



“SAY IT AGAIN”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 23; JOHN 10: 1-10
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
May 7, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Churches don't build themselves. They are born out of aspiration, out of vision, and out of a commitment that moves people to believe in something they can't yet see.

Such commitment to build something new is not for the faint of heart, nor is it for the tepid of Spirit. I venture to say no church ever began with a vision that included its death, or even its resurrection into something unforeseen or new. And yet, churches that survive, and certainly churches that thrive, are churches that have the courage to change stitched through their story. They are churches that know how to trust the mysteries of resurrection.

In 1932 Richard Mellon laid the cornerstone for East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh PA, a town full of cathedral Presbyterian churches.¹ He and his wife wanted to build “a new Church of cathedral proportions be erected in memory of their parents, to serve as a monument to Presbyterianism in Western Pennsylvania, and to rank among the great Churches of the world” on the site where the Church had been incorporated since 1864.

Mr. Mellon and his wife hired architect Ralph Adams Cram, a Boston architect whose famous and stunning work includes the chapel at Princeton. Mr. Cram was told by the Mellons that he had “absolute freedom to build the finest and most beautiful church to the glory of God he could create.” It would end up costing \$4 million dollars to build—the equivalent of \$66 million of today's dollars.

What would motivate such a lofty endeavor? Many refer to the cathedral that is East Liberty Presbyterian Church as Mellon's fire escape. He was a man known for his incredible wealth and the hard bargains that he used to get there. He was not known as a friend to working people in the way he did business.

Was this great cathedral his penance or was it some more lofty vision?

In 1932 Mr. Mellon laid the cornerstone for the gothic cathedral that would take over three years to build. He died suddenly in 1933, two years before its completion. Both he and his wife are entombed in the cathedral.

The cathedral was dedicated in 1935 and Cram, the architect, said, “This is my masterpiece. This church has been the most profound spiritual experience of my life.”

The church today is a remarkable testament to God's creativity and to the transformative power of the Spirit. The church responded to the changing

neighborhood and became “the cathedral of hope,” a place that ministers to those who are homeless, those who were searching, those who live in the disadvantages created by racism and poverty, and those who had been cast out of the church in other settings. East Liberty is a model for cross-cultural beloved community—a leader in LGBTQ ministries, a leader in space for spiritual practice, a leader for not being afraid to follow God’s voice into an unknown future.

(“As a diverse community of believers, we show God’s unconditional love by providing refuge for spiritual growth, ardently pursuing justice, and extending Christ’s radical hospitality to all.”)

Whatever the impetus that gave birth to that magnificent architectural achievement, it’s survival comes its capacity to be more than meets the eye—it’s heart is not its architecture, but the sacred space that it has become for those who are exiled, those who are searching for home.

Far from a grand plan to save one man from eternal punishment, that church has become an icon of resurrection right here on planet earth.

Over 64 years ago some Presbyterians decided this growing side of Asheville needed a church. And so, they came together in hope and in faith and began to envision a plan for Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.

No \$66 million in seed money for a gothic cathedral obviously. But Grace Covenant’s earliest beginnings were rich in people who believed in what it means to be church—and they were willing to invest their lives in forming a courageous family of faith.

As some of you may remember and others may be interested to know: early on, Grace Covenant attracted some of its first new members because of our ample parking spaces in comparison to First Presbyterian.

Not exactly a stirring story of evangelism, but we must use what we can to build the kingdom!

It’s safe to say our current parking situation isn’t what is drawing people in, but we should certainly take a moment to give thanks for how our parking lot helped plant the seeds of our current thriving! God works in mysterious ways!

From the very beginning Grace Covenant was a community that understands what it means to build, rebuild, and respond.

And Grace Covenant has been engaged in the world with that same capacity for change and responsiveness ever since.

Grace Covenant has dealt with the hardest questions that have faced the larger church during its 64 years—the reunion of the Northern and Southern churches in our denomination who split over slavery, the ordination of women, the inclusion and ordination and marriage equality of LGBTQ members.

Wrestling with these questions has not been without pain and disorientation and some leaps of faith.

Everyone should take some time and have lunch with Bob Busey and hear about his time as pastor here at Grace Covenant. Listen to what he was up against in this presbytery because of his generous theology and his courageous stances on race and the ordination of women. Grace Covenant was a place that helped him grow as a prophetic pastor and he helped this church find its sea legs in the tumult of contentious times in this country.

Our story is not an untroubled one. Dealing with broken trust, with excruciating losses and unexpected set backs, and having to face hard truths are stitched through the story of this church—there is both pain and promise in the heritage that we inherit as we celebrate 64 years of a church that never set out to be the fanciest or the biggest, but who dreamed of being a community where people pulled together to follow Jesus into a better world—even if it meant bucking the system here and there.

In the words of Bettie Pritchard in her story about the women of the church pooling funds to buy another lot to make the yard bigger for the manse that the Session told them the church couldn't afford: "The women may have been told by the [men of the] Session that the church couldn't afford to buy the lot. I don't know about that, what I do know is that a lot of people had a lot of different ideas and that's how lots of things got done. Each just did what they could."²

Let's say that again, "Each just did what they could."

Such collective pooling of resources, time, and vision define who we are today—we are social justice entrepreneurs, we are resourceful, we are hungry enough to work for justice and humble enough to explore how we might need to change ourselves, we are courageous enough to acknowledge our blind spots, and we are wise enough to know how much we will never know about God's mysterious ways in our midst.

In 1975 several members of Grace Covenant visited Craggy prison every week to be a part of a ministry there with prisoners.³ Story goes that one night two prisoners escaped and took one of Grace Covenant's members, Sally Bridenstein, hostage, along with a guard. This story was big news and deeply troubling and could have made Grace Covenant hunker down and close ranks. But it didn't. Those members—including Sally after her safe release, continued their ministry in the prison.

Courageous faith does not let fear lead the way, nor does it deny our own vulnerability when we follow Jesus.

It is our faith that frees us up to be the church, to have the “absolute freedom to build the finest and most beautiful church to the glory of God” we can create.

What could be more beautiful than faithful people who don’t let the complicated places and spaces of human life steal our faith, but who let them strengthen and define our faith.

No church thrives without God at the center of how it understands itself.

The Shepherd imagery of scripture speaks to trust we need to have for our life together to be abundant, trust in the immediacy of God’s strong and tender presence.

Being church is first and foremost an act of trust that God will provide and that God does provide.

We often hear the shepherd imagery of scripture in times of death—at funerals and memorial services. But these scriptures are really about life—and how to truly be alive.

Abundant life trusts Jesus’ promise that we don’t need to fear, that we don’t to worry.

God tenderly holds us in our vulnerability and calls us to the integrity of beloved community there, where we don’t put our trust in a building or an institution or one person or one program. We put our trust in a God who knows how to take care of us, who knows just what we need.

And so when we walk through the shadows, when we feel the sting of betrayal, when we wither from the stress of conflict, disappointment, failure, or danger—we are not alone, we are not without hope and healing opportunities.

Jesus says it again: “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Today we welcome some of our youth into a new phase of your faith journey—confirmed membership in the church.

This is not a culminating moment, but an amplifying moment—where we all say again, loud and clear, that we are invested in each other, that we need each other to live into the story of our future as a family of faith.

There are so many stories that help to define us, but these same stories do not confine us.

You and I are a part of our story, the story—the one that lives and breathes with life-times, and life-lines, with pain and promise, with births and betrayals and beautiful moments in time—like this one—when God’s people wander home once again to hear and say who we aspire to be.

After all, Churches don’t build themselves. We are born out of aspiration, out of vision, and out of a commitment that moves people to believe in something we can’t yet see.

Thanks be to God.

¹ To learn more about East Liberty Presbyterian Church check out their website.

<http://cathedralofhope.org>

² Bob Busey’s history of Grace Covenant written for the 50th anniversary of the church is the source of this story (16) and many more worth reading! *Signs of Grace: Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, The First Fifty Years.*

³ Busey, 42.