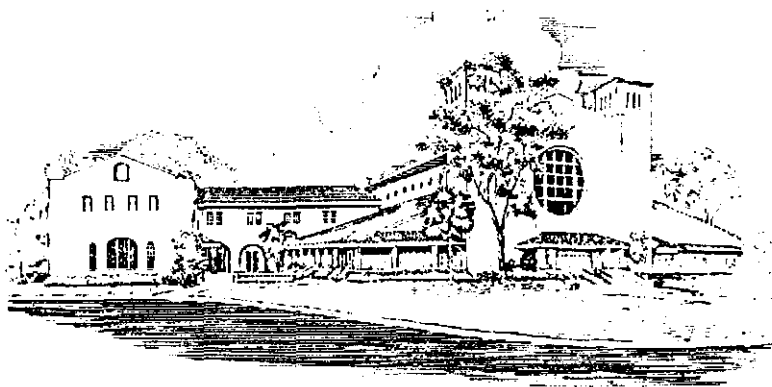


First Church Pulpit

"WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH?"

Text: "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations
...and lo I am with you always, even to the close
of the age..." — (Matthew 28:19)



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

401 SOUTHEAST FIFTEENTH AVENUE
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33301

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Just off the Northeast corner of Davie Boulevard and South Andrews Avenue in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; not too far from our First Presbyterian Church; immediately adjacent to the Exxon Station where at last look Regular gasoline was selling for an even "six bits" a gallon; within a clear Easterly view of the Andrews Avenue Church of Christ, which was featuring a course on marriage enrichment, diagonally across Davie Boulevard from the Motorcycle Salvage Shop, where I assume motorcycles are saved from all earthly ruin; directly across the street from the Rustic Manor Apartments, where some guy in a black shirt was polishing his 1978 Chevy, I spied one day not long ago the remaining shell of a once lovely Spanish Mission dwelling place, where people used to live.

Architecturally, it seemed to be a gem, if a bit unusual in its front facade. There are fine neatly proportioned arched windows there, one featuring a carved swirled pillar in the center. Delicate handsome red Honduran tile peeks down over the edge of the east and west sides to insure proper drainage from the roof. There are twin Coats of Arms on the front, no doubt the original family's choice, perhaps their very own. I do not know, and no one else seems to know either. There is a formerly sturdy fence all around to give privacy and shut out that busy boulevard and shut in the refuse which currently adorns the property.

It harkens you back in a hurry to its former glory days, for it surely is not

glorious now. Once fine and stately, and a rival for those mostly elegant homes which to its rear still decorate Rose Avenue, a brief enforced cul-de-sac over to Southeast Third Avenue, the house I am speaking of is now almost entirely in ruin. The windows on the sides are boarded over with plywood. There is evidence of a severe fire one night, charred window frames and discoloring on the outside walls. The beige-buff colored paint is flaking or peeling off almost everywhere. There are a few remaining drapes hanging on the east windows upstairs, but no one sane and sensible would live inside it now, even the back fire escape is no longer fit for use. Debris of all sorts is all around it and only one flowering mauve shrub shows evidence of a once well cared-for garden. It is a pity what can happen to a house.

In this case it is complicated further, because between the time that it was a fine and stately home, and now, for a short while, it became a fundamentalist little house church where people went to worship. Say, ten or fifteen years ago: no one I talked to quite remembers.

But after the parents died, I was told by E. Birch Willey, one of the surviving children opened up what was called a World Wide Mission Church. I suppose they were excited at the start; but surviving in church work is harder than it looks. It soon became a home for homeless people, and then that too, eventually closed. The fire came after all of that was finished.

All that remains to distinguish it now from other deserted homes around is the lettered sign at the top of the west wall. There, if slightly charred, is an attractively painted globe of the planet Earth. The World...and this inscription: Christ is the Answer -- World Ministry Outreach. Oh dear, what a vaunted valued dream for such a little church. Someone hoped to change the world from just off the corner of South Andrews Avenue and Davie Boulevard.

Oh, they had the right idea. They heart the marching orders quite correctly. I do not pretend to know what happened next, but it appears that they could not or did not carry it out. Maybe you could say at least they were trying to change the world for Christ. I know a lot of people who would say they are, but they aren't. I know a lot of people who speak of Christ, but serve the self. I wonder what went wrong. It was not just that they were small. (For at another time you know another little group of eleven worshippers got together in their troubled times with their troubled hearts and sought to change the world and did, and conversely, I know dozens of large churches which are religious country clubs. Anyway, they are gone for good I guess. For things are so bad now it would take a miracle, plus a Million, to take it back to what it was.

Well now, we have a lot further to go in this sermon than just over to South Andrews Avenue and Davie Boulevard. So we had better be off or we will never get

there. Right? There is a Scriptural message waiting for us on the Mission of the World Wide Church. However, there is a message waiting right here in that opening story. Oh dearie me, as I wandered around that little dwelling place, I wondered, almost out loud, at how symbolic, or maybe it is how actual is that scene.

I know a lot of churches in the land like that, and a ton of ministers. They had it all together at the start! Great dreams, good goals, right orders -- at the start. But they got lost along the way. They forgot what they are for. God does not call a church to be to bask in its own glory or to pat itself upon the back at how illustrious it can be. The church exists for Mission, for a purpose: To bring the world to Jesus Christ, to know and share His peace with everyone. And, when they do not; when they decide to do their own small things without notice or warning God departs and however large and beautiful it stands, whatever people say, God looks down and sees an empty shell, and the fires of hell are already embering. You don't believe it? Ha! Just wait and see.

I know communities, cities and counties like that too: for they have a purpose, too. All across the nation, I have watched them care about the trappings, pure this, pure that, keeping others out, keeping purity within, unwilling to move forward to embrace the coming world, unable to set prejudice or pride aside to allow God's purposes to enter. So, without notice or warning God moves

on...and the fires of hell will ember there.

And with nations, too. Ask the great Historian, Arnold Toynbee, now from his vantage spot beyond the clouds: Dr. Toynbee, what happened to those nations which disappeared? To all those thirty-three civilizations who once ruled the measure of their days.... What? Oh, I see, they deserted their ideals; forgot the sources of their power; they pursued their pleasures, as the fires of hell were embering. It is a pity what can happen to a nation.

And I know some people who are like that, too. Started out at the beginning with everything necessary for a fine and wonderful life...they have good looks, well dressed, well designed by their Creator, good education, the best that money could buy. They have a house on the water, the best cars, the best boats, the best families, good name, hard-working parents, good religious background, grand and wonderful beginnings.

But, they get lost, they wander around like poor lost sheep and do not know where to find their way. I do not know why, but they surely do now, don't they. They sell their dreams, then they have no hitching post to tie it all up to. They sell their souls to money, or to alcohol, or to song, or to women, or to men, to work or play. And when your soul is gone you have nothing left, save an aging shell of what once was the dwelling-place of God. And without notice or warning, God

departs...and the fires of hell are embering.

All that is true, I am sure...but, oh dearie me, we need to get on to Galilee, two thousand years away, where on an ancient hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus Christ, now risen from the dead, was gathering up the remnants of his earthly life, abut to ascent into heaven for eternity, or until He comes again. His chosen disciples were all there, all but one that is, he betrayed the Lord and in the horror, killed himself.

He was about to give them their final marching orders which would have to do for the next two thousand years. It is called in Christian history, The Great Commission, at the end of Matthew. "All authority in heaven and earth [He said] has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father,, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20. Let us take a look:

I. First, these concluding words of Jesus, that there was and is a mission for the church. That is not as easy as it looks. God wants us to do something in the world.... Now, if it is true that there is a battle going on in the world today, and it sure looks like and feels like a battle between God's people and the other people; and if we can assume that you and I want to be on the Right Side, i.e., the side where the Commander-

in-Chief is -- Jesus Christ our Lord; then, as anyone who has ever served in any kind of battle knows, whether it be actual armed warfare, the battle of football teams on the gridiron; the corporate battle to win new customers, the battle for good as opposed to evil, the only way the army can possibly proceed is to know what its orders are. And those orders come down from the top, they do not originate nor except save the most exceptional circumstances are they even altered, on the field. If you are Captain of a ship and you are ordered by the Admiral to stay and fight, even if you feel you should run for cover, you stay and fight, or else. If your team is told by the Coach to run out the clock, you run out the clock. You do not try to throw a touchdown pass, or else. Orders are orders, especially in battle. Authority is authority. Once given and declared it is absolute and final. It is so with this mighty army....

Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto me." That is known as The Great Claim. How or why, we do not know and cannot say. Not being God, we have no right to question the how or why, only that it is. Jesus is first establishing His claim to have the authority, transferrable from God the Creator to God the Son. He does not wear five stars or stripes on his shoulder. Nowhere does his helmet indicate that He has all the power on earth -- all power over life and death are given to Him. It just is.

Now many believe that, and many others try to. Many others cannot believe it or do not care to believe it. Imagine how it sounded back then.... Imagine how it sounds now....

We take the Sacrament today: The outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible Grace. To most of us it automatically means Communion or Baptism. Surely religious. But there is a second prior meaning which comes out of the old ceremony in which a Roman soldier made a sacred vow and promise. When Labienus swore allegiance to Pompey, he promised in a Sacrament, a sacred agreement, that he would always be faithful, never desert, and undergo the same chances, whatever they should be which Fortune should give to Pompey.

"There are so many poor and dying people in the world," someone once remarked to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, "How can any one of us ever help them?" "One by one," she replied, "one by one."

II. But following The Great Claim comes The Great Communion. The funny thing about it, as always, is that a Commanding General or Admiral cannot win the battle by himself. The best coach in the world cannot win without his players. The company President needs good employees all along the line, so does the Minister of a large church. Without good lay and staff assistance, he would be done for.

So go into all the world and preach the Gospel. I encourage you to think about it for a moment in its original setting. There was a paltry powerless little bunch of ordinary men, afraid, uncertain, unsure of themselves, huddled in a small upper room in the poor section of Jerusalem. Death stalked the streets of their city for it was far more than rumor that the authorities, the men of fame and power were out to get Jesus and they, the disciples were also in danger. Then before the Supper, He warned that one of them would betray Him.

That was even worse...to have open enemies in powerful places was bad enough, but at least they knew who they were. The Pharisees and Pilate did not pretend to be friends and followers. "Is it I, Lord? Is it I?" To be betrayed and deserted by one of His own. Give me an open enemy any day than a half-hearted self-serving friend. That was worse. That was worse....

Back in Isaiah 49, where it had been promised that a Messiah would come who would be for all the nations. the servant there says that God says "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Israel and to restore Israel alone. Therefore, I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

If you wish to keep Christ truly with you, the way to do it is not to work alone at cultivating the spiritual virtues, not

only to immerse yourself in the Scriptures, not only to saturate your mind with religious thoughts and books and readings, but as Alexander Maclaren once noted, you will find him "on the dusty road of life doing His Will and keeping His Commandments". "If a man love me, he will keep my words and my Father will love him, we will come to him and make our abode with him."

III. The Great Promise: Are you afraid today?...Are you hurt, and worried, and troubled, and weary; are you just about ready to give up on other people? Are you? Are you fearful of witnessing, of being a failure? Are you so lonely you could die...are you too timid to stand up for what you believe? Well then, the last part of the Commission is for you...Jesus says, "Lo, I will be with you always...even to the end of the age..." You are not alone.

I watched the film on Patton again the other night on T.V. What a tyrant of a man. What a soldier. What a patriot. They say one of the most wonderful things about General Patton is that he went up on the front lines to be with the men. Napoleon did that, too. It was said that when Napoleon came near, it was as if 10,000 extra men had been sent forward to lead the battle. Just to know that he was there. "Oh my God, Napoleon is here? He is watching me!" And he would go as Patton did, and pat them on the shoulder; tough General as he was, he would honor

their single presence, and their importance. Hmmm...(Are you listening?) My Dad used to say, "Don't worry, Richie, when you're in trouble, I'll be there..."

More, far more, far, far more does Jesus Christ make that promise -- no, not so much a promise as a fact...and when the fight is fierce and warfare long; when you are up to your ears and no one understands and you cannot get it all together, then glory be to God, let the distant triumph song steal in upon your ear: "Lo," Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

You see, you do not go out alone, whether you are off to the races, or out to struggle with some awful malady; or out to challenge some huge social mistake; or out to witness and to save the world for Jesus Christ,

And you know, they did not want to do it either.. They heard about all the power and authority. They called Him Lord and Master. They were overwhelmed that He had chosen them to be His special friends and troops. But not a one of them, for decades, ever followed through on the command. They kept on believing and practicing that it was their Gospel. They never took it to the poor, to the Gentiles, to the Romans, to the Greeks. They disobeyed the orders for two decades and more until an alien from Tarsus, a Turkish Jew named Saul, was chosen by God to intrude upon their sacred little homespun faith. Christ is not Christ if He is yours alone. Christ is not Christ unless and until He is shared!

"Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne
Behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above his own."
Lowell

Well, let's be on with it then: to change the world for good; I said the world. Christ and His world-wide Mission matter. And, let us pray that the day will come when we will really do it and never ever have to stand across the street and stare in disbelief that our little outpost here is gone, or going, and but a charred remains, and an empty shell. Christ is with us, still, for now...and evermore. Amen.