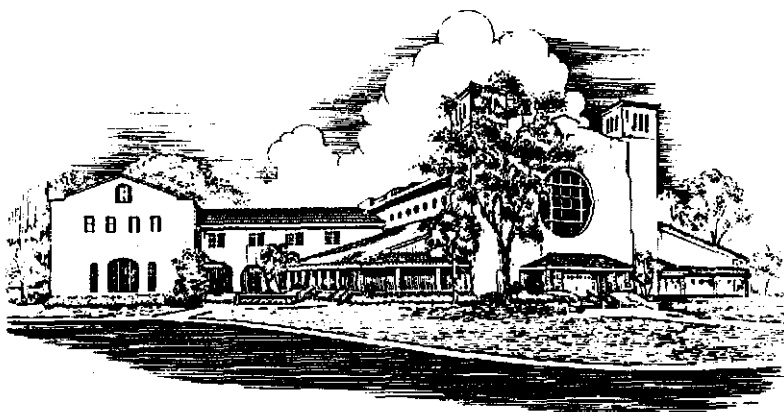


First Church Pulpit

"LOOKING BACKWARDS TO THE FUTURE..."

Text: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."
— *Hebrews 12:1, 2*



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

401 SOUTHEAST FIFTEENTH AVENUE
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA 33301

November 15, 1987

RICHARD M. CROMIE, Minister

In the little African village of Juffure, which Alex Hailey made famous while he was searching for his Roots, there are some simple attitudes and approaches to life. Haley, a most successful writer in this land of the free, a man who not only found fame and pride, but was able to pass it on, came from a family which for several generations had been slaves. He had to trace his origins.

Finally, he went back to Africa where, seven generations earlier, Kunta Kinte, his great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, was seized into slavery. He cried when he was there, thinking of the pain and loneliness.

In that little village, however, they taught him some wonderful things: The earth, the rivers, the trees and the sky (With us our church, our city, our nation and the world) do not belong to you and me, even if they seem to. Sure, we have a deed to a little bit of property here and there. We call this and that "ours", "my church". "Do you ever get down to Dr. Cromie's church?", somebody asked. I said: "Ha! It is not Dr. Cromie's church, as it was never Dr. Bininger's church, or Dr. Neumann's church, or Dr. McLeod's church. It belongs to God." Each of us, pastors and people, are like chapters in a book. The author of the whole story is God.

In Juffure they say: "This land does not belong to those who are here right now. It belongs to three groups of people: It belongs literally to those who are gone. It is theirs just as much as it is ours. It belongs also to us, we are custodians of what God has given us on loan. But more than that, it belongs to those who are not yet born." With us, this is their church, the New River is their river, Colee Hammock is their park, Fort Lauderdale their city, the United States of America their nation...the big round planet Earth, their Earth. (Are you listening?)

We meet in the middle, and thank God for what we have received. But we must live in such a way that we acknowledge both, determined that we will pass it on as best we can to others yet unborn. Because it is theirs. Right?

That is also what the author of Hebrews in his most elementary form is writing about in the words of our text. He says: "All the heroes of the faith who preceded us, received a promise." When Dr. Bininger came down here to Fort Lauderdale, God's promise was that he would use him. God never said how, even if He richly blessed this area because of him. Drs. McLeod and Neumann the same.

Can you live on a promise? You bet you can. If your father says to you at sixteen: "Be a good boy until you are eighteen, and I will buy you a car", that is a promise. You can live on a promise. When the one you love promises: "When I get out of college, we will get married", that is a promise...especially if you can trust the one who makes the promise.

"They were blessed", the author of Hebrews continues, "but they did not receive it all." It is a pity in many ways. They only saw the part of time which God gave them to live in. We in turn will see the part of time which God gives us to live in. Our little window on the world....But, when all is said and done, the Lord God Almighty is moving on, behind and in the scenes.

I will close with a final story. It took place in the early 1960s (You think we have problems now?), when in the city of Pittsburgh, black and white people were shooting each other. Perfectly sane people, trying to kill each other outside of schools, on the streets, everywhere, it seemed. There was a Methodist church then in the east end of Pittsburgh. It was a beautiful church. I preached one of my first sermons in it as a student. One night it was burned to the ground. Two churches in

fact were torched that night. Oh, how awful! What if this whole church, by some malicious act, was burned to the ground.... The windows gone, the beams down, the chandeliers, the floor, the pews, the pulpit... finished.

Well, I knew the pastor. When I heard it on the seven o'clock news, I went down to be with him. We stood outside the smoldering church.

Some young black students from the area came by to help. And right into the smoke they went. In those days, they had portraits of the ministers in a long downstairs hallway. The boys carried the portraits out. There was a row of hedges in front of the funeral home just across the street. And those young men propped up the portraits one by one, face out, facing the church. What a sight! Did you get it? These devoted men, who for 140 years had given their lives for the church, watching it burn to the ground. A sad story indeed. But there is a sequel.

Four years or so later, they rebuilt the church. Those same portraits were replaced in the hallway, and like "a cloud of witnesses", the author of Hebrews says, they look on in the new church. If you had stopped it all the morning after the fire, it was desolate. But God did not close His books the day the church burned down.

So, look around you, friends, in memory, look at the cloud of witnesses that I see. Think about them. Deacon Berryhill is there, the one who founded the church; the First Family, as it were. And old Rev. Charles Work, and Dr. Atkisson, and John King, who ministered through the Depression, and Dr. Edward P. Downey is there, and the Masselinks, and the Millers, and the J. P. Simpsons, and the William Maurers, the Kittredges, and the Freeland, and Herman Decker, and Herb Jenne, and Ernie Orr, and Dr. Burns Dobbins, and Harvey Reid, and all the rest.... I could mention each of the nine thousand eight hundred and forty members of this congregation.... They are there. They are there, looking to see how we will run the race.

I used to think I knew all about this text. I studied it in Greek at the Seminary. I thought I understood. Then, my mother died, my father died, my brother died, my teachers began to die, my friends.... And I found I knew next to nothing. Because they are there. It's personal now. Think of the ones who gave you life and love and faith, who built this church.... They are there. They are here!

I come into our Sanctuary alone sometimes. Every once in a while,

I think I hear them clapping: for you, and maybe, just a little bit, for me. Do you hear them?.... I hope so.... For now and evermore. Amen.