

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

110th Anniversary of College Hill

Deuteronomy 8:11-20 Matthew 5:13-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
February 27, 2022

[The Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 8 was read at both the 30th, 60th, and 100th Anniversary services of worship. The Matthew passage was read at the 90th and 100th.]

On the occasion of our 100th Anniversary 10 years ago, I began by reflecting upon the remarkable evening the night before at the nearby Campbell Hotel, complete with with a spectacular Celebration Dinner and program. For those of you who were there I'm sure you remember how we enjoyed the meaningful opportunity to take a nostalgic look back in time at some of the many highlights that were formative in the life, ministry, and identity of this congregation over the previous century. In the midst of our celebration today, I think it's important we also reflect upon the faithful members of this community of faith that are no longer with us a decade later. There are many.

College Hill, in each and every decade, by God's grace, has made a name for itself and an impact upon our community and beyond. This congregation has always been resilient, and oftentimes prophetic. Faithful and dedicated members lived through and dealt with such difficult eras of WWI, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, the Great Depression, WWII, the peak of mainline denominationalism, a neighborhood with a radically changing demographic, issues of conscience during the Vietnam War, the fight for gender equality and a woman's right to reproductive choice, denominational struggles concerning the ordination of LGBTQ persons of faith and latter same sex marriage, engaging in Hispanic Ministry efforts and issues involving immigration and refugees. And now, a world-wide pandemic entering into its third year.

One of the things College Hill is known for is its strong sense of identity, of who we are, why we exist, and what we hope to accomplish, with God's help and guidance.

That was not always the case, however. It's worth recounting a time in this congregation's history when it chose not to integrate science and religion, something many still don't to this very day. We were not alone, however, debating the concept of the theory of evolution during and after the time of the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial.

In 1928, as the story goes, the Rev. George Nichols, who was the pastor here at that time, demanded that the teaching or support of evolution be banned from anyone associated with this congregation. As an aside, it just hit me how many people, administrations, and school boards right now are trying to ban the teaching of racial injustice and subjugation in this country. Heaven forbid it make any white person uncomfortable to learn and hear the truth of history – past and present.

One church member, decades ago, recalled that Rev. Nichols asked that all church elders and leaders must sign a statement that the Bible was the holy word of God and should not be tampered with. Interestingly, there is no such mention of such in our church's Session Minutes from that time. College Hill's historical Roll Book, however,

records that nearly 70 members of this congregation were “dismissed” to First Presbyterian Church downtown, though not all of them joined there. Notice, they were not “transferred” they were “dismissed” on and around January 20, 1929 – 93 years ago. Membership continued to decline in subsequent years, perhaps because of these theological differences.

What has never been made clear, unfortunately, is precisely how College Hill went from that traditional theological position to where we are now. We must be the poster church for theological pendulum swings! That could have changed sometime in the 1940s when members of this church sponsored and housed Japanese-American students attending the University of Tulsa who faced intense anti-Japanese sentiments. We would later house the Than family, one of the first Vietnamese families to arrive in Tulsa after the fall of Saigon. Later again, during what was named the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s, College Hill housed a family seeking refuge after fleeing from El Salvador.

Striving for and doing something about social justice for others, all others, has very deep roots here at College Hill. That continues in our efforts to more fully understand and face ongoing issues of racial inequality and in inequity throughout this city and within ourselves.

All of this rich and diverse (and sometimes divisive) history makes me wonder what College Hill will face in the decades ahead. And more importantly, how this community of faith will respond. But that is the key. **This is a congregation that throughout its history has bravely, courageously, and faithfully responded to the issues of the day.** Those responses have always been guided and measured by our sense of God’s calling and vision. That will continue to be the case. Never satisfied simply with institutional maintenance, although that is still part of who we are, **our efforts to actually be relevant and missionally oriented will continue to push conventional boundaries and the status quo.** In and through the lens of progressive Christianity, we are not always aligned with orthodox understandings of traditional theological doctrine, biblical interpretation, and at times certain positions of the Presbyterian denomination (of which I state bravely and hopefully not foolishly in the presence of the General Presbyter of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery). Saying that, **this congregation has been and will continue to be guided by its discernment of God’s will for our life, mission, and ministry together.** We have and will continue to follow where we believe God is leading us in order to further the kin-dom of God in our midst.

Convinced of the radically inclusive nature and character of God, and of God’s love and grace for everyone, interpreted in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, and experienced through the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit around and within us, we will and must continue to, quoting our Mission Statement:

- Build an inclusive community of faith;
- Receive and openly share the love of God;
- Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.

In pursuing that mission, however, let us heed the warning directed to the ancient Hebrews, as we heard in the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 8, to never forget God. They were warned not to become proud nor forget that they were once slaves in Egypt. They were told to remember their history, including the exodus when God led them through the wilderness filled with poisonous snakes and scorpions;

when God provided them with food and water in a place where it was scarce; when the people had to learn to trust in the gracious provision of a loving and caring God.

That is why we are pausing this day – not only to celebrate, but also to remember our history, including those times in the wilderness of danger and scarcity, those moments when we had to learn to trust in the gracious provision of a loving and caring God.

The author of Deuteronomy goes on to warn, “When you become successful, don't say, ‘I'm rich, and I've earned it all myself.’ Instead, remember that the Lord your God gives you the strength to make a living” (Deut. 8:17-18a CEV). College Hill has been and continues to be richly blessed in many ways. But let us never think that throughout these past 110 years that we've earned or done this on our own. Instead, **let us recognize and remember that it is God who has and continues to give and bless us with inspiration, strength, persistence, hope, and courage to be this very special and somewhat unique community of faith.**

It is God who empowers us to make a difference – a difference in the lives of each and every member and friend of this congregation, past and present, a difference in this very neighborhood, this city, this presbytery, this denomination, this world. It is in acknowledging God's guiding, empowering, and Sacred Presence in our midst, and within us, that makes us, to use the imagery found in Matthew 5, the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So today, we celebrate 110 years of saltiness, 110 years of being a light, more light, sitting high on a lampstand in order to shine before others, so that our good works give glory to God.

Let us never forget where and what we have been and done, where and what we are and are doing now, and where and what we hope to be and do in the future. And most importantly, let us never forget God, that Divine and Sacred Presence beyond us, with us, and within us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.