

“Of Structures and Sending”  
a sermon by Rev. Katie Crowe  
on the occasion of the 95th anniversary of  
Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church  
January 31, 2016

Our reading, as we move through the Narrative Lectionary, comes from the gospel of Mark. Listen now to God’s Word: “(Jesus) left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

Here ends our reading. This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

Familiarity breeds everything from indifference to disbelief to contempt in Jesus’ home town, where the people who know him from way back when were confronted with the question that is in front of everyone in the gospel of Mark- who do you say that Jesus is? When Jesus was back in his old neighborhood he couldn’t transcend the assumptions of those around him that caused them offense by his very presence. Mark says that he taught with wisdom and demonstrated deeds of power but ultimately, to them, he was still just the carpenter’s son, with kin whose history everyone knew and therefore they thought they knew him. He was such a familiar part of the landscape of their lives that his prophetic edge was completely lost on them- something Jesus himself could hardly believe. So he takes his ministry elsewhere, and the hearts of those who had been geographically closest to him all their lives remained fundamentally unchanged by his presence. Jesus being rejected in his hometown reveals that it can be a tough thing to be the body of Christ to those right outside your own back door.

One of our members recently saw a bumper sticker on the back of a trailer that was being hauled by a church van that said, ‘the church has left the building.’ Every week at our benediction we say much the same thing- that as we pass over the threshold of this building and go out into the world we understand that we do not leave the church, we go out to be the church. This is the only way that the gospels define what it means to be the Christian church- through

action. In the gospels, the church of Jesus Christ is always on the move. There is no static structure that stands in one place long enough to become a point of familiarity in the landscape of people's lives. Christ's disciples are told to take with them no object that offers them any measure of comfort or security. He did not say 'I give you authority over unclean spirits and now send you out two by two, so take your steeple and HVAC system and network server with WIFI access out into the world. No, he told his disciples to not even pack a change of clothes or bring their wallet. And yet, rooted in the history of these very apostles, physical structures did evolve to hold this intrinsically kinetic- this very active thing- that is the church.

During his lifetime the followers of Jesus were always attracted to his side- gathered around him to listen and to be challenged and inspired about the kingdom of God, and to glean deeper truths about their lives and what it means to live in the world. Up until this point in the gospel of Mark, Jesus is like a rock star- there are swarms of people hanging on his every word. And after his death and resurrection his disciples had gathered in an upper room when the Holy Spirit unleashed itself upon them with its power spilling out onto the streets and stirring more people to know Jesus and to gather together. First in open spaces and upper rooms, then in catacombs and house churches and finally in church buildings as we have come to know them. All of them gathering for prayer and study and fellowship and worship in the church before then being sent out into the world to be the church.

The movement of the Spirit in the hearts of Christ's followers that led to the establishment of Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church followed much the same course. With people gathering and organizing, struggling and worshipping, studying and praying their way to become the congregation that all of you have known over the years and that we are today.

Some cite that the earliest description of North Carolina Presbyterians came from an Anglican missionary in 1704, who described Presbyterians as, "idle fellows who have left their employment and pretend to preach." Other sources date our arrival in the state closer to the 1730's. A clergy friend of Dr. Bennett- pastor of Trinity Avenue for 40 years- once said that Presbyterians were simply Baptists who wanted to drink but couldn't afford to become Episcopalians, and so we are here. In any case, we know that the first Presbyterians to arrive in Durham were Dr. and Mrs. Richard Blacknall, who moved here with their three children in 1860, and set up Sunday school classes for mill children.

On the last Sunday of 1871, eleven Presbyterians of Durham organized the First Presbyterian Church, and in 1894 established a mission in the community around the Pearl Mill, a structure that still stands today one block east of us, named after Pearl Duke, daughter of Brody Duke. It manufactured muslin that our children will be waiving during our closing hymn today- colorful dyed water used to flow through city creeks. This mission church met for worship in a small cottage on Washington St. given by George Watts, a leader in Durham and the mission who later supplied the materials and land for a chapel that was built in 1898 on the corner of Duke and Trinity Avenue. It is said that Watts could be seen on Sunday mornings riding his high-stepping horse down Duke St., often having taken the train in from NY just in time to teach Sunday School and then return.

In 1902 the Pearl Mill mission was reorganized and became the Second Presbyterian Church of Durham, and fell on hard times, with Trinity Avenue being a pitted, often mucky road that few wanted to traverse, and money drying up. The mission saw 10 mostly part time pastors over the course of the next 10 years, was officially disbanded by presbytery, and reorganized on May 16, 1921 as the Trinity Ave. Presbyterian Church, boasting about 40 members and a budget of \$800. The congregation continued to struggle and reached out to First Pres to ask for help,

and a men's Sunday School class, under the leadership of Dr. Henry Carr, responded in force, with 75 members transferring their membership to Trinity Avenue in January of 1924. The membership soon began to boom and outgrow its little chapel space. The lot was exchanged for our present location and the new construction that was this space got underway in 1925 as an 8-yr old Perry Sloan, who still worships with us each Sunday, looked on.

The stained glass windows- renovated today at a cost that has climbed to \$177,000 that is still being raised— were created and installed by a company in Atlanta for \$2,000, aided by the generosity of Dr. Carr, whose family later donated our bell tower in his honor. The whole building was completed for \$78,000, with its first worship service taking place on October 6, 1925 heralded by a procession of the congregation from their former building to the sanctuary, the children carrying baskets of flowers that they sprinkled onto the sidewalk and threw into the air. And the rest, as they say, is history. The years since would see everything from basement floodwaters to organ and garden dedications, new construction, a Social Action Class led by the Blakes in the 60's, the introduction of Scouts, a fire, and countless programs within the church walls, while bearing witness to Christ in Durham as it endured a national depression, several wars, social upheaval, recession and renewal. And Rev. Graham McChesney entered the church's story in 19— after a ministry that began in 1945 led him all across the Southeast to build relationships with more people than you or I will ever know, and finally landed him here.

While Trinity Avenue is built of timber and brick, the space animates our faith with its witness, and itself comes alive as it stirs us to deeper relationship with one another, and deeper faith in God. God sanctified ordinary space by taking on flesh in Jesus, who became the temple of God's very own presence in the world. His body the church now walks through the world in the form of our flesh, flawed and in constant need of renovation as it is, but a temple of the Holy Spirit nonetheless built to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Physical structures matter to God.

Stained glass was known to have been used in churches to inspire worship and give disciples a foretaste of the beauty of heaven from as early as 686 AD. Our windows are unique in that they pick up traces of styling more closely associated with Islam than Christianity with a signature Moorish Arch- that onion top styling- and depicting geometric shapes and vegetation rather than scenes from the Bible. But one Sunday a child of the church came up to me following a sermon on Moses standing before the awesome power and mystery of God in the cloud on Mt. Sinai. He said, 'Pastor Katie, I see the cloud!' 'What cloud?' I asked him. To which he replied, 'The cloud of the Lord's presence, I see it in the windows!' And he pointed, and sure enough. This static, silent window was transformed by the divinely inspired imagination of a child into an interpreter of the Biblical story. He saw the blue cloud-shaped figure in every bottom pane as a representation of the power and the mystery and the holiness of God- and the windows became for him what they were designed to be for us all- representations of the windows to the soul where God acts to cultivate wonder, trust, devotion and praise.

While solid and stationary, the ceiling of our sanctuary is shaped like the hull of a ship, implying activity. Reminding us that faith is not a static thing, but that we are part of that movement of apostolic sending that began when Jesus looked at his first twelve followers, counted them off two by two and said, 'go.' And so we enter into this ark each week in the manner of the animals that went two by two to find life-giving refuge in God's care amidst the storms of life. And we go out each week in the manner of the disciples as pilgrims on a journey who are willing to leave behind the comforts and security of a sanctuary in order to set sail on the seas of discipleship, catch the winds of the Spirit, and represent Christ wherever he says to go.

This church that has stood here for generations past is requiring from us a generous and ongoing financial investment if it is to stand for generations to come, something you will be hearing more about in the months ahead. But the greatest danger facing any neighborhood church, as Jesus' rejection in his hometown shows, is not that its roof might fall in or that its stories might be forgotten. The biggest danger to the church is that the lives of those who are geographically closest to it will remain fundamentally unchanged because it becomes such a familiar part of the landscape of the neighborhood's life that it loses its prophetic edge.

So today, as we celebrate the birthday of this church building and rededicate the windows to its soul, I'd like to ask that we also re-commit ourselves to being the church here on this corner once again. As we welcome those who have made our past and present so vital, let us also find ways to transcend the assumptions of those who would never consider being part of our future by dedicating ourselves to building up relationships with and among our neighbors one block at a time until all can identify the story of God's activity in this corner of the kingdom as their own. As we recall the lives of saints whose faithfulness has built up the body of Christ and perpetuated hope, let us also rend our hearts over the realities right at our doorstep that are cause for lamentation that are tearing the kingdom down- realities of escalating gun violence, litanies of lockdown procedures, drug use, socioeconomic and racial division, crushing poverty, isolation, anxiety and despair. All of these occasions for lament and hope are our mission field.

This space has stood for 90 years. The way that it will be transformed into a container to hold new visions and inspire prophetic dreams for the next century has much to do with how you will respond to one simple question: 'Who do you say that Jesus is?' and then how you leave the church to go out and be the church, and risk setting sail on a journey with the Spirit to follow wherever your answer leads.

Let us pray: God we thank you that you have been our help in ages past, and our hope for years to come. To you be the glory for each person here, their heart for your church, their faith, and the faith of the families and friendships that have built the body of Christ in Trinity Avenue into what it is, by your grace, today. Bless the Presbyterian Church USA and the Presbytery of New Hope of which we are a part- all her churches, people and leadership that she might be a vital witness to the Reformed tradition that invites each person to rest in your sovereignty and to know that their lives have a place in the sweeping story of your salvation. Bless each person here and those not yet here and help us in this corner of your kingdom to be faithful to our calling. Amen.