

IN THREE DAYS...IN THREE DAYS

John 2:13-22

Get ready.
Hang on to your pew.
This is a rough and tumble text.
Don't let me scare you.

"In three days...

In three days

I'll build a new church," said Jesus.

"In the new church

there will be nothing trivial...

nothing...

nothing trivial in my new church."

That's what he said, you know;
and,
as best we can tell,
that's about the way he said it.
That's what he said,
and that's what he did.
He built a new church.
In three days.
It was not so much double talk
as it was layers of talk...
truth built in layers of meaning.

Wonder how you keep the new church new?
Wonder how you keep the new church free of trivia
especially when so much of late
that has come down as Christian theology
seems to be mostly fluff?

Did you hear the one
about the three business men flying together
on a jet liner?

All of a sudden
the plane made a jolt
and started a rapid descent.
The pilot came on the loud speaker
and told everyone to prepare for a crash landing.
Crouched over in their seats and hugging their knees,
one of the men said to the others,
"Shouldn't someone say something religious?"
"Yea," said the second,

"but I've never been to church...
I don't know anything to say."
"Neither have I," said the third,
"but when I was a kid I lived next door to a church...
sometimes I could hear them through the window."
"Good," said the first,
"quick, you say something religious."
"Let me think, let me think...OK, OK, I got it," said the third.

They all got very quiet.
In a solemn voice the third man said,

"Under the B 11, B 11; under the I 19, I 19; bingo."

The New Wappetaw Presbyterian Church
is located in McClellanville, South Carolina.
McClellanville is a fishing village
that's been caught in a time warp.
Nothing much changes in McClellanville.
It's near where the Santee River flows into the Atlantic Ocean.
The New Wappetaw Presbyterian Church
was established in 1872.
By most standards
that's not very new.
But, then,
the Old Wappetaw Presbyterian Church
was established in 1696.
It was burned during the Civil War
and never rebuilt.
It's ruins and cemetery
can be found near the community of Awendaw, South Carolina,
a few miles inland from McClellanville.
There is a lot about the New Wappetaw Presbyterian Church
that is quaint:
Up until the last hurricane
they still had a pump organ.
They use the old blue hymnbook...
the one from before the old red hymnbook.
Sunday School meets
in the corners of the sanctuary.
They still have dinner on the grounds
at which they serve shrimp creole
and corn on the cob
that'll bring tears of joy to your eyes...
the shrimp come right off the boat
and the corn comes right out of the field.
Sweet corn on the cob
boiled within five minutes of the time it was pulled off the stalk
is an unrivaled culinary experience.

It's things like that that make the New Wappetaw Church old timey;
but let me tell you
what keeps the New Wappetaw Church new.
If any three...
any three members of the New Wappetaw Church
had been on that plane in my silly joke
crouched over, hugging their knees, and waiting to crash
they would have known what to say:

*Nothing can separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus, our Lord...*

*I go to prepare a place for you...
and will take you to myself..*

I saw a new heaven and a new earth...

Where I am you will be also...

*Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil...
thou art with me...*

That's what keeps the New Wappetaw Church new.
The Church of Jesus Christ does not always have to be somber.
If ever you are in the area on Sunday
I suggest you look up the New Wappetaw Church
on the outside chance
they will be having dinner on the grounds.
They'll invite you to stay and eat with them.
Their joy will be infectious.
The Church of Jesus Christ can be fun;
but the Church of Jesus Christ
can never be trivial...never.

**"In three days...
In three days
I'll build a new church."**

It's hard to think,
don't you think,
of our meek and mild Jesus all white-knuckled,
standing there with the veins bulged out on his neck,
fist still clutched about a make-shift whip,
dare we think,
shaking it in their faces:

"Destroy this temple

**and in three days's I'll build a new one.
"Do what you will with the house of God;
but do not make it trivial."**

Here we are.

Here *we* are.

The followers of the new temple of God.

Wonder how you keep this new church new?

Wonder how you keep this new church free of trivia?

What is there about air travel that brings out the stories in us?

I was coming or going to or from some place or other

and headed for Atlanta to make the obligatory connection.

In the course of the flight

the passenger in the seat beside me and I struck up a conversation
in which the passenger learned my profession.

He must have asked.

I'm sure I didn't volunteer the information.

The conversation progressed

on subjects I do not at all remember

but it was probably about restaurants in this city or that
or something no more profound.

Finally the pilot turned on the fasten seat belt sign

which signaled we were getting close to Atlanta.

I looked at my watch and said,

"Looks like we're going to get to Atlanta on time."

"O no," said the stranger,

"We'll have to circle a while.

We'll be late.

What you want'a bet?"

Just as I was about to say something like, "No takers,"

I looked at him and he had turned ashen.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Reverend," he said.

"I didn't mean really `bet'...

it was just a figure of speech...

I didn't mean to offend you, Reverend."

"I wasn't offended," I said weakly.

I wish I could think faster in settings like that.

Just look.

Look around you.

Look at this building magnificent in its simplicity.

Just think about it:

What devotion it represents!

What a tradition of faithfulness is represented in these walls and windows!

Notice the communion table with symbols of bread and wine
and the solid baptismal font..

Notice also the pulpit, how it's in the center.

In recent years some Presbyterian Churches
have been dividing the chancel
with a lectern on one side and the pulpit on the other.

So far as I can tell,
that is mostly to accommodate weddings.

In our older tradition,
the pulpit is in the center
symbolizing what the old-timers called
the centrality of the Word.

Those are our primary symbols: Pulpit, Table, and Font.

We Presbyterians are the people of word and sacrament
little or no other adorning *is* seen as necessary.

This building must never *define* who you are.

This building must *express* who you are.

This building says you are not trivial;
and that's what keeps you new.

I wish I had thought to say to the stranger on the plane,

"Your talk of a friendly wager
on our time of arrival does not offend me;
nor does it offend my religious sensitivities.

Let me tell you what offends me...me and my religious sensitivities:

Seeing hungry children,
that offends me.

People caught in an endless cycle of poverty,
that offends me.

Hollow happiness in the middle and upper classes,
that offends me.

Teens so filled with hopelessness
they kill themselves and each other,
that offends me.

People shooting at each other over ancient prejudice,
that offends me.

Twenty-first century genocide,
that offends me.

Old people afraid to walk out of their homes,
that offends me.

Children left to rear themselves,
that offends me.

Children playing war games on computers,
that offends me.

Families in pain,
that offends me.

Internecine bickering in the highest levels of the church,
that offends me.

People willing to believe and leave the church
over half truth and ugly rumors,
that offends me
Dishonesty in the market place,
that offends me.
Being caught up in unwinnable wars,
that offends me.

Lucky stranger on the plane.
Fortunate for him

I can't think fast in situations like that.
The Church of Jesus Christ
should not always be somber.
We have much about which to laugh;

but the Church of Jesus Christ can never be trivial.

**"In three days...
Destroy this temple
and in three days
I'll build a new church."**

Only those of us on the inside
can possibly get the irony of what Jesus was saying.
He was talking about his death and resurrection, of course,
but, at first,
it was an obscure level
in multilevel speech.

Get the picture.
Jesus and his disciples come to temple
for Passover worship.
Passover marks the day when God set his people free.
There is nothing trivial about being
passed over by the angel of death
and being set free.
A memorial to Passover is an important time to worship.
In many ways,
it's like our Lord's Supper.
In fact,
Passover is the setting for our Lord's Supper.
When they got there for Passover worship
they found the temple
covered up with two-bit hucksters
and shyster money changers
making the Passover sacrifice trivial.

Jesus made a whip

and drove them out of the temple.

It's the only story we have of
our Lord behaving like that;
but the story made such an impact on the church
all four gospel writers told it.

It's very rare
for one story
to be in all four gospels:
Many are in two;
Some are in three; but
Only a few are in all four.

John said it happened early in Jesus' ministry.
Matthew, Mark and Luke said it was late.
Old right-brained John
never did worry much about the order of things.
He was always more interested in the truth of it all
than in the order of it all;
and in all four gospels
the truth of this story is the same.

The truth of the story is this:
the Lord of the church,
meek and mild,
will tolerate many things
and welcome many sinners;
but the Lord of the church will not tolerate it
when we try to make the church trivial.

Here we are,
members in good standing of Christ's new church.
Wonder how we keep this new church new?
Wonder how we keep this new church free of trivia?

The late George Buttrick
was one of the great preachers of the century now just past.
Among other things,
he could think faster on his feet than your transitional pastor.
He told once of an experience like mine
where he was engaged in conversation with a stranger
on an air liner.
As almost always happens
the stranger discovered his profession.

"Well," said the stranger,
"I never have been much for church going
but I'm a religious man."
"That so?" said Buttrick in his deep gravely voice.

"Yes sir," he said
"my theology can be summed up in one sentence."
"That's nice," said the old preacher.
"Exactly what might that sentence be?"

"Do unto others
as you would have them do unto you," said the stranger.

"That's a good theology," said George Buttrick
"and I commend you for it;
but if that's your whole theology
your whole astronomy must be,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are."

Don't you wish your transitional preacher could think that fast.
No, maybe you don't wish such a thing as that.
My preaching might be too strong.
Look around again.
Now reflect for another brief moment on this stately building;
but turn quickly to look at each other.
You are the people of the new temple of God
built in three days.
You are the new church gathered in the hope of resurrection
and you invited me to join you in your gathering for a season.
We are not always somber.
Of all people in the whole world
we have most about which to be joyful and hopeful;

but our hope can never be trivial!

Because that is so,
as Christ's new church we will never grow old.

Here's our theology...
no "twinkle, twinkle little star" here...
here's what we believe:

We believe
we shall know the truth
and the truth will set us free...

We believe
that,
as truth contained in science
but in truth too big for any known science,
God created the heavens and the earth.

We believe
that God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life
and we became living beings.

We have no other gods.
We worship no other god.
We speak the name of God only with reverence.
We set aside time each week to worship.
We honor those who have gone before us in the faith.
We do not murder.
We do not commit adultery.
We do not steal.
We do not lie.
We do not covet anything belonging to anyone else;

and when we fail in any of these
or when in *all* of these
we fall short,
we believe that when repentance is real
forgiveness is dependable.

That's only the beginning.

We believe
that when the time was right
to us a child was born...
his name was Jesus ... *he will save his people....*
Emanuel ... *God with us.*

We believe
that when we have served the least of these
you have served our Lord.

We believe
that it is right to turn the other cheek.

We believe
that in three days...
in three days...
a new temple was raised from the dead
in the body of Jesus Christ.

We believe
by grace we are saved through faith.

We believe
that on our faith...*our faith...* the church is built
and the powers of hell shall not prevail against it.

We believe
that the Holy Spirit of God
is as close to us as the air we breathe.

We believe
that the church
is the body of Jesus Christ...
one body...
many members...
each member with a gift to give and a job to do...
no member more nor less important than any other.

We believe
that no matter the present devastation of war's alarm on countless fronts,
no matter the underlying causes of it all,
no matter the wrong that is in any of it or the right that may be in some of it,
and no matter its long aftermath of all of it,
in the end the cross of Christ...
the empty cross of Christ
will be seen rising up from the dust and rubble
and at last the will of God shall be done on earth.

That is what we believe.
With such belief,
by our faith
we are filled with hope;

and our hope will never be trivial.

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