities. To take them in would undoubtedly cripple a church's programming. Plus, at this time Meals on Wheels received government grants. The whole thing smacked of federal handouts and government interference.

Finally, they arrived at Westminster's door. I doubt they maintained much hope of success. An expanding congregation rapidly outgrowing its own space, Westminster possessed few members who would need the Meals on Wheels mission. But if the Meals on Wheels people had been aware of Westminster's past, they could have anticipated the positive welcome they received.

The first gift the forefathers and foremothers of Westminster have given us is our past. We possess a heritage of faith and outreach. Our partnership with Meals on Wheels lasted for twenty-one years, culminating in the building of their own facility in 1990. In 1969, Westminster was instrumental in beginning and providing space for the Hollis Center, a day care service for the mentally challenged. Westminster has been at the forefront of denominational support, sending missionaries, building schools, staffing clinics, establishing drug programs, planting new churches, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick. Fresh water flows in Senegal because of the wells our money dug. In Malawi, thousands of people have survived because of the clinic we built. Today, we provide more monetary support for Presbyterian missionaries than any church in America. We are the largest church supporters of United Ministries here in Greenville. We gave the largest church gift to renovate Montreat's Assembly Inn. In Greenville, and all over the world, people live, prosper, and worship because of the outreach of this church.

An interesting footnote can be found at the bottom of Westminster's very first budget. For the six month period ending March 31, 1948, the total budget was estimated at \$18,155.25. But \$13,000 of that was designated for the Building Fund. Yet, a footnote at the bottom read: "It is the hope of the officers of the church that approximately \$1200 will be contributed to Missions and Benevolences." From the very beginning, regardless of the congregation's needs, Westminster emphasized outreach. With resources and helping hands a tradition of working outside our own walls has prevailed at this church.

And yet, it is not only a physical outreach that has characterized us, but an intellectual one. Another of our gifts from the past is a theological openness, a willingness to stretch our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit's new directions. During the tense days of desegregation in the 1960's, Westminster's second senior pastor, John Haley, along with other church members, stepped to the forefront in working for the equality of all God's children. During this period of rapid social change and questioning, our Session took a stand against racism. On February 14, 1971, our third senior pastor, Al Montgomery, exchanged pulpits with the Reverend Alex A. Chalmers, pastor of the Israel Metropolitan Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Greenville. In January of 1991, we welcomed into our pulpit Rabbi Jim Cohn of Greenville's Temple of Israel. In 2010, renowned Muslim scholar Yahya Hendi was our Heritage Lecturer. Other Heritage Lecturers as diverse as Rosemary Reuther and Philip Yancy have challenged our theological perspectives. We were the first church in the presbytery to call a woman pastor. We were the first church in the presbytery to elect a woman elder. Like true Presbyterians, we have fostered an intellectual curiosity, a willingness to open our hearts and minds to God's continuing revelations.

And, this has cost us. In every decade we have lost people who were uncomfortable with theological and social openness. But one of the continuing hallmarks of this church is that we will not be constrained by societal and cultural norms and beliefs. Our standard remains the person of Jesus Christ, who came to free us from our sinful humanness, to liberate us from the constraints of human bondage into the love of God. Those who went before us have presented us the gift of theological integrity, a heritage that trusts in the love of God proclaimed through the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Marj Carpenter, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly told about a little girl who was crying while telling her mother that she didn't want to go home because she knew her kitty cat was dead. Her mother, floundering through an explanation said, "Your kitty cat is in heaven with Jesus." Whereupon the little girl replied, "What in the world is Jesus going to do with a dead cat?"

Through the decades, Westminster has asked the hard, uncomfortable questions, those queries that take us beyond the veneer of religion into the heart and soul of the Gospel.

The second gift our church forefathers and mothers presented us is our present. Today, as in the past, we remain a church focused on missions. In 1991, we purchased the property across the street dreaming of a retirement center, a facility where residents of this neighborhood, not just our members, but all in need of such accommodations could find affordable living. In the process, we were approached by business people willing to start the bidding for the property at one million dollars. Like our spiritual forefathers and

mothers, we went for the mission instead of the money. That dream became a reality in the construction of the Westminster Retirement Center.

During our Mission: Possible campaign in 1993, we constructed the second floor of the new building with community groups in mind. In the evening, these rooms overflow with organizations like the AA, NA, Greenville Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Al-Anon, Girl Scouts, and many, many others. From the beginning we have charged no fees and continue to entrust building and room keys to the groups. We have so many community requests, we must put people on the third floor.

One of my favorite images of Westminster will always be the night many years ago when I observed passing each other in our parking lot those dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns attending a chamber orchestra concert in the sanctuary, a Narcotics Anonymous group wearing leather jackets and riding motorcycles, and our own casually dressed members coming to a meeting. Those first Westminster members decided that these buildings would be a gathering place for the community in all its shapes, colors, orientations, and needs. That tradition not only remains strong, but continues to grow.

And not only our commitment to missions, but our founders' theological vision remains intact. Most likely, we will never be a huge church. First, because we have remained focused on missions instead of membership. It doesn't mean we don't like or want new members, but our resources and energy have gone into other areas of ministry, education, and service. When we build or purchase property, we do not do so with largeness in mind, but ministry.

And second, we probably will not become huge because we will continue to seek and live a faith combining the Presbyterian elements of heart and mind. We will pursue new ideas. We will challenge accepted beliefs. We will study the Bible, really study it. Most people do not desire that kind of faith. They prefer security to scholarship, coddling to commitment. But we will continue to employ scripture as a means of salvation instead of scorn. We will foster a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation instead of condemnation. We will maintain a concern for the poor, the disenfranchised, the hungry, the sick, and the persecuted. We will not just quote the Bible, but study it. We will promote the equality of all God's children, regardless of race, creed, or sexual orientation. From its founding, this church has been generous in its love, concern and compassion for all those God has created, and that heritage continues to shape us today.

Many years ago, a young pastor travelling in India had the opportunity to visit Nobel Peace Prize winner Mother Teresa, the Catholic nun known world wide for her work with the poor in Calcutta. After an adventurous cab trip through crowded streets, he arrived at the simple structure that houses one of the greatest testimonies to the reality of the resurrection. He knocked at the door, and a young novice in the simple white and blue sari

of the Missionaries of Charity answered. She listened as he explained the intent of his mission.

The young disciple ushered him into a simpler parlor, and after a brief wait, the pastor could hardly believe his eyes. There she stood! A little, frail, bent-over woman, overflowing with the presence of Jesus. She graciously spent about twenty minutes with the young clergyman. Then, not wishing to intrude on any more of her time, he stood up to express his appreciation and depart, but before he left, he asked, “What advice might you have to offer a young preacher?”

“Only this,” she said. “Preach Jesus, the true Jesus, the real Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, and not a Jesus of people’s imaginations.”

For seventy-one years, Westminster has been attempting to preach the real Jesus, not a Jesus that fits cultural and personal desires and expectations, but the strong, vibrant, revolutionary Christ of the Gospels. We surely haven’t been perfect at it. But to the best of our abilities, with God’s help and leading, we will continue to seek and lift the Christ who calls us to love and aid all God’s children.

Those early members of Westminster have through the years presented us the gifts of the past and present, and their third offering is our future. The American Church is changing. Like it or not, there are cultural currents to which we must react. Forty years ago, how many women worked outside the home? How many households in your neighborhood had only one parent? Someone moving was a major event. Who owned a computer – much less a smart phone? Church programming was limited to youth groups, Women of the Church, and Sunday School. And how often did people go away on weekends? Society is radically changing, and we must plan and work to meet those challenges. It will not be easy; change never is. But through all generations, the Church has found new ways to share the Gospel. And so will we.

Yet, I pray there are some things that will never change. Like our spiritual forefathers and mothers, we will continue to emphasize missions. In fact, we will seek new ways to become involved both locally and overseas. We will continue to stand with the poor, those suffering discrimination and injustice. And we will continue to be an open, inclusive community of faith, preaching love over hate, forgiveness over revenge, learning over ignorance.

What we have been in the past and present, we will strive to be in the future – a congregation following Christ instead of the culture, a fellowship more interested in truth than accepted societal or religious norms, a people who are willing to reach out in faith, to take risks in the name of Christ. We will not worry about being big or wealthy or even acceptable. We will only concentrate on one area, a constant striving to be what God calls us to be, a gathering of people differing in personalities, socio-economic status, race, and

even, at times, beliefs, yet united in our quest to proclaim the love of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the world, and right here in Greenville.

The Chinese word for “crisis” is a combination of the symbols for “danger” plus “opportunity.” Studies show that for the American Church, Westminster included, the future will be a crisis, fraught with danger. It is up to us to also make it an opportunity for God’s will to be discovered and accomplished.

“Westminster – Our Goodly Heritage”

Our heritage, our past is a gift that continues to reverberate among us today. Understanding that past gives us a guide into the future. Missions, intellectual inquiry, openness, acceptance, forgiveness, and courage – all traits that led this church in the past, can also be ours in the coming years. But that, of course, is a choice each one of us must make. We have a goodly heritage given by those who went before us.

This morning, let us resolve that our past will only be a harbinger for what is to come.

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
January 14, 2018