

May 10, 2015

TEXT: I Kings 8:26–30; Revelation 21:2–7

TITLE: Making All Things New

Today is a special day, as we remember the dedication of this church building 80 years ago. In 1935, newspapers ran big articles with photos of this magnificent edifice. The architect, Ralph Adams Cram, and noted church leaders were all here. A few of you here today are old enough to remember what it was like to see this church rise up at the corner of Penn & Highland. The scripture passages I read were part of the worship service on that Dedication Sunday, but we don't have a copy of the sermon that was given then—so I want to assure you that I'm not reading from an old, yellowed manuscript from 1935. To prove it, here are some things that would have been unknown 80 years ago: John F. Kennedy, Apollo 11, Barack Obama, 9-11, iPods, Richard Simmons, and Pop-Tarts. (Honestly, I just like the idea of somebody reading this manuscript 80 years from now and trying to figure out the significance of Richard Simmons and Pop-Tarts.)

The name most associated with this building is that of the Mellon family. But in truth theirs is only the latest in a series of family names linked to this location. Back in 1762, a German immigrant named Caspar Taub was given 303 acres in Highland Park by Colonel Henry Bouquet in exchange for delivering 1/3 of his crops to feed soldiers garrisoned at Fort Pitt. Taub's daughter Elizabeth married into the Winebiddle family, who owned land in Lawrenceville and Bloomfield. The Winebiddle's daughter Barbara Ann married Jacob Negley, who by then owned almost all the land from Highland Park to Point Breeze. Around 1810, Negley laid out the town of East Liberty, eventually paving and widening the two-mile stretch of the old Greensburg Pike that ran through his property. Thirty-three years later, the combined Negley-Winebiddle land holdings shifted to a new family, when Sarah Jane Negley married Thomas Mellon whose real estate and transportation holdings soon earned him a fortune.¹ And about 90 years after that, descendants of Thomas Mellon gave the funds that built the church we worship in today.

It is hard to imagine what it must have been like to witness this Spanish Gothic cathedral rise up in East Liberty, especially during the early years of the Great Depression. It had to feel paradoxical to see an ornate church emerge during a season of struggle and poverty in our nation. The 1935 newspapers all noted the church's \$4 million dollar price tag. I think that is part of the reason the preacher on Dedication Sunday chose to read some of the prayer King Solomon offered at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, for no building dedicated to God is truly worthy of God, no matter how magnificent the architecture. As Solomon said, "*O God, even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!*" Solomon asked that God's eyes be open night and day toward the place where God's people gather—that God would be ever mindful of us as we humbly seek God's favor, grace, and assistance while traveling down life's winding roads. I believe Solomon's prayer still remains our prayer today.

Back in 1930, about five years prior to the dedication of ELPC, famed preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick stepped into the pulpit on Dedication Sunday for the new cathedral-like edifice of Riverside Church in New York City. He startled his congregation with these words: "My friends, it is not settled yet whether or not this new church will be wonderful. That all depends on what we do with it. If we should gather a selfish company here, though the walls bulged every Sunday with great crowds, that would not be wonderful. If we formed a kind of religious club of the right kinds of people, and though we tripled our membership, that would not be wonderful. If we gathered in that heavenly place with all its beauty and praised ourselves for what we had built, that would not be wonderful. But if in this city, this glorious and wretched city where so many people live in un-heavenly places, if because of this new place we could go forth and lift some burdens, put light in some dark spots, help solve some real problems, then this would be a wonderful place." Fosdick's prayer is also our prayer today. If ELPC is to be wonderful, it will always depend more on God's grace guiding the people within the walls rather than the ornate walls themselves.

On our Dedication Sunday in 1935, the preacher also read from the final chapter of the bible—Revelation 21. He read about "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of the heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." That verse is the inspiration for the rose window over the East Transept. The woman in the window up there is not the Virgin Mary; rather she represents a depiction of the church as the bride of Christ. And while I'm correcting misconceptions, let's correct another one. Despite a lot of bad preaching and movies on this subject, there is no act of rapture, of believers being lifted up into heaven, described in the book of Revelation.² There are two little verses in I Thessalonians in which Paul describes people rising up to meet a risen Christ, but that has far more to do with who we'll be with at the end of the age, rather than where we'll be located.

Why is it important to make this distinction? Based on Revelation 21, God's Kingdom is not so much about us going up to heaven as it is about God's holy city coming down out of heaven to earth. Talk about urban renewal! The city of God coming to be with us. A heavenly city—not a rural landscape, but an urban setting of people interacting with one another. A place of shared worship and shared lives. This is part of the reason why we work so hard to get things right here on earth. We work for transformation and peace and healing here because here is part of God's future plans. Piety may cause folks to lift their eyes up to heaven, but faith requires that we keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

This is all part of the paradox of Christianity: the eternal God became incarnate in Jesus Christ; the glory of heaven comes down and dwells among us on earth; a cathedral is erected in the midst of a Great Depression; imperfect and sinful human beings are entrusted with embodying the gospel "good news." Our human condition is always marked by paradox. We are capable of cathedrals and concentration camps, Holocausts and Hallelujah Choruses. Here's another

example: When the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922—the monument in our nation’s capital to the man who signed the Emancipation Proclamation – the seating for that ceremony was segregated. To me that is so indicative of the paradox of humanity—a great moment of liberation honored with acts of racist separation.

But it is foolish to try and run away from paradox. As people of faith, we can only move through paradox and embrace it. God in Christ became flesh and dwelt among us. Heaven does come down to earth. Presbyterians, standing upon the legacy of our Puritan forebears, build a cathedral in East Liberty fit for bishops of Rome. Best of all, there is the paradox that we, an imperfect Presbyterian congregation, are entrusted with the gospel of Christ. To paraphrase Garrison Keillor, being Presbyterian is like the Electoral College: it works okay if you don’t think about it too much.³ We are surrounded by paradoxes, and yet in the end we are captive to a faith that is larger and greater than the paradoxes of life.

On this day, we are asked to re-dedicate ourselves to our calling as members of East Liberty Presbyterian Church—people called by Christ to lift burdens, shine light in dark spots, help solve real problems, loving others as Christ first loved us. We are to remember that we do not do this work on our own. Paradoxically, wondrously, God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is with us—dwelling in our city—interacting in our lives—saying each day, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Did you hear that right? God did not say, “Behold, I am making all new things.” This is not some Christian marketing slogan in which we trash everything old and look to buy all new things. The church’s future does not depend solely on new forms of worship, new songs and hymns, or finding new ways of being Christian in the 21st century. God said, “Behold, I make all things new.” God takes what is now and transforms it, by grace, out of love, into something altogether new. There are lots of examples of this: The resurrection of Christ—a crucified body made alive once more (all things new); the prodigal Son—a head-strong, misguided youth welcomed back home at last (all things new); the rehabilitated convict, the freed slave, the healed addict, the agnostic who boldly says “I believe that I might understand,” the activist who humbly affirms, “not by might, nor by power, but by Thy spirit, O Lord of hosts” (Zech 4:6). All things new.

As much as we look back today and remember our past, we also look around—marveling at what Christ has done in our midst—and we look ahead—imagining a future East Liberty far different from the world of Winebiddle, Negley and Mellon. We look ahead by faith to a future nation moving far beyond its legacies of segregation, white privilege, economic injustice, homophobia and xenophobia. We recognize that for too long we have been adrift from God’s purposes, lost in a secular realm dominated by violence, exploitation, distrust and sin. Yet these former things pass away. Today each of you is re-dedicated as a stone in the house of the Lord. Today you are all lifted up and made new. May the name of Christ Jesus our Lord by our words and deeds and worship here ever be praised!

¹ Franklin Toker, Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait, 1986, pp. 207-210.

² Brian Blount, Revelation, Old Testament Library, p. 378.

³ Garrison Keillor, The Keillor Reader, 2014, p. 149.