

A FRONTIER FAITH

September 25, 2011

For this past year we have remembered and celebrated the history of this church, a church that is now, after a year-long celebration, a hundred and seventy-six years old. Our events through this past year have been sometimes somber and other times silly. The decisions that we've remembered that have occurred in this congregation are sometimes dated and other times daring. And the actions that this church has taken are often courageous and almost always caring.

We are – this church of ours – a venerable organization. We are the oldest congregation of the Reformed tradition in continuous existence in the state of Wisconsin. We've lived in three buildings, and this church has been served by twenty-five pastors and ten associate pastors. But, you know, our history is not captured in black-and-white statistics. Rather, it is captured in the living color stories of lives that have been touched and transformed because we have trusted the love of Jesus; the love of Jesus that lives in us...because we have let that love of Jesus live through us...and because faith is the foundation on which this church is built. In the words of the letter to the Hebrews:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Everything we've been for a hundred and seventy-six years...everything that we are today...and, yes, everything that we shall be beyond this day is not because of us, but because of the One we believe and trust. You see what we could never predict or expect are the very things that faith makes real and possible. Yes, ...*faith is the assurance of things hoped for; it is the conviction of things not seen.*

Twenty-five pastors and a hundred and seventy-six years. Five of those pastors represent over seventy of those years, and today, on this last day of our anniversary celebration, four of them have come back to life, miraculously...and the fifth has been drinking from the fountain of youth!

So, here they are:

Moses Ordway...Jeremiah Porter...Leonard Parr...Charles Bagby...Charles Mize.

Well, brothers, have a seat.

Moses Ordway:

CM: *Moses, this is a microphone. You've probably never seen anything like it. Talk into it and your voice will get even louder. Moses Ordway, is the second pastor of our church. He's the first full-time pastor whoever served this congregation. Moses, how long were you here?*

M.O.: *Four long, hard months...that was enough for me!*

Me: *Why is that?*

M.O.: *Lord Almighty! This place is a wretched wilderness. It's filled with rude, smelly fur traders, and they're all the Pope's minions!*

Me: *So, you mean they were Roman Catholic?*

M.O.: *That's what I said! Are you hard of hearing? I mean they're superstitious barbarians!*

M.O.: *I take it you don't like Catholics?*

M.O.: *I don't like Catholics and I don't like Methodists. They're rude and they're crude. They say you can't have a sheep and an ox pull together. You know who the sheep was? The Methodists!*

Me: *I thought they were the ox.*

M.O.: *No way!*

Me: *Thank you. Well, you know, Moses, I've got to say you sound pretty rude and crude yourself.*

M.O.: *You watch your mouth, young man! I'm a plain-spoken man serving a stern, willful God. I'm not here to make you happy. I'm here to save you from the fires of hell.*

Me: *So, why did you leave?*

M.O.: *Because this place is a wilderness. I wanted civilization, so I took Brother Marsh with me and we went to Milwaukee to start a church down there.*

Me: *So you took our first pastor and left?*

M.O.: *Yes!*

Me: *Well, it's my understanding that when you did that, no one shed a tear.*

M.O.: *I didn't shed any either!*

Me: *Moses, thank you. Thank you for coming back. I know it must hurt.*

So from Moses, we move to Jeremiah Porter, our fourth pastor.

Me: *Jeremiah...may I call you Jerry?*

J.P.: *You may not.*

Me: *I understand, Jeremiah, that your great-grandfather was famous.*

- J.P.: *Yes, Jonathan Edwards was the most well-known preacher in this young land. Perhaps you know him by his most famous sermon: Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. His mission was to rend the hearts of men through the love of Jesus Christ. He was my inspiration, and that's my mission, too!*
- Me: *So, to rend human hearts with the love of God; is that why you came to Green Bay?*
- J.P.: *Yes. I organized the First Presbyterian Church in Chicago in 1833, but that town had no future. So I came here knowing full well that this would be the greatest port on Lake Michigan, what with its beautiful harbor protected by the bay. The only good thing I got out of Chicago is my wife Eliza Chappell.*
- Me: *Well, I hear that your wife, Eliza, she was quite something. She was quite a missionary herself.*
- J.P.: *In fact she was. She founded the first public school in Chicago. They even named a street after her – Chappell Street. When it came to Green Bay, she was the principal of the school, and they named a street after her here, too – Eliza Street. You don't see any streets around here named Porter Place or Jeremiah Street! There is that bust over there with the strange hat on (points to bust in the south transept).*
- Me: *Oh, the strange hat. You saw the hat. Do you know what that's about?*
- J.P.: *No, sir, I do not.*
- Me: *You do not. Have you heard of baseball?*
- J.P.: *Rounders?*
- Me: *Yes. Yes! Well, the Milwaukee team won the National League Central Division this past week. That's why you're wearing a hat.*
- J.P.: *National League?*
- Me: *You know, Jeremiah, your son James gave that bust over there – the one with the hat – he gave that bust to this church in 1932. But I have to tell you that the only reason we have it is because nobody else wanted it. Now let's get back to Eliza!*
- J.P.: *Yes, my angel. She gave me the courage to do the most brave thing in my ministry.*
- Me: *And what was that?*
- J.P.: *We sheltered a family of slaves in the church belfry for eight days, and then we put them on a steamer for the freedom of Canada.*
- Me: *Wow! That's pretty amazing. That is really amazing. So was that your frontier of faith?*

J.P.: *My frontier of faith was to build a strong, lasting, faithful church where all people were welcome.*

Me: *And so you worked on that for how long?*

J.P.: *I was here for eighteen years.*

Me: *Eighteen years, and then where did you go?*

J.P.: *I went to Chicago. I was wrong about that city, after all!*

Me: *Well, it's wonderful you stayed for eighteen years. Thank you, Jeremiah.*

Next, we come to our eighteenth pastor, Leonard Parr.

Me: *Leonard, it's wonderful to have you here today...may I call you Lenny?*

L.P.: *Absolutely not!*

Me: *It's my understanding that you are quite literary, and that you like to build church buildings.*

L.P.: *I can see you've been doing your homework. Well-read is well-bred, don't you think? Look where we sit today. I also firmly believe that the church cannot claim its prominence without an edifice that's a suitable witness to the grandeur of God.*

Me: *And as I look around me that must be English Gothic. Is that right?*

L.P.: *You are an agreeable young man. I built a church just like this in Eau Claire, and I was determined to build one right here. When this congregation wanted to settle for a little renovation and expansion of their meager house of wood, I threatened to move on for them to see it my way. Can you imagine that, a pastor getting his way? Suffice it to say I prevailed.*

Me: *Don't you think English Gothic is just a little bit too pretentious to be properly Congregational, Leonard?!*

L.P.: *Pretentious? Ah, maybe! But how it does lift the eyes toward God and fill the heart with heaven! That Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick was building a new church in New York with oil money from Rockefeller. They called it Riverside. But it's French; clearly inferior to this!*

Me: *So, Is this your frontier of faith?*

L.P.: *Yes. This is the Christian Century, and I spent almost fourteen years laboring to make this the finest and grandest church in this city! And it is – the crown jewel in the triumph of Protestantism.*

Me: *Thank you, Leonard. I know that microphones are a new thing.*

Next, we have Charles Bagby.

Me: *Charles. Charles...may I call you Chuck?*

C.B.: *No.*

Me: *How about Charlie?*

C.B.: *No!*

Me: *Okay. Thank you. Charles, I understand that you grew up in Kentucky and Tennessee...and that you're the son of a Methodist minister.*

C.B.: *That's right.*

Me: *Well, if that's so, then how did you come to the United Church of Christ? Do you share Moses Ordway's opinion of Methodists?*

C.B.: *No. My father Tom was the most wise, and faithful, and humble man of God I ever knew. He was my inspiration. But he was a victim of polio, so the bishop never appointed him to a church that was worthy of his skills. That's why I chose the United Church of Christ, and Congregationalism before it. It's an intellectual church, and it's free. The only bishop for me is Jesus Christ.*

Me: *You stayed here almost twenty-two years. Why?*

C.B.: *Well even though I'm a Kentucky Colonel, Green Bay became my home. I even gave up bourbon for brandy! I really fell in love with this church. You know, this church can be the best church in its denomination, and it can be the worst. It nearly killed me.*

Me: *Really? What happened?*

C.B.: *This church was divided when I arrived. Some people wanted to join the United Church of Christ, but others thought we would lose our freedom. And my predecessors – Claxton and Haehlen – were too chicken to take a stand. Well, I had already taken a stand. I joined the United Church of Christ before Vince Lombardi and I both arrived in this town.*

Me: *So were you the enemy for the anti-UCC folks?*

C.B.: *That's right. Some of them badgered me every week after church – they called at the manse just as my family and I were sitting down to dinner. All I got was indigestion... and then an ulcer. I nearly bled to death.*

Me: *But you and the United Church of Christ prevailed?*

C.B.: *Yes, but just barely. And the opposition did form a new church – Pilgrim. But then we regrouped. And then we became a church.*

Me: So what were the frontiers of faith for you and for your ministry here in Green Bay, Charles?

C.B.: *We reached out into this neighborhood and the community. We tackled racism. We started the Green House. We began Youth Ministry – now you call it YCA. My goal was to make this a learning, a listening, a loving and a living church – that’s still not a bad vision!*

Me: Thank you so much, Charles.

And then, finally, the twenty-fifth pastor of this church: Charles Mize.

Me: *Charles...may I call you Chuck?*

C.M.: *Please! Please!*

Me: *Thank you. How about Charlie?*

C.M.: *No!*

Me: *How about Chuck E. Cheese?*

C.M.: *No! Only one person gets away with that!*

Me: *Chuck, I understand you were a Presbyterian once, kind of like this church...but weren’t you supposed to be an electrical engineer?*

C.M.: *Yes, I grew up in a Presbyterian Church. But then I met a U.C.C. minister and his family in my hometown. I felt God calling to me and I fell in love with the United Church of Christ. So here I am!*

Me: *Well, why did you come to Green Bay?*

C.M.: *I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay in St. Louis. I hate the winter. But God has a sense of humor, and He had other ideas. We’ll see how long I stay!*

Me: *So, what are your frontiers of faith?*

C.M.: *Well, it’s a fight about being Open and Affirming. I don’t see why the gender of the person you love should be threatening and that we misuse God to bless our fear. After all, a long time ago, Jeremiah Porter taught this church that God loves all people because of their diversity, not in spite of it.*

Me: *Anything else?*

C.M.: *Yes. The church all around us isn't what it was in Leonard Parr's day. It needs a persuasive dose of the Holy Spirit so that it can be vital, and relevant, and make a difference in God's love and in this community and world. It needs to do this in excellence, in sensitivity, and in passion!*

Me: Well, thank you for that Chuck. And thank you, friends. It's not a small thing to materialize after you've been occupying the grave for decades, even centuries. But you have, and now we'll let you go. You can wander back into the past, into the pages of history from whence you've come.

As for me and my tenure, well, it will be seventeen years, come January.

Remember the words of Hebrews:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Our history is about how others have lived by faith in this congregation. Our future is about how we build on that foundation and live by faith today. It's not about pastors: whether they're oratorical or ordinary, whether they're obstreperous or outstanding. It's about you! It's about us!

You see, friends, the Christian life is a relay race. It has been passed to us, and so we are the ones who carry it. We're the ones who live it. And then, when we're done, we pass it on, too. Listen as the letter to the Hebrews continues. Listen to its words for us here today.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you, so that you, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Yes, ours is a frontier faith. Our frontier is the changing landscape and issues that challenge us today. Living on that frontier means putting God's love into action. The theme of our anniversary celebration is what we must always be doing: putting God's love into action. And the best way we can do that is to become and to make disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord. You see, Jesus is God's love in action. So let's do it. Let's never grow weary or lose heart. Like those who came before us, let us live on the frontier! Amen.

Charles E. Mize
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 Green Bay, Wisconsin
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