

“History and Urgency”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
The Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area  
Service of Worship at Central Presbyterian Church  
November 18, 2007  
Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Mark 13:1-2

One final text for reflection. It is a good theological one, but due to its source – the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church, best said after “the Word of the Lord.” So from G-4.0303 of the *Book of Order*:

“The Presbyterian system of government calls for continuity with and faithfulness to the heritage which lies behind the contemporary church. It calls equally for openness and faithfulness to the renewing activity of the God of history.” G-4.0303.

I want to reflect today on the past and future of Central Presbyterian Church. For those who are from out of town, or here accidentally, or who do not otherwise have anything at stake in the question of the future of this church, I think there may be some nuggets for you to chew on as well, as you reflect on your own past and future. I would like to set these three texts in creative tension. The Deuteronomic command to teach the faith to the next generation, Jesus’ warning of the destruction of the temple, and this passage from the *Book of Order* that says our system of government calls for continuity and faithfulness to our heritage and openness and faithfulness to the renewing activity of God.

This congregation, Central Presbyterian Church, began in 1852 before Minnesota was granted statehood. It was funded by and named after a Central Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, whose generous members wanted to see an “Old School” Presbyterian Church established in this growing territory. When this building was built on this spot in 1888, the State Capitol was across the street, and the sanctuary was intended to serve as the auditorium for the city. For many years, as if these 1100 seats were not enough, where our Friendship Room and Martha’s Closet is now, there existed a two floor lecture hall that could be opened into the sanctuary and seat an additional five hundred people.

Jesus and his disciples once went to their capitol city Jerusalem. There is some scholarly debate on this, but it is likely that Jesus and the disciples were rural and small town folk. A friend of mine, who grew up in Missouri and then went to Macalester College, once went on a college choir trip to Manhattan. They were given some instructions on safety, and then this: “whatever you do, don’t stare up at the tops of the buildings, and keep your mouth closed.” In other words, “don’t look like some hick tourist.” Well, Jesus and the disciples went to Jerusalem and the gospel of Mark records the conversation on this field trip to the big city. “Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

In February, 2005, I said similar words upon my arrival as Central’s designated pastor – what large stones and what a large building! What a large building for a congregation that numbered just 174 members (twenty-six of whom were men, and the average age of the congregation 60.8). The Pastor Nominating Committee, and the presbytery personnel who

helped in this designated pastor process made it clear that Central was in a life or death situation. My job, they said, was to help the church live or die with courage and grace. And we had four years to make it happen.

Most said it could not be done. When I consulted with optimistic friends who understand good church leadership, they said even if I did everything right, they would at best give it a fifty-fifty chance. And that was if everything went right! Paul Nixon has written a book that I have found inspiring: *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!*. But Nixon pulls no punches in warning of the difficulties we face.

Most urban churches in old buildings are either dying or already departed from the earth. If they are not dying, they are typically serving only a fraction of the number of people their buildings were erected to serve.<sup>1</sup>

Membership peaked in the early 1960s. A familiar story for Presbyterian churches. Central members were encouraged to help seed new suburban congregations growing north, east and south of Saint Paul. There were some conflicts in the next few decades. Some were poorly handled. Morale declined along with attendance. Budgets were balanced only by drawing down investment income, then principle from past generosity.

There is a fundamental belief in the business world. A company is either growing or dying. You are either increasing market share, or decreasing. Now let me be clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not argue that bigger is always better or that faith is the same as numerical or financial success. But we would be wise to at least wonder about what the business world would say about years of declining attendance and membership in this church.

Central's story is unfortunately not unique. My friend and former colleague Jon Walton was fond of quoting this saying. "The Church is always just one generation away from extinction."

Moses knew that faith is always at risk. And so in Deuteronomy, we hear these exhortations to pass the faith on to the next generation.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:6-9)

To keep telling the stories and to make the teachings visible, binding them on your hand and forehead and painting them on your house. A living faith requires such active participation.

Perhaps what sets Central apart from other churches is that the situation was dire enough that it could no longer be avoided. Fifty or sixty people in worship can make for an amazing congregation of believers and followers of Jesus – but it feels awfully lonely in a sanctuary such as this.

Some structures are so huge and such a part of our daily or symbolic lives, we cannot imagine them crumbling. Until a bridge falls into the Mississippi River. Until the World Trade Center Towers are attacked. Until the great temple of Jerusalem falls. And then we begin to see things in a different light. Taxes look a bit different when you question every bridge you cross. The costs of collaboration with the Roman Empire and accommodating faith to the ruling power looked a bit different when one saw the beauty of the Jerusalem temple.

This sanctuary looks different when you realize that the congregation is on the edge of existence. Thirty or so months ago, Central was in despair. Sunday attendance was in a dramatic decline. There had been no new member classes joining the church. Good people were working hard to do the important mission of this downtown church, but it was not enough. A lot of wise people said that it could not be done.

But I was called to be here and God was not done with this church. We still have a long way to go. I am grateful to long-time members who continue their involvement and are open to new opportunities. I am grateful to the new people who took a long look at who we were and still took a leap of faith and have brought vitality. I am grateful to the staff members who have caught our vision and added their talents. We still have a long way to go, but we are in a different place than we were three years ago. We have grown significantly and are showing new signs of life. Demographics have helped. New people are moving downtown and we embrace those young and old who are looking for a church community that is diverse, involved and faithful. Great music has helped. Our mission programs such as Martha's Closet, Project Home, FIRE and our Wednesday lunch help as people see us putting our faith into action. Call it luck, or call it grace, we have been blessed in these years with experiments in ministry and mission that have met real needs and brought joy.

This week, I was invited to preach at the presbytery worship service, and was specifically asked to share some of the things that we are doing well that are leading to our growth. With some humility and an awareness that elders in other churches can be defensive and other preachers are the most critical listeners to sermons, I shared three things I think we are doing well that other churches would do well to follow:

- Draw on the best of your history, but live with a sense of urgency. The past is no predictor of the future.
- Focus on the important things. Too often, committees and sessions spend lots of energy on trivial items because it is easier to thereby avoid dealing with the real issues. What's that old aphorism of rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic? Put your resources of dollars and space and volunteers together on the priority items. Make the main thing the main thing.
- And finally, don't take yourself too seriously. Have some fun along the way.

I am grateful to my friend Joanna Adams, for sharing the story of a monastery that had fallen on hard times. There were only five people left at the monastery, the abbot and four monks. They were about to close the place down, really. The abbot was in distress. Near the monastery was a little hut where a rabbi came to have some spiritual time away from the synagogue. One day, the abbot and the rabbi happened to meet outside the hut. The abbot told the rabbi about the shape the monastery was in. The two of them cried together, because it was a sad story, and there was no happy ending in sight. But then, just as the abbot turned and began to walk away to go back to the monastery, the rabbi said, "Just one thing...the only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

How could that be, the abbot wondered? He thought through the unlikely cast of characters, crotchety Brother Eldred, passive Philip, the irritable Joseph. How could it be? He told the others what the rabbi had said. The more they thought about it, though they were puzzled, the more they began to treat each other, even treat themselves, with more respect. After all, you can never be sure! Before long, the neighbors began to sense a new spirit in the place. People began to come and pray again. They worshiped and studied together, and they told their

friends how great it was to be there. And those friends brought more friends. Everyone was welcome, everyone, as if he or she might be the Messiah. Within a few years, the whole place was radiant with light and life.<sup>2</sup>

We were not down to five people, but we have realized that we are at a critical point in history, a time when this church will be reborn, or it will die. Our history will inform us, but it will not save us. And this sense of urgency has fueled Central's desire to be the church that God is calling us to be right now. And so now, remembering Jesus' words, "see those stones, not one will remain standing," makes us look at this sanctuary in a different light. Our Stewardship campaign that begins today seems like an urgent and exciting priority rather than a dull annual event. I will be making a pledge to support the mission of this church next year. I will be stepping up my pledge from last year. I encourage you to do so as well. Whatever the amount, I strongly encourage you to make a pledge – plan your giving for the coming year. And, I will add, your pledge will help us meet our challenge gift of four thousand extra dollars if we receive 100 pledges. In the book of Acts in the Bible, it says that "it is more blessed to give than receive" (20:35). That has been my experience, and I hope you will experience the joy and meaning that come with generosity.

I am grateful to Biblical scholar extraordinaire Walter Brueggemann for a decidedly non-biblical image about history and urgency in the church.

You know how to keep score in bowling? When you bowl a frame, if you get a spare or a strike you mark it down; but what you bowl in the next frame or two determines the value of what you have already done in the previous frame. The intergenerational mystery of the church is like that.<sup>3</sup>

How well the church has done is determined by what happens next.

Every day I come to this church, I am reminded that time is short. "You are here to help this church live or die," I was told. And I believe God wants us to live. But there is no time to waste. That is my calling as your pastor, and our challenge together as a church. I don't know what your calling, your life purpose is, but I encourage you to find it and act with a similar urgency. Martin Luther King, exactly one year before he was assassinated, said these words.

We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of men does not remain at flood – it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is adamant to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, "Too late." There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or neglect.<sup>4</sup>

Like King, we have no idea how long we have to live. So we are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. Tomorrow begins today. The gospel begins with Jesus calling the disciples. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near," he called out (Mark 1:15). And to those in the midst of their daily lives, he called them by name and said simply, "follow me." The future begins right now. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Nixon, I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church! (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006) 85.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Adams, in a sermon preached at Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, “The Reign of God and Junior High School,” on 11 October, 2007, [www.morningsidepc.org/worship/sermons.html?id=16&page=1](http://www.morningsidepc.org/worship/sermons.html?id=16&page=1). She gives credit for this story to Scott Peck, A Different Drum and retold by J. Barrie Shepherd, Aspects of Love (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1995) 16-18.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann, ed. Anna Carter Florence (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) 149.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. the conclusion of his speech, “A Time to Break Silence” Addressed to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, at Riverside Church. James M. Washington, ed. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986) 243. Also available at [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Beyond\\_Vietnam.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Beyond_Vietnam.pdf)