

9/20/09

Let's Hear It For Sharon Church !

Text: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

I Peter 2: 9-10

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Charlotte, North Carolina
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Just about the time I heard a secret whisper that my time with you as Interim Pastor was coming to a close, I had a dream - honestly I did - about Sharon Presbyterian Church early in the morning of the 27th day of August. As with most dreams on waking, all the intricate details did not arise in my rising consciousness, but I was able to piece enough of it together to write this sermon for our last Sunday together. To clear the way for a new pastor, I had submitted a letter of resignation a several weeks back to become effective at the end of this month. But since I was already scheduled to be away next week to preach in New Jersey, this morning is the last time with me as your Interim that we will be together in worship.

Before I tell you about the dream, let me thank our Clerk, David Stanford, for his kind words this morning and for his many other kindnesses in the past two years. Then, on behalf of my Peggy, our daughter Cathie and Mike DeCramer and marvelous grandchildren Maddie and Wil, plus Rev. Courtney and Cammie who have visited from time to time, we thank you for the kind and gracious Southern hospitality we have received since we came on board back on January 1, 2008. It seems far longer than that; in fact sometimes I can't remember ever being pastor anywhere else.

There have been some difficult situations to be sure, and a struggle here to help things along in the Interim. I surely want to congratulate some of you for the most creative foot dragging I have ever observed in all my life; you sure have an aversion to change. But all of you - I would prefer to say "you-all," but my Pittsburgh twang never allows it to sound authentic, most all of you anyway have made us feel like fellow travelers in the Kingdom of God. We have faced some tough times in unforeseen illnesses and family troubles, and of course we have gone through the sad losses of some irreplaceable people. We will never forget them or you. Our thanks to the Church Staff, the Officers, and the others among you who have made an extra effort to befriend us. It is much appreciated. Thanks. God bless you and keep you in his care.

But, back to the dream: I dreamed of a day far away (Are you listening?) when I was present at a grand reunion of the Sharon Presbyterian Church in heaven. By the way, I chuckle when I say that I was surprised to see that all of you were there, every last one

of you made it, which proves that Almighty God sure is Merciful! Joining us were innumerable others, some of whom you know or have heard about, but every last one was known to our Heavenly Father.

Anyway, we were assigned a choice location in a flowered glen down by the banks of the Catawba River. Its free flowing tributaries watered the whole area: Paw Creek and Steel Creek, McAlpine, McMichaels and McMullen Creeks flowed gently along, as did Big and Little Sugar Creek; and of course there was one called Everlasting Sugar Creek. The river and lakes were filled with bluegills and spotted bass and perch and catfish galore, but no one tried to hook them because everyone understood that they were God's little creatures too.

Mountain Laurel and Catawba Rhododendron blossomed with all their might. Of course, the dogwoods, the daffodils and tulips and crocus were in perennial bloom. Carolina Lilies, Marsh marigolds and White Asters and Evening Primrose bordered the meadow, and a trail of white Trillium lined the path down to the water. Some St. John's Wort was blooming, but no one took to munching on it to calm their nerves, for there is no stress and trouble in Heaven, none at all. The Oak trees abounded, as did the Ash and Walnut and Hickory, Long Leaf and Loblolly Pines and Poplars and Maple and dear old Sassafras.

Native Carolina wildlife had the run of the place. Eastern cottontails and chipmunks and weasels and red and gray foxes scurried about. Raccoons were peering out from under every bush and shrub, but not one of them tried to snatch a single morsel from the table. Golden Eagles and American Bald Heads nested in the tall cedars overhead. Great Horned Owls peered down from their perches while the bright red Cardinals kept constant watch. The wild turkeys gobbled, but no one tried to shush them let alone shoot them. The woodpeckers pecked all day and night and nobody tried to hush them up either. Even the migrating Canadian geese wobbled all over the place but no one tried to shoo them away.

Big black bears lumbered around. White tailed deer bounced through the fields and no cars hit them as they crossed the roads. Wild boar and coyotes and cougars and Bobcats (The animal kind) mingled with the crowd. Mountain Lions and cows lay down

side by side and their calves and cubs played with and teased each other, like lambs gamboling in the shepherd's field. Isaiah dropped by and reminded everyone that he had foretold the day when "The wolf would dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the loin and the fatling would be together." (Isaiah 55:12)

And just about every member of the Congregation that there ever was, was there. Even the old codgers who would never felt the need to come to Church came gladly to the reunion. A tear formed in the corner of my eye as I noticed the families jumping up and down and hugging each other: for those who had long been separated by death were back together again - just like the Bible said they would be: "Death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning nor crying or pain, for the former things were passed away!" (Revelation 21:4)

It occurred to me that even in my brief time at Sharon Church, we have said goodbye to nearly 100 family members and friends and current or former members. Every last one of them was there. The little children who had gone away for a while were giggling and racing around like school was just over, because their parents and grandparents had started to arrive. Oh what a great happy day! Just like the Bible said it would be.

Then the former pastors turned up. That was a gas. Some of them looked so stern, that I guessed they had sucked on a lemon just before they entered Glen Sharon. I recognized a couple from their photos in the hall. Most of them were swapping stories about the hard times they had when they were pastors. Bob Johnson told how harrowing it was to watch over the flock during the Civil War. Then Cyrus Johnston chimed in telling about the dangers of the Indian Raids on his families just down the road in the 1840s. Old Samuel Caldwell Pharr was still miffed because up in Concord they accused him of being too worldly. Not sure what he did, but I thought I heard him say: "Man I didn't do anything, compared to some of these guys!" But then he apologized that he got so peeved that he demitted the Presbyterian way and became a Methodist minister down the road in 1866 - but God apparently forgave him anyway for he was there.

And old Sam Williamson strolled in. He looked a little like Andrew Jackson, from the side anyway. Not many of you will remember him; he was the first pastor in 1831. Sharon was yoked with Providence Presbyterian Church at the time because neither one could afford a full time preacher. But then, don't you know, the two churches got to arguing with each other about how much time the good doctor was spending here or there and who owed what to whom. That was sad. Sharon Church paid him \$200 a year: that's about four bucks a sermon; but, I guess it was agreeable for there is no record that he ever complained. He got upgraded though and he left Sharon in 1839 to become the President of fine and fancy but still tiny, Davidson College to the north - good for him.

Then old Jethro Rumble rumbled in. I liked him. He looked a little like Louis Pasteur. They were in fact about the same age. Jethro Rumble - now if I couldn't be Rev. Dick Cromie, I think I would be Rev. Jethro Rumble. He was a student at Davidson when Dr. Williamson was President, but school records do not tell us if he was a well behaved student or not. I kind of doubt it. But he became a minister and when he got to Sharon Church the people sure loved him. (Is the Pastoral Nominating Committee listening?) They adored him so much that when he accepted a call to a new congregation up in Salisbury, they voted at the Congregational Meeting not to release him, "No, no Jethro, you can't go!" That was a pickle! But just to show who was boss, like preachers have to do sometimes, Jethro left anyway. He ended up serving the Salisbury Congregation for 40 years! He did return a couple of times, by invitation, like, on August 15, 1891 he preached a dandy sermon at the Dedicatory Service of the new Sanctuary, now "The Chapel." And I would guess he drove his horse and buggy down from Salisbury for a Fall Festival or two. Well anyway, everybody sure liked old Jethro.

Rev. Gilbert Taylor Thompson, Jim Terrell's great, great grandpa, was there. He was pastor around the turn of the 20th Century. Like Williamson, he also yoked two churches. The people at Providence were still upset, so he went over to Carmel Presbyterian, preaching here in the morning and there in the afternoon. I hesitate to say it, but he didn't look too fond of the flatbed truck out there on the church campus, where young Jim and the banjoed musicians were playing blue-grass. But he tired to

smile a little: I guess because Jim was on the truck, and only a misanthrope would refuse to applaud, a little bit anyway, for his own great-great grandson.

And of course Charles Little was there. He deserves a medal: he served the longest pastorate of all, 33 years. (You wore me out in just under two!) Imagine, he led the congregation during both World Wars, as well as the Great Depression in between. And he did a good job. Sometimes it was not certain that he would receive his salary during the 30s; there was no money at all. But he was bragging about how long the CE Building named for him had been in use, until someone informed him that it had finally fallen down of its own accord.

And Reverends MacLeod and Cooper and Carmichael and McKinnon and Richardson and Long and John Alexander and Mac all turned up - Bill Stanford quipped that they all came because they probably thought it was payday! But, they were all happily working the crowd and munching on the heavenly hotdogs as they woofed down the ribs from Adam's Stand with homemade apple cider.

And all the Associate Pastors were there, too. They were mainly complaining about their bosses. And then, the women ministers showed up and sat down at the Clergy table: marvelous gals like Martha Jane Raedels (1982-87) and Sheryle Phillips 1995-98) and Terry Hanna (1999-2005) and Meg Skidmore (2006-08) and Dee Smart (currently). When they plopped down, the men pastors of long ago were whispering in consternation among themselves: "This table is reserved for Pastors, what on earth are they doing here?" "They're pastors, too." Gabriel yelled over. But before long, Terry and Dee had charmed old Jethro and Sam out of their high starched collars, and everybody got to laughing and talking about how times change, and how people have to change too. It was a hoot!

And, the music makers from the choir loft were there too, from way back when all they could sing were Psalms without benefit of organ. Then along came Elgerine Elliott and Esther Brown and Jane Dillard and David Mayo and the others. Sandy didn't have to play the organ anymore because the angels do that on the harps in heaven - now not that she isn't an angel! The office folk and the custodians and the pre-school staff and the Scoutmasters all came too.

Oh yes, by the way, the old Chapel had finally been renovated, and it sure looked pretty, with its angular pews and new audio-video and all the rest. And glory be, there was a marvelous new CE Building across the way with a photograph of Bobbie Ward hanging inconspicuously over in the corner of the entrance hall. Praise the Lord!

And Billy Graham came by for a little visit, with Ruthie of course. And dear Ruth was showing off her engagement ring which Billy had purchased with the \$65 dollars Sharon Presbyterian Church had given him at the start of his career. He was the Mission Preacher, delivering 7 sermons in 6 days. That's about 8 bucks a sermon - you were getting better. Ruth said she never took the ring off until they removed it after she had gone away.

And all the families who had farmed the properties around what is now South Park and Sharon Road and this whole area were there, happy to be with each other again after all the development crowded them out and sent them off to other stations and places.

And, don't you know? Our Church Session had been whittled down to three elders, with just one Committee, and that one never met because there was nothing for them to do: Jesus Christ had done everything. Oh dearie me, how sweet and heavenly that would be. And (are you listening?) everybody could clearly hear every word and song because there was no sound system up there bouncing off the walls, no screeches at all.

And of course, the Lay Ladies of the Church were there. The older ones were puzzled that the younger ones were not wearing their Sunday-go-to-meeting-hats, and they couldn't believe that these girls actually came to worship in everyday slacks and jerseys. Some of them sported high laced shoes and long dresses. Oh they all looked so lovely. My Dad used to say that "All women are pretty; it is just that some might be a little prettier than others." But, don't miss this - not a one of them was old or creaky, and nobody coughed or limped or winced in pain. Just as Isaiah said it would be, "The weak hands and the feeble knees will all be gone away; and the lame will leap for joy! And pain will be no more." (Isaiah 35:3-4)

The "Faith Group," my buddies, were still there, mixing up some leftovers for the Thursday picnic lunch. They had been serving Thursday meals for 147 straight years by then, which meant that some of their leftovers were like 37 years old. But they were still smiling and the whole meal still cost a dollar and a quarter. Then they took a little bow and felt all puffed up when someone announced that they had contributed \$16,000 total dollars to mission.

Margaret Springs and Ann Ross were chatting about the first Woman's Association Meeting in May of 1849, when they proudly turned over 16 dollars to the Pastor, which by the way was the entire mission budget for the church that year. The first Honorary Life Members of the Association were there: Mrs. Little and Mrs. Elliott and Mrs. J. Walker Kirkpatrick, with Maude Rea and Mrs. Black right behind, and the 120 or so more since then were seated at the head table. And they all laughed out loud when they saw the Epitaph on the grave of the young minister over in the next Glen over, which read:

"Here Lies our Pastor, cold and Killed;
He tried to run the Ladies' Guild!"

Then the soldier boys (and some girls, I guess) came marching in, singing waving to everyone. And all the older folk were singing:

"When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again. Hurrah, Hurrah!
Let's give them a hearty welcome then, hurrah, hurrah.
And the men will cheer and the boys will shout.
And the ladies they will all turn out -
And we'll all be feel gay when
Johnny comes marching home."

Some had fought all the way back in the Revolutionary War and some the Civil War, both of which were more prominent in the Charlotte area than most people imagined. Three who had died in the Spanish American War were introduced. Then the 13 from WWI who were buried in our Cemetery got their turn. And then the scores who served in WWII, 48 of whom were buried in the cemetery at last count, reminisced beside the Hallowed Monument in their honor. Emery Sullivan was there, having given his all in the Vietnam Conflict. Others came from the Korean and the Mid-eastern conflicts etc. As their names were called, the Angel Gabriel blew his horn with all his might and they marched along with glee and their families and loved ones hugged and embraced them for a long long time.

And the Yankees in the Church, from up in Michigan, Pennsylvania and even New York who had swarmed down in the rapid growth of Charlotte in the 1980s and 90s, with their blustery ways and rapid speech, were made to feel equally at home.

And race divided nobody up no more. No one even noticed the color of their skin. Blacks and whites and browns and yellow and red men and women and children all sat down together and ate at the same table and drank from the same cup. Then they tried to understand and explain what happened and how on earth good Christians could have been so ridiculously dumb and inhumane and cruel and nearsighted. There were some honest moments, even a few strong, abrasive words, but after the meal was over, it looked like everybody forgave everybody, well, almost everybody anyway.

The Missionaries were all Guests of Honor, and all the faraway who had been helped by Sharon Members with their mission generosity came from all around the globe. And the hungry and the homeless and troubled and lonely from Charlotte who had been touched by our generosity came too, and they felt unhurried and each ate their fill.

And, don't you know - nobody was lonely and no one was nasty or rude or jealous, and nobody held a grudge. It was one big happy family. And there was Isaiah again touting his prophecy where he had written:

"You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace;
And the Mountains and hills shall break forth before you in singing,
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." (Isaiah 55:12)

And it sounds ridiculous I know, but honestly I thought I heard the distant sound of the bagpipes whirring away from the top of the mountain and a choir of angels was singing "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord." And don't think me daft, but I was sure the trees of the field clapping their hands, for Sharon Presbyterian Church. And Elvis and Roy Rogers, with Red Foley and the Sunshine Boys, and Johnny Cash joining our own JD Pearce singing "Ther'yrl Be Peace in the Valley." Oh Praise God! It was a hoedown: a country-wide shindig, a wild, wonderful jumping jamboree, the likes of which no one had ever seen before.

Then, lastly, and I truthfully cannot remember whether this part was in the actual dream or not - maybe I just dreamed it. In a little while - a million years or so - Jesus Christ came down to Glen Sharon for the party. He greeted everyone warmly by name and he sat down and spoke unhurriedly about how and why things went this way or that. And you could hear a pin drop, as he explained why all the puzzling things intruded on our lives, and how it was necessary, but so sad that God wept with us all from time to time. The Lord answered every single question, even the myriad of ones from the little children. He talked about the Transitoriness of life. Almost no one understood it all, but most everybody caught the gist: that life keeps moving along and even when things go wrong, you can still trust the One who loves you enough that he die for us.

Some of it sounded to me a little like an exegesis of I Peter 2: 9-10, where the First Apostle was challenging the earliest Christians to be faithful, no matter what happened. Because, he said:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have."

I Peter 2: 9-10

"A chosen race," that's what Isaiah told his people they were. Jesus added that that honor now applied to us in the Sharon Church reunion. We, you - were/are/always will be - chosen by God for a purpose: not to put our noses up in the air and look down on everybody who isn't like us, but so that we knell down and look up to everybody and help to spread the arms of love a little wider.

You are "A Royal Priesthood." Peter said. That's what God called them when they were wandering through the wilderness. Jesus said that title is for us too: we belong to the Creator-King: like Royal Property, a bit of Buckingham Palace, a Royal Burgh, and a Command Performance all rolled into one. "You are not your own," St. Paul is speaking in I Corinthians, "You were bought with a price." (I Corinthians 6:19-20) Bought: i.e., the owner bought up your contract to play on the team. You are no longer free agents, negotiating for your own time and pleasure. God owns your contract. Long ago he paid the full price in Jesus Christ.

You cannot serve God, and Mammon. You are either for me or against me, said the Lord. If you are on the team, then play for the team. If you are not, go sit down on the bench and twiddle your thumbs until your playing days are through. Christ said, "I'd rather have an open enemy than a half hearted friend."

You are "God's own people." Think about it; "once you were a nobody." You were one of the teeming millions of faceless, nameless, forgotten people in the massive crowd, like a little speck of sand on some distant shore. You might have lived and died in a Bedouin tent in the Arabian Desert ten thousand years before Christ. You might have been one of the Cherokees who were shoved across America in their trek through the Vale of Tears. You could have been sold on the market of humanity. You might have been one of the millions of peasant girls who were sacrificed to the nameless gods in the Inca Civilization of long ago, or one of those who are still being sold for profit today. You could have been anybody, anywhere, any time.

But, you weren't; you aren't; and you never will be. You are one of God's own people. You are special because God chose you and he loves you. The one who made the starry heavens knows each of us by name. He knows we are not perfect, but because Jesus was, we don't have to be. Once you were worth nothing. Now you are worth everything. Nobody invites himself to the table at the heavenly reunion up in the flowered Glen. We were not born with a birthright into the household of God, not in this life and not for the next!

Paul writes in Romans, "We groan inwardly as we wait - as we wait for our adoption as the children of God." (Chapter 8:23) Just as a lonely little forgotten child waits somewhere in the agency for an adoptive parent to come and rescue him, or as an abused little puppy waits in the shelter for someone kind and nice to claim him and take him home. With you and me, the adoption has already taken place. You are a child of God, destined for Glen Sharon.

Well, eventually I woke up and frankly felt a little exhausted from it all. But I also felt good, grateful that in some small way I had been a part of Sharon Presbyterian.

For finally Jesus Christ stood up and he led the group in a rousing cheer: "Hip, Hip Hooray, he said, " Hip, Hip Hooray. Let's all hear it for Sharon Presbyterian Church! Well done, my good and faithful servants. I know you were not perfect, but you did your level best: that's all anyone can ask. You were faithful to me, and as always when you do that, it will all work out all right."

It's been a good two years. I believe God called on us to spend this little bit of time together. Now he calls on us to part. That's the way it works: a generation comes, a generation goes, but the Word of God remains forever.

I will continue to pray for you and for your new pastor and for you staff and officers and members and guests. Thanks for the lovely cruise. God bless you and keep you in His Care. For now and forever more. Amen.