

Noank Baptist Church

Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Pratts' Arrival at NBC

Sunday, September 29, 2013

10:00 a.m.

First Lesson: Psalm 146:5-10

The first lesson, a reading from the Old Testament, is taken from the 146th Psalm verses 5-10. It is a description of true happiness, of being sure not only of what God wants, but that God blesses those who fulfil his wants.

Second Lesson: I Timothy 6:17-19

The Second Lesson, the Epistle, is taken from the 6th chapter of the First Letter of Paul to Timothy, vs. 17-19. Paul here sets out his version of the true nature of an enjoyable, happy life.

Third (Gospel) Lesson: Luke 16:19-31

The Third Lesson, the Gospel, is taken from the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 19-31. It is a parable of Jesus, the one in which he speaks of the "rich man" and his encounter with the beggar Lazarus at his gate.

Introduction to Sermon

Before I pray, here are two important components that shape today's sermon. The first is the occasion that has brought Nancy and me to Noank today. Fifty years ago this month Nancy and I, recently married, arrived here to serve with you in the ministry of Christ in this place. We were here for slightly more than thirty-seven years, before we went off, in retirement, to London and joined St. Nicholas Church in Chislehurst. There, just last Sunday, I led a celebration of the ministry of Francis Murray, Rector of our congregation, for fifty-six years from 1846-1902. Which leads me to speculate that if I had decided to serve you that long, I would still have six years to go. A more important component of the sermon, aside from the nature of this occasion, is the lessons provided by the Lectionary used by churches all over the world to set the lessons for any particular Sunday. To my surprise, I found that those set for today establish the priorities of God for the People of God. These seem to be the very priorities that Nancy and I found highly honored in this place fifty years ago when we came here and that we see are still the basis of this congregation's ministry. This is a fact for which we praise the Lord.

Let us pray: O God, let my words and the response of this congregation be faithful to your word given to us today in the lessons from the Holy Scriptures. Amen.

My very first visit to Noank came in May of 1963. It was a place previously quite unknown to me. I was here to meet with the pulpit committee seeking a successor to Earl Abel. Before that meeting, Ashby Anderson showed me around the village and this recently restored church building. What I saw immediately convinced me that many of the people of this community were privileged and rich – with the material blessings of living in such a picturesque location by the seashore and having the benefit of worshipping, studying, and fellowshiping in such a magnificent building. So knowing nothing more than that about you, I was ready to expect great things from you and you came through. Now forgive me if I use the term “you” not only for you, but for the folk who were here before many of you were born. This has always been for me a corporate community, including present folk, folk now gone, and folk yet to come. All of you helped me and Nancy enormously as we learned to share with you and through you what we brought with us, our own wealth of education, training, and experience. In fact, praise God, we seldom found ourselves in the unhappy position of the rich man in the parable – for few of you – and neither of us – would let anyone get by with ignoring folk like Lazarus in the parable read today. In fact, it wasn’t long until Nancy and I discovered, as many of you already knew, that there were legions of folks like Lazarus from here to Hong Kong calling for our help. These needy people were old folks and young children not getting the care or housing they needed. They were victims of fear and prejudice, expressed in racism, religious bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and in the blindness of many obviously privileged folk who ignored the poor as stupid, lazy, immoral, and unworthy.

We quickly learned that you were not ignorant of these matters, just waiting for us to enlighten you. In the past, especially the immediate past, you had learned much from and taught much to such fine ministers as Bill Millar, Art Knauer, and Earl Abel. Bill brought to you his conviction that everyone on this peninsula ought to be included in the parish or community of the Noank Baptist Church. You welcomed that perception and taught Bill how wide the parish might be. Art was a brash fellow who didn’t mind rattling cages – and he got you to do some revolutionary things. First of all he got you to change your age-old by-laws so no one was elected a Trustee or Deacon or Treasurer for life. Some life-Deacons were offended, but the congregation quickly learned the value of rotation in office and challenged Art to respond positively himself to the new ideas flooding in. Even more, he got you to admit believers to membership who had not experienced “Adult Baptism by Immersion”. As a result you got some excellent Presbyterians and Methodist in your ranks. After Art, you called Earl to a “part-time” ministry, so he could go to graduate school – but then this building burned. Earl took leave of graduate school to oversee its rebuilding as a strikingly beautiful place. It was amazingly useful for worship and a place for all sorts of godly activities and services, from elegant weddings to meetings of the AA and NA. And the flood-gates opened to opportunities and methods to serve the people around you and to be served by them.

I already knew and admired Earl from graduate school and over the years I also came to know and admire Art and Bill. But best of all was getting to know the

congregation here – especially as person after person and group after group shared with me and Nancy their hopes for what could be accomplished in this lovely place with the wealth of talent, commitment, and faith evidenced in the congregation. In retrospect I think of people like Ashby and Patty Anderson, the Burdick-Brown-Crossman tribe, the Lathams, Syd Butson, Howard and Mary Davis, and especially that great woman, Gertrude Brown, dying from cancer, who used my weekly calls to fill me in on the history of this congregation and the idiosyncrasies of its people. They showed a determination, with my help, to maintain, enhance, and expand the goals and dreams of their ancestors and my predecessors. Now some fifty years later many of the dreamers of 1963 are still with us here. They have been joined since 1963 by countless others. Old-timers and new-comers inspired me and Nancy, kept an eye on us, sometimes argued with us, and often shared with us or took from us strange new emphases and implications of the prayer that Jesus taught all of us, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done in Noank as it is in Heaven.” Most of us came to see ourselves accurately as privileged, rich folks, who, seeing the poor folks at the gates, should react, not with scorn or fear, but with welcome, compassion, and generosity. Allow me to give a few examples. First, there were literally homeless people here, folk with no place to go. There was Lloyd Moore. He had a domestic dispute with his wife. She fled their home, called me, and asked me to get Lloyd out, so she could go back. I did so, brought him to the Parsonage, and eventually got him a home with Saint Mary Arnold. Then there was Artie MacDonald, an elderly, kind, gentle man with a drinking problem, who had been dwelling with Millie Trahan down there in a burned-out house. Millie died – and Artie had nowhere to go, so he moved into the Parsonage – until Mary Arnold took him in, too. The congregation noted what was going on, especially the young Chip Anderson. To our surprise, he bought the decayed Legion House (with a resident raccoon) and gave it to the church to be converted into a residence for homeless folks. This led, not to a homeless shelter, but strangely enough, after 13 or 14 years of trial and tribulation not only to the Group Homes, but also to the magnificent complex of Mystic River Homes, where not only the elderly, but the youthful disabled find homes and a marvellous community.

Besides Lloyd and Artie there were other folk outside our gates. When Nancy and I came here we immediately perceived that the congregation of the Noank Church had a soft place in their hearts for children – not only their own in the beautiful new classrooms of our Sunday School – but also for children in a much wider community. This was evidenced in the Day Nursery School, presided over by the incomparable team of Dorothy Steel and Ginny Knight and supplemented over the years by Cynthia, Adele, Vera, and many others. It was so popular that young couples, immediately after conceiving a child, would place it on the waiting list for the Nursery School. As a congregation, you also supplied splendid teachers to the Noank School itself – up there on the hill – folk like Harriet Bates, Ruth Hodgson, and Jane Schmidt. The birth of our children, Elizabeth and Clark, further alerted us to the needs of children in our community. Then Nancy “raised the ante”. She brought the five Thompson-Manchester children home when their father and step-father was killed and their mother admitted to Norwich Hospital. These children, joined at times by several other adolescents from the community in our home or

shared by us with some of you, helped reinforce your own concern for “children in need”. This led to the conversion of the Legion House into Main Street House, with much help from architect George Knight, passionate house-restorer Mary Anderson, a huge non-interest loan from the congregation of Union Baptist Church, and a lot of assistance from Fred Clark and his work crews and machinery, pushed along by the formidable Linda Mitchell.

There were other folk, the truly despised, outside our gates. There were the “people of color”, still subjected to restrictive covenants at Groton Long Point and the prejudices of our village. I commented on this in a Memorial Day address in the cemetery. The next day, one of our own members, Louise Haines Murphy, in a letter to “The Day”, told how she was refused a rental apartment here in the village. Some of you got to work on that issue. Then you even welcomed, among our “ministers-in-training” from Yale Divinity School, such folk as Tony Allen from Jamaica and Willie Blankson from Ghana. Then you agreed to ordain a woman (!) of color, Thelma Waterman. You entered into a “Covenant of Fellowship” with the people of Shiloh Baptist in new London. And soon we were taking it for granted that women – of whatever color – would be welcomed here for field education and ordination. Do you remember Heidi Fuller, Joyce Funk, Erica Wimber, Katherine Fagerberg..., and Elizabeth Pratt?

But your support for despised or ignored people didn’t stop with those tormented by racism or sexism. It also came to include the intellectually challenged, the sexual minorities, the homeless who found no place at facilities like Mystic River Homes, the refugees from Vietnam and Ethiopia, and, perhaps, most controversially, the victims of AIDS and their families. Who will ever forget Michelle Diggs and her children – and their involvement with all of us, but especially the Reas family? Then there was an evergrowing concern for the victims of war – and a passion for working as hard for peace as we did for military victory. Whenever our passion dimmed, our resident prophet, Cal Robertson, would witness to us on behalf of people of all ages, races, economic circumstances, who are being blown to bits every day from the streets of Boston to Syria. We would be further instructed by folk like Dan Buttry and finally have a major peace-maker, Paul Hayes here as our leader.

And one last group of outsiders we have welcomed – the folk of other Christian persuasions or non-Christian believers. Bill Millar was ecumenical. He taught us that all of us are God’s people. We have worked hard here to be welcoming of other Protestants – including the Pentecostal congregation that once worshipped in our chapel. We have cultivated close relationships with all local Christians, including the previously despised and feared Roman Catholics (do you remember those dark days?) I especially enjoyed becoming the virtual chaplain of the local Christian Scientists, when they wanted a Church wedding or a funeral or memorial service.

Consciously or unconsciously we have joined the Psalmist read this morning in singing, “Praise the Lord...for the Lord sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the strangers, and upholds

the widows and the orphans. Praise the Lord.” Together we have heard Paul’s words to Timothy, words for those who are rich – that we are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for ourselves “treasures in heaven”. Unlike the rich man in Jesus’s parable this morning, we have been – most of the time – alert to the folk like Lazarus outside our gates. We met their needs, we have welcomed them into our fellowship, and we have turned many of them into major servants of those in need.

So Nancy and I thank you for giving me this opportunity 50 years ago to mature in our faith and actions with you, to lead you and to be led by you in so many forms of service to the needy folk around us and within us. You and we have – most of the time – in spite of incredible obstacles – always trusted in the Lord that things will work out. That was the witness to me of folk, some dead, some still alive, folk like Lois Shandeor, Gerry Jones, Jerry Williamson, Janine Porter, Rob Richards, Kitty Patterson, J.D. and Irma Krell, and Paul and Betty Guhl. As the Minister of the Parish Emeritus of this congregation – a congregation of which Nancy and I are now at last “50+ members”, I, along with Nancy, continue to marvel at how well you deal with the present trials and opportunities in this community. Blessings on Paul Hayes, on Mary Brodhead with her enduring compassion for disadvantaged people, blessings on the Corner Closet, the Prayer Team, Chip at the Waterford Country School, Tim in all his labors at the Lawrence and Memorial, the teachers in the Nursery School, Wendy Hayes and all the other staff and volunteers at Mystic River Homes, Marti Bradshaw off to peace conferences...

Thanks for making Nancy and me a part of all of this 50 years ago. It’s a great life, isn’t it. Amen.