

125th Anniversary, “Remember Our Past”

Ecclesiastes 3.1-8, 11, 14-15

October 25, 2015

First Christian Church

David B. Hartman Jr.

Wichita Falls, Texas

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace...

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end...I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

A movie made back in 1989 was in the news this past week. Maybe you’ve seen it—“Back to the Future, Part II”—and the reason it was in the news was because, in the movie, the time travelers Marty McFly and Doc Brown went forward in time, from 1985, to a very specific date—October 21, 2015—in order to save Marty’s children, who had not yet been born. The movie speculated on a lot of cool devices that would be in use on October 21, 2015—a flying skateboard, called a “hoverboard,” a prototype of which is actually being tested now, and self-tying sneakers, which Nike will soon release on a limited basis. The thing the movie almost got spot on was special glasses that kids could put on at mealtime to read messages from their friends and watch movies and play video games and totally ignore their parents. Such a device actually exists, and is in common use, only it’s a little screen on a smart phone instead of glasses.

The biggest fantasy in the movie was that the Chicago Cubs would play in the World Series in 2015. Against the odds, the Cubs actually made it to the National League championship last week, where they lost to the Mets because, you know, they’re the Chicago Cubs. The Cubbies haven’t won the World Series in 105 years, and they evidently didn’t intend to start this year. For generations, Cubs fans have lived in hope, and died in despair, and then the following season, they come back and live in hope again. It’s a great character building exercise, being a Chicago Cubs fan. But isn’t the Christian faith somewhat like that? We are often on the brink of despair, but we always return to hope, because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It’s fun to speculate about the future, though of course the only one who knows what the future holds is God. As our scripture says, “God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end...I know that whatever God does endures forever...That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out

what has gone by.” But even though only God knows the future, there are lessons even we temporal mortals can learn from the past.

First Christian Church of Wichita Falls was founded in 1890. It is safe to say that none of the founders had the slightest clue where this church would be 125 years on, any more than we have any idea where First Christian Church will be 125 years from now, in the Year of our Lord 2140. But yet, we know that God will be there in 2140—is already there—and I trust, unless the Lord Jesus Christ has already returned in glory (“Come, Lord Jesus!”) that in some way, shape, or fashion this church will still be bearing witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is a tenacious thing, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. If the Church was only a human institution, we humans would have destroyed it long ago. But it’s not merely a human institution, because the Holy Spirit both birthed and sustains the Church. When I look back on the history of First Christian, I am struck by how, through the generations, the people were faithful—sometimes even heroic—when faith and heroism were most called for. Our forebears weren’t sinless, of course—no one is—but part of faith involves fortitude. That means, for Christians, that when times are at their hardest, “we fight the good fight, we finish the race, we keep the faith.” Our forebears did, which is why we are here today.

Every generation is judged by the ones that follow. We will be judged by our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who will bear the consequences and write the history of the choices we have made. My generation has already made its judgment on my parents’ generation. We have called them, and rightly so, “The Greatest Generation.” They endured incredible hardships—the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, the most terrible war in human history, the long, fretful twilight of the Cold War—and by their courage, their toil, and their great, great sacrifices, left us freer, healthier, safer, and more enlightened than we would otherwise have been. The Greatest Generation led the way in the cause of racial justice. The Greatest Generation put men on the moon, developed technologies that saved the lives of hundreds of millions of people who would otherwise have perished from famine and plague, and led the world into what, by the late 1980’s, seemed a new birth of freedom. The Greatest Generation was also the greatest church-going generation in American history, because they wanted their children and grandchildren to inherit the spiritual power and light of the Christian faith that had enabled them to endure, and move beyond, the great dark valleys of their days. And then, as they entered the late autumn of their lives, they passed the torch to my generation. Whatever the judgment of our children and grandchildren on my generation, I hope they will remember that whatever foolish, self-indulgent choices we made, we nonetheless truly desired that they be healthier, happier and far wiser than we were. My generation knows that we stand on the shoulders of giants. And if our more privileged days meant that we were not required to be as brave, or stalwart or steadfast as our fathers and mothers and other forebears were, we nonetheless still recognize courage when we see it, and generosity when we witness it, and devotion to causes greater than ourselves when we behold them through the faith that is revealed in the light and in the love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God for all the faithful servants of the last 125 years who have brought us to this day. Most of them are now part of the great cloud of witnesses, in the fellowship of heaven. But they will always be in our hearts. And we will never forget that we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Renewing Our Commitment

On Wednesday evening when the combined choirs from Park Place and First Christian were going over the service for today, a moment was taken to remind people that here at First Christian we use the word “sins” in the Lord’s Prayer instead of “trespasses” or “debts. That exchange of information reminded me of when Emo Philips was trying to discover some common ground with a man he had just met. Emo asked, “Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?” The man answered, “Protestant.” Emo said, “Me, too! What franchise do you belong to?” The man said, “Baptist.” Emo said, “Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?” The man said, “Northern Baptist.” Emo said, “Me, too! It looks like we have a lot in common.” Finally, Emo asks, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879?” And the man answered, “Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.” And Emo turned bright red and stated, “What??? How is it possible for you to be so much like me, yet be such a heretic?” And Emo turned and walked away.

We live in a world where we have so much in common, yet we seem to focus on those things that divide us. We separate ourselves as family, or tribe or denomination, or specific church or community or City or State or nation. It is so easy to believe that if there are ideas or traditions different than our own, they can’t possibly be right. And this tendency goes way beyond religion in our lives. It’s the basic stuff that causes turmoil in families, businesses, and in our relationships with friends and people we’ve just met. It’s the stuff that causes war.

This is a problem that mankind has had from the very beginning of human kind. Even the sons of Adam and Eve had different ways of seeing and understanding how things should be or what the status was of each other. A large part of the New Testament consists of Paul’s letters to the early churches and individuals urging them to work together. In Corinth there was a diverse group of people with a wide variety of beliefs and practices. It wasn’t easy for the congregation to hold it all together. They squabbled, denigrated one another’s gifts, and threatened to splinter off and start their own church that would not have all the challenges that diversity brings.

Paul reminded them, and us here today, that it is precisely because we’re different that we need one another. It’s true in every phase of life, and doubly true in the church. We all know God and Jesus in different ways. To benefit from the variety of gifts we must be in relationship with others. We need those we have difficulty understanding in the way an eye needs an ear or a head needs a heart. They have gifts we lack – gifts from which we can benefit if we see ourselves as part of the same body. And this unity, this relationship, is always a challenge.

I believe that Jesus speaks to us through the Scripture of the New Testament and says to us: “If you hold the same beliefs I have and do the things that I am doing . . . you will believe that God is the Creator of all people . . . that we are all part of the family of mankind. If you follow me you will be required to deny yourself – to set yourself aside – to give yourself away to others. If you follow me you will believe that the greatest gift you can give to another is the gift of yourself. If you follow me you will be required to take upon yourself the interest of others . . . the suffering of others . . . the burdens of others. If you follow me you will be required to absorb great suffering that will become as unpleasant and difficult as carrying a cross. If you come after me you will believe that people are more important than political or religious institutions – even more important than long held beliefs if those beliefs belittle other people and hold them apart from relationships with others.

I lift up today the three congregations represented here at this 125th Anniversary Celebration. Highland Heights Christian Church would never have become a reality if it had not been for First Christian Church. Park Place Christian Church would never have become a reality if it had not been for both First Christian and Highland Heights Christian. And the birth of both Highland Heights and Park Place did not take place because of wrangling and dissatisfaction within the initiating churches. They became reality because members desired to expand their witness for Christ and create disciples of Jesus in different areas of town.

All three congregations have faithfully attempted to follow the spirit and the lifestyle of Jesus. It’s a rarity in today’s world. Today all three congregations are together to remember our past, to renew our commitment and to rejoice in the Lord.

This morning I encourage each of us to renew our personal commitment to the lifestyle of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to each other and to all of the other members of the family of mankind who have not yet come into a relationship with God through Jesus, who is our reliable source of knowing God. May God continue to bless our ministries.

Preached by James Zug

October 25, 2015

125th Anniversary Celebration of First Christian Church

Wichita Falls, Texas

**Sermon for First Christian Church, Wichita Falls,
125th Anniversary**

October 25, 2015

Rev. Alice Hupp

I would first like to thank you for inviting Park Place Christian Church to be a part of this very special occasion! We feel honored and blessed to be here. How wonderful to be here with such great colleagues and have our two choirs sing together! We come today very aware that we stand on the shoulders of such a great cloud of witnesses...as we celebrate the legacy of Highland Heights Christian Church and First Christian Church in this way, looking back over the past 125 years.

The Prophet Joel said, in chapter 2:28b-29a

*“I will pour out my Spirit on all people;
Your sons and daughters will prophesy-
Your old men will dream dreams-
Your young men will see visions-
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”*

It's a lot like when a family prepares for a baby. The hopes and dreams of starting a family...the preparations: A friend of mine purchased the *National Enquirer* magazine...now let me assure you that I do not read nor buy this magazine...but a friend of mine did and I just happened to flip through it...and I happened to notice an article talking about George Clooney and his wife Amal...had just purchased a crib for \$19,000!! Who does that??? \$19,000??? Talk about preparation!! But for any baby coming into the world...any ministry, we want to nurture it so that it will be the best it can be. We are aware that for this to happen we must be open to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit...what it will bring...what it will call us to be or do...It calls us to look at what was...what is...and what will be! It may even call us to CHANGE. How many of us want to see change? Ah but the real question is; How many of US WANT to change?

The very blueprint of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) came into being as a result of the Holy Spirit leading to change...when a “leader/elder of the church” would decide whether or not a person was *worthy* of communion. Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott, felt called to a new and inclusive way...in the days of the circuit riders...to share a new ministry that saw the church as One Body in Christ even in the midst of our differences. Just like leaders of old...leaders like O.L. Shelton who ministered here at First Christian Church whom I have a special connection with. He became the President of my alma mater Christian Theological Seminary. It was in the Shelton Theater, named after him, where I walked across the stage to receive my Master of Divinity degree. Leaders like Kelly O'Neal and George

Davis, John Muir and Dave Hartman...leader like Jim Zug and Henry Cohegan and Byron Rose...They didn't look at things as they were but saw the leading of the Holy Spirit that brought the church into new ministry and vibrancy.

Change is hard, but we are here today because we have seen the church stretch and grow over these past 125 years and know that for it to retain its vibrancy it must look boldly into the future. The church must seek the leading and the leaning on the Holy Spirit...we must find our Boldness like the prophets of old in this new age.

The truth is there are only 2 ways to change. Either something new comes in or something new comes out of us.

It's like the man who suddenly finds himself in a lion's cage. He looks around trying desperately to find a way out...he shakes the bars and screams for help. When he turns to look over his shoulder he sees the lion looking intently at him, dripping from his mouth....as he screams for help and sees no escape he cowers down on his knees with his arms over his head in an attempt to protect himself. All of a sudden he hears the cage gate open...and when he peeks from his protective arms he discovers his fiancée has been thrown into the cage....he sees that the lion has diverted his gaze from him to her. As he watches the lion begin to stock his loved one, he finds deep within himself a courage he didn't know he had. He quickly jumps up and begins to run toward the lion screaming at him to leave her alone.

Now this was the same guy who was cowering on his knees...what changed? He found his passion...he found something worth fighting for, something that had deep meaning for him. That is what we are called to do in ministry.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross once said;

When you come to the edge of all the light you know and are about to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen: there will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught to fly.

Now, as we have gathered here today we have had the privilege of celebrating the victories of the past...and have acknowledged where we have been, and see where we are now.....We are called to boldly plan and move into the future with purpose and intention....to discover our passion and what we will fight for in Jesus Christ...for we know that with every life we redeem, we transform the world.

Thank you again for allowing us to come and be a part of this most special day! Happy Birthday First Christian Church!