

“Leaving Legacies”

Text: Haggai 1: 7 – 8; 1 Corinthians 3: 9 - 11

Used: Congregational Church of Naugatuck – 5/18/03

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On September 15, 1968, in his first service as this church's called pastor, the Reverend Mr. George Fisher preached a sermon entitled – Does any one remember? George? It was entitled “Marks of a Great Church”. Now for his first few weeks of ministry in our church our Pastor Emeritus also had a habit of subtitling his sermons and it was this subtitle that particularly caught my attention as I was looking through our history. His subtitle that week was “the world at its worst demands the Church at it best.” Obviously, beyond what was printed in that week's bulletin I know little of the content of that sermon; after all I, at the time, lived a few states away and had not yet quite mastered the complexities of potty training. But I do believe that that subtitle is as true today as it was thirty-five years ago: “the world at its worst demands the Church at its best.”

This weekend we celebrate the one hundred year legacy of the sacred hall in which we now gather for worship. And I suspect, that there might be disagreements among us as to when in those 100 years the world has been at its worst – but I suspect that throughout those 100 years that the demand has always been there for the Church to be at its best. Thus, as we gather for worship today, we celebrate not only the beauty and magnificence of this edifice but also all that has happened within these hallowed walls for the past century. And we realize that the task of the church has not changed – we are still to be

the Church at its best. You see, we have been left a great legacy, one which demands that we never become complacent, for it is the task of this generation of the church, and the generations which will follow over the next century, to continue the task of leaving legacies.

The first legacy that we have been left, and that is now ours to pass on, is a legacy of being good stewards of our resources.

Look around you for a moment. Look at the beauty of this sanctuary. And think what the feeling must have been like 100 years ago to the day – two days before people gathered for worship in the sanctuary for the first time. It had been decided a few years before that the church's meeting house at the time – a structure that had been immediately across the street from where we currently worship facing the town hall – had fallen into such disrepair that it made more sense to build a new sanctuary than to repair the old one. A team of five men, Bronson Tuttle, John Whittemore, George Lewis, George Ham and Lewis Warner were named as a Building Committee and basically charged with responsibility of overseeing all matters related to the building of the new structure. As we well know, they employed the architectural services of the firm of McKim, Mead and White. The estimated cost for the building that was drawn up was \$100,000. The men on the Building Committee went to work and were able to secure \$ 88,000 in pledges. They then effected a lease of the Green to the town for the remaining \$12, 000. The cornerstone for the church was laid in a special service on August 13, 1901. In June of the following year, the old church building had to come down, so worship was moved into what they then called the Chapel – what

we now normally refer to as the auditorium of the parish house. It had been nearly a year since the congregation had met in its own space exclusively designated for worship; think of what it must have been like to come into this space for the first time.

At the church's annual meeting on May 12, 1905, the church elected its first historian, a Mr. Frank Warren. These were his words on this occasion:

“After the cornerstone was laid, slowly but surely, the massive foundations were placed, the walls raised in their strength, and the lofty spire extended heavenward. The whole making a fit tabernacle for an interior beautiful as a charm in elegant simplicity of decoration and purity of design...And on Wednesday, May 20th, 1903 the long looked for day of dedication arrived and we ‘entered into His gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise.’”

One of the things I suspect our forebears felt upon entering this sanctuary for that dedication service was great pride in their stewardship – after all when they gathered for worship that day the church was debt free from all the expenses of this building. I can assure you that this will never again be repeated in the history of our church. We know simply for the repairs to our tower in the last decade of great expenses for a building such as this... and we chose to go in debt for the repairs for one section of this building.

To be honest, I am not sure our forebears ever even envisioned that this building would still be standing 100 years after it was first dedicated. Neither of the church's previous buildings made it nearly that long: the first having a life span a little over fifty years and the second just under it. There is no doubt that

we have received a magnificent gift in this building, as well as in our other facilities. It is virtually unimaginable the type of financial burden that will be created the next time one of the facilities needs to be replaced. For the sake of the well being of the church in future generations, we must practice the lessons of stewardship taught to us by our forbearers and we must teach those lesson to those who follow.

Now the second legacy I would like to address at some level may seem antithetical to the first. But in the practice of our forbearers, it has always been understood as complementary and not conflicting. The second legacy that we ought to leave for those who follow is the task of constantly re-thinking the best ways to be the church.

Now I know often we like to think that changes in our worship life together have occurred only during the tenures of some of our more recent staff members. Well, as one who has spent the last few weeks pouring over the bulletins from the past 100 years, let me assure you nothing could be further from the truth. Beyond that fact that we still use the same book for our scriptures, there is little that was not changed time and time again. And such changes began in the first services of worship in this building. It was during the Dedicatory service for this sanctuary that the practice of the Pastor and the Choir wearing robes first began. The following Sunday at 4 p.m., the first service of communion was held in our sanctuary. It was on this occasion that individual cups for communion were first used. Prior to that occasion a common cup had always been used.

But even bigger changes in the way we structure ourselves as a church occurred when this sanctuary first opened its door. Prior to 1903 the church's main revenue stream came from the purchasing of pews. Each family had annual dues set by the church of the pews in which they would sit. Any guesses where the cheapest pew was? Right up front – some things don't change. We even have in our archives a layout for what the initial pew rental fees would be for this sanctuary. However, Mr. Warren's history accounts that it was just before this sanctuary opened that "It was adopted as the method and custom of this church that seats should be free to all and that the revenue for its support be derived from voluntary weekly offerings." Can you imagine what a big risk this must have seemed like? And what a powerful way to live out the words that are above our Church Street door, that this place is to be "An House of Prayer for All People" ... not just those who can afford to purchase pews.

Changes in how our church acted as the church in the last 100 years not only happened in relation to worship, but also in relation to society. In all my reading I came across a statement that our church, through its Prudential Committee, adopted as a witness to the community around it in the 1960's. It read: "We, the undersigned of Naugatuck, believe in equal opportunity for all people. We believe that prejudice based upon race, religion, or national origin is wrong. We regret that some people will call new neighbors undesirable without meeting them, talking with them, sometimes without seeing them. We value people as individuals, each with his own God-given rights and unique qualities. We believe that our community should be open to all who desire to work and live

in it, regardless of race, color, creed, or national origin.” Can you imagine what a powerful witness this statement must have been in the 1960’s? This my friends is the legacy of church and the legacy that we must leave for those who follow – a legacy of rethinking the way we are a church in relation to our own practices and to our society.

We are all familiar with “This House of God”, Don and Mary’s Anniversary hymn that we sang prior to my sermon. But theirs was not the first anniversary hymn. There was also hymn written in 1931 for the occasion of the Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Church by a woman named Harriet Rossiter Lewis. The third verse of her hymn speaks rather directly to this idea of re-thinking how we are a church:

“Stern were those live of olden times,
Narrow and straight their pious way;
We travel now a broader path
And from old standards wisely stray.
Church of our fathers – give us heart
To live aright and do our part.”

Finally, in our task of legacy leaving, we are to remember that the church must always be laid upon the foundation of Christ. This perhaps is the most simple and yet most important part of our legacy. It is all well and good to take awe at how beautiful our buildings are and how rich our ministries are, but if we forget at any point that all we do is to be for the glory of Christ, then our buildings might as well be museums and our ministries programs run by some social agency. All we have and all we do is an extension of the work of Christ.

There were five scriptures that were placed in the time capsule in the cornerstone of this sanctuary when it was laid in August 1901. All five attest to the fact that the cornerstone, the foundation, upon which we build everything as a church must be Christ.

For a long time in the history of our church, the bulletins included small collects or reflections for the day. The Easter bulletin in 1969 contained these words penned by a professor from Andover Newton Theological School, Dr. Nells Ferre: "The Church of Christ is the community of those who know the sufferings and resurrection of their Master as their chief glory; who are first of all, turned in faith, gratitude and love to God; and whose life mission is to live before him and witness with all their lives to his love and to the sure coming of his kingdom...The Church that is alive to God is of the most use to man."

In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he reminds us that the foundation for everything we build as a people of faith is Christ. But he also reminds us that the building is never finished. My friends, our forebears left us an amazing legacy captured within this building in which we now worship, but let me assure you the building of this church did not end 100 years ago when our sanctuary was dedicated. Paul reminds us, "Each builder must choose with care how to build" upon the foundation. May we choose with care the legacies that we will leave to those who will gather to worship in the sacred space in the century to come.

To this end, let me close with the final verse of Harriet Lewis' hymn for the Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of our church:

“So “carry on” O Church of Christ!
You stand for every kind of good,
For righteousness and charity,
For love of God and Brotherhood.
Church of our fathers – help us be
Examples of posterity.”

Amen.