

“What We Can Learn”

Rev. Dr. Ed Thompson

Ephesians 2: 11-22

200th Anniversary Service

If you see a turtle sitting on a fencepost, you know that turtle didn't get there by itself. If you look around at the 19 Presbyterian churches in the Kanawha Valley, you know they didn't spring up like mushrooms overnight.

We had help, a lot of help, to get to where we are today. We are in debt to our ancestors in the faith. Although we might wish they had made some different choices, like building accessible, one story buildings with larger parking lots, we are standing on their shoulders, building on the foundation that they laid.

The letter to the Ephesians says we are “members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” So even our Presbyterian ancestors, who started the first Presbyterian Church in the Kanawha Valley 200 years ago, March 14, 1819, did not start from scratch. They had ancestors in the faith who inspired them, encouraged them, and who passed on what they thought was important, so that they might be faithful followers of Jesus Christ in their own era.

So what can we learn from those who have gone before us? What made these pioneer Presbyterians decide to start a church here? Because to be honest Presbyterians were not really the first settlers in the Kanawha Valley. Or if they were, maybe they formed a committee to decide whether to build a church and if so where it should be located. Knowing how committees work, there might have been amendments, substitute motions, and maybe even a minority report before they could make a decision, which allowed the Baptists and Methodists to start churches before we did.

So why did they do it? What made our Presbyterian ancestors want their own church? They could have settled for being Baptist or Methodist. They could have sat in the back pews and complained about the preacher over lunch, a long standing tradition with Presbyterians.

However they didn't settle. Instead they believed that there was something distinctive about being Presbyterian, something different about the Presbyterian form of Christianity, that they were not hearing, that they were not getting from the other churches in that were already here.

I think there are three things, at least three things, about being Presbyterian that inspired our ancestors and can still inspire us today. First of all Presbyterians believe in the sovereignty of God. We believe that God rules the world, that nothing has happened and that nothing can happen except by the will of God.

Yes, there are tragedies and accidents. Yes, good people suffer. But God allows these things to happen because they all fit together and serve a larger purpose that is meant for our good and leads to our salvation and the salvation of the world.

We might not understand how this will works out but we believe that it does and it will because the foundation of our Presbyterian understanding is that God is at work in the world and in our lives. This gives us comfort and strength to face the challenges and uncertainties of life that existed on the frontier and that still exist today. We rely on that blessed assurance and

because our ancestors could not find that understanding in other churches, they were motivated to organize a Presbyterian church.

A second thing that distinguishes Presbyterians is our emphasis on education. That plays out in an educated ministry. Yes, maybe sometimes Presbyterian sermons can be too academic and go over people's heads. On the other hand some of the other preachers out there, while they may have been kindly souls, had some odd ideas about the Bible and about life that God only knows where they picked up. So to put it bluntly, we were not satisfied with preachers whose hearts were strangely warmed. We wanted preachers who had been taught the Bible and who could teach us the Bible. Presbyterians wanted to read the scriptures for themselves so they could have intelligent discussions about what scripture leads us to believe and to do.

That also meant we emphasized religious education and we worked for public education. Our ancestors may have even considered public education a form of evangelism because they probably believed that if you taught someone to read the Bible for themselves they would not be satisfied in other churches and they would want to become Presbyterian.

The third thing that distinguished Presbyterians is that they care about their community. Salvation is not just about me, it is about us. God calls us to love our neighbors and sends us out to work for the transformation of society, to make the world a better place. That meant sending our missionaries to foreign countries and to the frontier. It also meant starting schools, starting hospitals, starting food banks. It also meant getting involved in government, getting involved in schools, getting involved in groups that want to change things that they felt were contrary to the will of God whether that meant the abolition of slavery, better working conditions in the factories and mines, or better sewage and public water systems.

Friends, we still believe in a sovereign God. We believe there is an order and a plan, that life is not chaos and confusion but there is a God who is in control, a God, who loves us, and who sends us a Savior to lead us through this life.

We still continue to educate ourselves so that we can read the scriptures with understanding and so that we're prepared to disagree and even debate with the preacher on their interpretation of scripture. And we still support public education because we want people to think for themselves so that they are not lead astray by fake news or by scammed by hucksters with their outlandish claims.

And we're still involved in our community, in organizations as well as in local, state, and federal governments. Because we still want to make the world a better place

Presbyterians don't always agree what that means. We never have and we probably never will. Certainly we disagreed at the time of the Civil War. We still disagree about the role of government and a whole host of other things.

However at our best we are able to work together. We work together with other faiths. We work together with other Christians. We even work together with other Presbyterians. For we know God is Lord of all. We know the problems facing our community are too big for us to solve on our own. And we know that we will be better able to address them and make a difference in the name of Jesus Christ if we work together.

We certainly have our challenges but even as we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us and have been blessed by them, so we have the opportunity to bless those who come after us. We can pass on our buildings. We can pass on our faith. We can pass on our commitment to education and our dedication to public service. Maybe we're

uncomfortable saying that we have been predestined to doing that. But we can say with confidence that we are part of God's plan and God has, God can, and God will continue to use the Presbyterian Church to make a difference in the Kanawha Valley and the city of Charleston.

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Notes:

Mary Draper Ingles, her three children, along with her sister-in-law Betty Draper were among the first European Americans to travel through the Kanawha Valley. You can read about her experience in the book Follow the River. Other trappers and traders followed. In 1770 George Washington selected tracts along the Ohio River and the mouth of the Kanawha. Because of fighting with the Native Americans before and during the American Revolution, settlements came and went.

It's generally accepted that the 1st permanent settlers in Charleston arrived in April 1788 led by George Clendenin. The area grew as threat of attacks declined. Industry expanded, specifically salt making and coal mining. There were different itinerant preachers but apparently the first churches were started by the Baptists in 1793 and then the Methodists in 1806. Henry Ruffner formally organized the first Presbyterian congregation on March 14, 1819.