

The Sermon That Split the Church
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September 17, 2006
On the occasion of OPUCC's Third Anniversary

One year ago today we celebrated officially taking ownership of this new building, two days worth of celebration, it took us months to recover. That date marked our second year together as a church. One year before that, our anniversary kind of came and went, we were in the Prouty Building then and by my recollections we were knee high in duck tales as the make shift "Open Prairie Drama Guild," presented a hilarious production of "The Sissy Duck" starring of course our beloved Roger Perkins. But one year before that, on the third Sunday in September, the then as of yet unnamed group of people who gathered on the Hornbaker's front porch were- unbeknown to them- participating in what would become the birthday of this church. There were no cigars being passed around, no balloons announcing whether it was a girl or a boy. No, the birth of this church was without pomp and circumstance.

It is an interesting phenomenon to me, that when someone mentions that weekend in September 2003, their eyes may get a little misty as they recall the sight of car, after car, pulling up on the long dirt road that stretches across the Hornbaker property. They may feel a flutter in their heart when they tell you that Prudence Yagmen came out of retirement to preach at that make shift worship service and that the forty who had gathered sang, "Morning Has Broken."

They may tell you about the particularly beautiful way in which the sun rose up into the clouds that day. They will even share about the ways in which the committees of the new church formed effortlessly within half an hour. But usually, that's where the conversation stops. Not much is said about the weekend that preceded our birth, about the labor pains of September 12, 2003.

For some of us it is too hard to think about, for others it just seems best to move on, but there is something important about Remembering. *Re-membering*, bringing those memories back together to knit into the same birth narrative. I have noticed that like many relationships it is hard to say exactly when we as a church, began. Couples often find it helpful to have a formal marriage ceremony, so that they can stop arguing about the particular date they met or started dating...nobody can argue with a marriage date, the date is the date.

But we have the date when the first conversations between myself and the search committee took place, the first and second candidating sermon dates, the date of that first worship service, the date when you voted to call Katie and me, the date I actually joined the payroll, and the date of my Installation. Which date is it? Well, today I am hoping to put an end to all the anniversary ambiguity.

Today we celebrate our third year as a church. I was not with you on September 19, 2003 at Hornbaker Gardens, by then Katie and I had returned to Boston. But today I want us to marry our memories, to remember- if you will- our common beginning, so we won't have to wonder any more about our actual anniversary date. So that you know to mark the third Sunday in September on your calendars, henceforth and forevermore as our special day, let me state clearly and for the record, today is our Anniversary. On this day, three years ago, we became a church.

But in order for us to fully celebrate that reality I need to speak to the reasons Katie and I were not with you on that third Sunday in September three years ago. We need to go back in our collective memory to the events that directly preceded our birth as a new church- we need to revisit the second Candidating Service at Hampshire Colony. The weekend before the third Sunday of the month, the second weekend in September, Homecoming weekend 2003. Today, I wanted to re-preach the actual sermon I had preached on that day-the lectionary repeats itself every three years and the text from that Sunday re-appears today. Only a curious thing happened when I went looking for the service and the sermon from that date. It doesn't exist. I can't find it in my computer, I can't find it in my files, and I can't find it anywhere.

I have the sermon from the first Candidating Service; I have the "Service of Inspiration" we did on the back porch of what was then the Flanders's house.

I found a rough draft, but not the “Sermon That Split the Church”... now you have to know I say that in jest, because we all know the sermon had little if nothing to do with it. As luck would have it however- I don’t know how he did it but Victor, God love him, taped the worship service that fateful day. And after a fare amount of avoidance on Friday night, and then again on Saturday, Katie and I sat down and watched the tape. Wow, no wonder it’s hard to talk about it.

The scripture was then as it is today **Isaiah 50:4-9a, and Mark 8:27-36**
The Isaiah passage reads,

GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning God wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out (my) beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

And there were many insults and much spitting that day.

*Isaiah continues,
The Sovereign One helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;*

I know that I shall not be put to shame... We were ready that day. We had done our homework, you had done your homework- those of you who went door to door trying to educate, trying to open hearts and minds so that they might truly be willing to listen to the voice of God as you were hearing it. God’s voice as I was hearing it, the voice of God that said, **“We belong together.”**

The God who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

And confront they did, for almost two hours- we had left the room... Katie was listening at the door, I'd entered into some sort of protective trance and she listened, you listened to the confrontations. I know that I shall not be put to shame... It felt as though we were being shamed, it sure felt a lot like disgrace. I wondered where God was, I wondered about God that day- as I imagine you did- because we did not yet know about the weekend that would follow, all we knew was that we had put our hearts on the line that day and our hearts were breaking.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

Who did they say that we were that day? They said that we were "evil." They said we were "sodomites." They said "Katie and I had come to town earlier in the month under a 'cloche of darkness' and had already started another church." It was not as much **what** they said, although that was pretty terrible, it the message they sent...you are not welcome here... you are not safe here... you are not wanted here.

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Don't you wish you had had the foresight to say something like that? "You have misunderstood us; you have misrepresented and mischaracterized us. What you are saying will split this church. It is not what she's said, or what we've said, it is what you are saying that is making this an unsafe place... can't you see the harm you are doing?"

But we didn't say that did we? We did not say much of anything, we couldn't say much of anything- we were too shocked, too hurt. Except for Terry Zearing, she said it- she marched up to the front of the church and said, "this is not right." But it didn't change anything; the die had already been cast. We couldn't have known what would come next; all we knew was this moment, this excruciating moment.

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

In that moment we could not have known what was yet to be, what following Jesus would eventually look like...

Out of the rough draft and Victor's tape I did salvage a few thoughts from the original sermon that I think are worth sharing. The first is the story I shared during the children's time called, "**I like me best when I'm with you.**"

A while back I met a doctor, his name was Joe. When Joe was in school to become a doctor he spent a year on an Indian Reservation in New Mexico. Many of his friends had chosen residency positions at fancy hospitals in big cities, but Joe knowing that people on Reservations often are very poor and cannot afford proper medical care, thought he might like to help out.

Some time went by and Joe found that he was growing very close to the Puati people. There was one woman in particular whom Joe had seen for heart troubles when he had first arrived in the village. Her name was Stella. Stella was a woman in her nineties and she took a liking to Joe,

so she invited him back to her home for supper. The liking was mutual and once a week Joe went to Stella's home for a meal. They did not speak the same language so they would spend time trying to teach one another words and phrases, usually just ending up laughing at each other and embracing.

A year went by and although Joe had grown very fond of his new found community, he knew he must return to Chicago to finish school. The village threw him a going away party, but Stella did not come. After he had said goodbye to the rest of the village he made his way down the rocky path to Stella's home. He found her on her front porch waiting for him with a hand made blanket in her hands. They embraced and she wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. After sitting together in silence for a while the old woman spoke...she looked Joe in the eyes and took his hand in hers saying simply, "I like me best when I'm with you."

And a segment of the sermon that followed concerning the risky nature of God....

"I like me best when I am with you," the old woman cooed at Joe. I picture the two of them sitting together on the front porch, enjoined to one another-though worlds apart. Because, like Joe, I took a risk in considering a Call to Hampshire Colony, you took a risk in inviting me to consider the Call. We both took the risk of uncertainty, of not knowing whether we would fit together. And yet through this whole process Stella's words have rung loudly in my heart. "I like me best when I am with you."

Memories of sitting in the backyard with the Flanders and watching the firefly's make magic around us, laughing in the kitchen with Kelly and Adam, playing with Victor's kittens and enjoying Bee's stories. Katie and I have come to like ourselves very much when we are with

the people of this community. Sitting around lunch tables, chatting about aqua aerobics with Frieda, exchanging dessert recipes and learning about people's lives. These are the things ministers dream about. A place to be on the journey with others, with people who call you into your best self, a place where people believe in each other, where people are willing to risk vulnerability with one another, yes this is the heart of ministry.

I said to the people of Hampshire Colony that morning, *"I believe in this church, I trust in it's legacy and in all that it has come to represent in this County. I believe that I am Called to serve this church."* I do believe I was called to serve the church... I still do. Only, we know now, that the Call wasn't confined to that context. The Call was located in the people, the people who have become this church.

On the day of the second Candidating Sermon, I stood at the pulpit, trusting in the mystery of God to move mountains, change hearts and bring communities not to conformity but to embrace the unity that can only come from accepting diversity.

I said simply, *Members of Hampshire Colony the invitation this morning is to shift the focus from human things to Divine things. To embrace the freedom that comes in walking with Christ. We do not have to understand what is happening, we do not have to fully agree with what is happening, the invitation is to let what is happening, happen, and trust that God will lead the way through any unresolved*

uncertainty. We are being asked to put our trust in God. We are a success story waiting to happen. Let it be so.

That's how the sermon ended.

What we could not have known that painful day just over three years ago, is what we would become. How beautiful and strong, compassionate and full of life we would be as a new church. We were a success story waiting to happen, we are a success story in the happening. On this the third Sunday in September, I am proud wish you Happy Anniversary Open Prairie, "I like me best when I'm with you."

Amen