

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ

Richard E. Sindall, Pastor

Sermon for the Rededication of the Old Broad Street Church, August 30, 2009

Lessons: II Samuel 7:1-11, I Corinthians 3:9-16, and Matthew 13:31-33,52

REDEDICATING BRIDGETON'S FIRST HOUSE OF WORSHIP

God has a rocky history with houses of worship, because God will not be housed and because, as the prophets insist, God would rather be served in the community for the good of its people than worshiped in a sanctuary that shelters the faithful from the evils in the marketplace or the halls of power, insulating their praises to God from the cries the exploited, forgotten, or excluded. God is satisfied to dwell in a tent and be on the move in life with the people rather than enshrined someplace apart from the people's daily lives. So, God's problem with a house of worship has always been both *house* and *worship*. God will not be confined in any physical structure, system of doctrine, or manner of ritual. Our worship services in this or any other place feed us, not God. Long ago, when Israel's worship centered around animal sacrifices, God asked the people in frustration, *Do I drink the blood of bulls? Do you think I am hungry? All the earth is mine; if I were hungry I could take any animal or plant I wanted and not need you to feed me.* Now, be careful. It's not that God is indifferent to our worship. I don't believe God is indifferent toward us in any way. We Christians have been wrong when we have suggested on philosophical grounds that God does not and cannot need us. Love creates its own need and commits to that need no matter how much it disappoints and hurts, and God's love which creates its own need for us is the basis for all our hope and salvation.

Why, then, are rededicating Bridgeton's first house of worship? What we now call Old Broad Street Church first housed the Presbyterian Congregation at Bridge Towne, established by the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1792. This structure is significant historically and architecturally, so well preserved because the congregation decided in a mere three decades to relocate on the east side of the Cohansey River, leaving their first church building to be kept without modernization. We have this gem because people have been faithful in preserving it, and the current Friends of Old Broad Street Church have worked diligently and patiently through the winding process of securing both grant money and expertise, not merely to get a new roof, but to rectify and fortify the structure supporting that roof. Before we had our first fund-raising concert here, we verified that the balcony would hold a full compliment of people so we would not risk turning a benefit into a disaster.

The process has not been smooth, but some fine people have lent us their expertise and passion for historic preservation to make this day possible. When Jack Wood, who has

officially chaired but more accurately spearheaded the long effort, told me that the state funds would finally be unfrozen, I warned him the state might clear its desk by requiring that all grants be resubmitted, which is what happened. Undaunted, Jack and the Friends pressed on.

Here's the connecting question. Why did our church ancestors make the also considerable effort in the difficult years following the Revolution to build this place from 1792 when the foundation stone was set to 1795 when construction was completed and worship begun? The only grant they received came when Dr. Jonathan Elmer, briefly senator from New Jersey and prime mover of the project, wangled the grant of permission to pay off the building with a lottery. This church was not built casually or conveniently. It was built with a vision that inspired commitment and hope, not just for the Presbyterian congregation itself, but for the city of Bridge Towne when there was as yet neither Vineland nor Millville. Jonathan Elmer, at least, envisioned Bridge Towne as a special place, and erecting this building was a step in pursuit of that hope.

There is no reason for a living church to preserve an old, long-ago abandoned building just for the congregation itself, no matter how great a historic treasure that building may be. Jonathan Elmer and his compatriots did not construct this place for themselves but for the community they hoped would flourish here. The church is not in the business of relics, and so true historic preservation must be done with an eye toward the future and a vision of something that emanates from God's persistent love for this world and its people. We never just preserve the church but, as Paul insists, build upon the foundation that has been laid, which is the grace of God embodied for us in Jesus the Christ. Each generation builds upon that foundation, deliberately or carelessly, faithfully or selfishly, but it builds one way or another. Our addition need not be spectacular, but it should be faithful. The seeds we plant may be tiny, and a small lump of leaven works its way unseen through the entire batch. Jesus has always been concerned with quality more than quantity and with relationships more than projects, concerns his churches have not always shared, preferring to trivialize salvation for easy sale and fill up the pews with enraptured givers.

God has nothing against historic preservation unless it comes at the expense of justice and compassion in the present and of hope actively planted for the future of the community in which the historic is preserved. Biblically, God's people look back so they can be encouraged by God's faithfulness in the past to go forward with renewed vigor. Jesus Christ is always out ahead us, calling us to follow him into the community and into the world to plant the seed and add the leaven, and I doubt he is pleased when he turns to call us forward, only to see only the rear ends of churches fixated on their own past.

But Jesus gives us strong encouragement, if only we will trust him and follow him. The seeds may be tiny, and we may not even see where they fall or be there when they sprout;

but if we sow them with respect and compassion for people in our communities, they will grow. Enough of them will grow, we know not how, and God, who is pleased to work with us and through us, will not fail. We don't need to focus all our faith-attention upon ourselves, because God will hold on to us, even if what we build upon the foundation is not very sound or helpful. I take from that assurance, combined with Paul's warning to build carefully and faithfully, the message that we can focus on God's grace for others in our communities and our world, worrying less about our own future on earth or in heaven.

Let us rededicate this historic church building, this architectural gem with which we have been entrusted. This is a day to celebrate, if only in rededicating this structure which once housed our congregation's worship of God, we also rededicate ourselves as a living church to the grace, compassion, respect, and mercy of Jesus Christ that breaks down barriers dividing people, welcomes the excluded or alienated, and binds up the brokenhearted.

The shining Bridge Towne of Jonathan Elmer's vision never quite came to fruition, partly of course because Vineland and Millville came into being and the roads from Philadelphia swept above Bridgeton toward Atlantic City, but that's not all. Bridgeton stumbled where the United States itself stumbled, over its own prejudices that sowed the vile seeds of fear, suspicion, and superiority. But now there is hope for a new day. Bridgeton will not likely be the most prominent town in South Jersey nor the wealthiest, but it can be a place where people reach out, cross barriers, and work together in mutual respect to keep building a better town. God loves the people on both sides of any of those barriers. And God delights in respect (*el respeto*), justice (*la justicia*), friendship (*la amistad*), and grace (*la gracia*). I'm not showing off my minuscule knowledge of Spanish but reminding myself and you of the many voices of Bridgeton and Cumberland County, New Jersey's poorest. We need each other, and I believe God wants us to know we need each other. Jesus blesses peacemakers, justice workers, and sowers of the seeds of God's grace.

So, it is with hope in Jesus Christ that we rededicate this historic building from our past and in so doing rededicate ourselves as a living congregation of Christ's church to an ever-new and forward-looking vision of God's love and mercy for the people of this community, all of them. Bridgeton is black, Bridgeton is Hispanic, Bridgeton is Native American and also Indian (from India), Bridgeton is white, and more, and all are created to be daughters and sons of God. All are loved and longed for with the need God's love creates in God willingly. The tiny seeds will grow; we just have to sow them. The leaven will work its way through the batch; we just need to add it humbly. We need to care deeply. There was nothing convenient about building this place after the Revolution, but there was a vision that inspired hope to action. Let there be a new vision kindled in us that will move us beyond convenience and concern for ourselves to go forward with the work of God's grace. Amen.