

“The Company of Pilgrims”

75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of  
Duke Divinity School  
November 10, 2001

*“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.”* (Hebrews 11:39-40)

Seventy five years ago yesterday a congregation gathered expectantly in Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Durham. The women wore filigreed, thoroughly *modern* frocks and bell-shaped, flowered hats. The men were restrained by silken vests with lapels and high celluloid collars. Straw kadies were deposited in the narthex; Model Ts and shiny new Oldsmobiles were parked out back. At the appointed time, the organ struck up the opening hymn, and what can only be described as a skimpy academic procession of six professors, a couple administrators, and assorted visiting clergy made its entrance. There were eighteen students. The professors’ names were Harvie Branscomb, James Cannon, Paul Neff Garber, Allen Godbey, Howard LeSourd, Elbert Russell, and Edmund Soper, the dean.

It was an expectant congregation, but what were they expecting? West Campus as we know it was at that time unbroken forest land. The building that would house the School of Religion and this magnificent house of worship had not yet been begun. The new dean had publicly described himself as the dean of a school “that does not exist.” What were they expecting? I wonder if their development officer foresaw the crash of

the stock market and the onset of the Great Depression only three years in the future! Did any dream that the very character of the School of Religion, later to be renamed the Divinity School, would be tested by three more wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reshaped by a massive social revolution that would transform the racial mores of the South forever? What were they expecting?

The new dean had announced that henceforth the study of religion would be carried out “scientifically.” Did he have any idea of what he was up against? The Scopes Trial had just concluded over in Dayton, Tennessee. In 1926 only 11 per cent of the Southern Methodist clergy were college graduates; 53 percent had only a high school education or less, which in some Methodist circles was counted a *virtue*. Peter Cartwright, that famed circuit rider of a century before, had boasted that it was the *uneducated* Methodist itinerants who had set America on fire while their educated counterparts were still fumbling for their matches. (See R. Durden, *The Launching of Duke University*, 310)

What were they expecting, as they prepared to study religion scientifically and to engage modernity? Could they have imagined the bad dreams that would haunt modernity’s end or the terrors that would plague us, their successors? Of course not. For it was a glorious morning, the organ was playing, voices were raised, and the procession had already begun!

So, 75 years later, like them, in we march, full of expectations but of what we know not. We are like children crossing a busy street. We do not even know which way to look on such an occasion: backward, toward the appealing vista of simpler days and heroic progenitors, or forward, toward a new building, to be sure, but also toward an

appalling absence of definition. Is it a *place* we celebrate today—and all it has and will symbolize—or a *pilgrimage* toward an unknown future?

I have a hunch you are all pretty savvy when it comes to sermons; so you know the preacher is going to say, ‘It’s the pilgrimage; take the pilgrimage.’ Well, perhaps, but in times of crisis and uncertainty, God’s people have always clung to buildings, cities, locations, land, real estate. “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go into the *house* of the Lord,” says Psalm 122. “Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together.” “Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces.” (KJV)

We are especially attached to buildings when they reflect our vision of the divine. The 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and Anglican priest George Herbert says of all the creatures that build habitations for themselves only humans build them with high ceilings. Only humans create buildings with God in mind. Soon we will break ground on a building with God in mind. More than we know, these walls, windows, and spaces will reshape the daily habits of succeeding generations, even as we have been shaped and inspired by the beauty of the vaults and stones around us.

When many of you first came to Duke, I’ll wager that before you valued the tradition or embraced the pilgrimage, you fell in love with a *place*. I’ll bet you stood on the pavement outside in the fading light of an autumn afternoon, perhaps listening to someone practicing the organ, and fell in love with the shadows and harmonies of a *place*. And what’s not to love? Duke is a magic kingdom where everyone, except for professors (alas), remains eternally young; where everyone has a sharp question and an eye cocked to the future; where anything can be imagined but no project is ever quite

*finished*. It's a magical place where the scent of magnolia never fails and the sweet tea never runs out.

It means a great deal to many of us because it's the *place* where we were formed as pastors or teachers. It's the place where we first made the connection between my personal call and the ministry of Christ's church. When you walk through the halls of the Divinity School, oh, the lectures you can still hear from teachers now long departed! Can't you hear them--praying, probing, prodding, laughing, demanding? I can. Their voices are in these walls. John Donne said, "I date my life from my ministry," and for many that dimension of life begins with a *place*.

How audacious of the unknown author of Hebrews to suggest the possibility of something *better* or more lasting than a beautiful place. And yet, this is precisely what he does throughout the letter, as he describes the tabernacle and its entire sacrificial system with a word translated, "*sketch*," *hypodeigma*-- an architect's rendering, a work in progress, and later, a shadow of something better. Throughout the letter he writes of a "*better*" promise, a *better* covenant, and of a *better* building, not made with hands, whose architect and builder is God. He says, finally, in chapter 12, "You have not come to something that can be touched" (v. 18).

As it turns out, we are not the custodians of a place but members in a vast company of pilgrims on the way to something better. No matter if we are administrators, teachers, students, pastors or leaders of congregations, we are all on the pilgrim way toward perfection. In fact, I was tempted to title this sermon "Going on to Perfection," but as a Lutheran I got cold feet!

Besides, what exactly *is* perfection? It's like the essence of God, known only via its negations. One thing we know about perfection is that we *don't* have it. And second thing we know is that those who came before us--they *do* have it:

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.

*We* suffer the terrors of this mortal life, *they* have it made. They are the *real* saints; we are at best sketches and works in progress. We read Hebrews 11 again and again because we *need* all the heroes enumerated there to tell us who we are. You would think we would know how to put one foot in front of another, how to keep on believing. But no, we stand in desperate need of their pattern of faith.

How astonishing it is, then, to discover that not only do we need them, they need *us*. How incomprehensible is it to read that they, though sanctified and canonized in the Book, are without us, *incomplete*. Their perfection depends on us. How can that be?

The great heroes of faith, including the greatest of the great – Abraham and Sarah – did not know some things we know, which at first sounds terribly condescending and even embarrassing – a little like saying, ‘Poor Shakespeare; he never got e-mail!’ But exactly what is it, *who* is it, we know? It is the present reality of Jesus Christ. Now, to know Jesus entails more than entertaining a feeling for Jesus or an opinion about him. It means *meeting* him in the company of the brothers and sisters. Our heroes of faith, however, never celebrated the Eucharist, as we are about to do. They never sang “*For All the Saints*,” as we shall soon do. They could not confront the terrors of their world through the lens of the cross and resurrection, as we do ours every day. Does this make us *superior* to them in any way? No! Only *bound* to them in *God's* way. In us, even our father Abraham is mystically enfolded in the communion of saints.

And today we join that little procession that began in Trinity Church 75 years ago. We perfect it. We have more students and faculty than they and many more administrators. Dean Jones completes the eloquence of Dean Soper. President Keohane tops off the vision of President Few. Our choir fills out the ranks of their choir. Your glad *Amens* amplify theirs. You get the idea.

We do not perfect ourselves, but we are granted perfection by joining our lives to the ministries of those who have come before and by opening ourselves to the ministries of those who will follow. We help perfect our predecessors by adding our suffering and hope to theirs. And whatever good there is in us can only be made *better* by our successors. For all I know, 75 years from now somebody may be standing in this very pulpit and calling *us* saints or heroes, perhaps testifying to our good works and wisdom. Wouldn't that be nice? But if you were able to listen carefully, you would also hear the preacher gently correcting our – shall we say – *limited* perspectives, forgiving us, and cleaning up after us.

This is why we build buildings: in the audacious hope that there will be a people to come after us who will perfect *us* in the work of ministry.

Nearly 70 years ago a young man in Catawba County answered the call and enrolled in the new Duke School of Religion. Trouble was, he was so poor he couldn't pay his undergraduate tuition bill, and his college refused to forward his transcript. Finally, they struck a deal. The college would send his credentials if the young man would agree to pay off his debt at the rate of \$10 per month. Later this morning, we will retire that debt and add to his perfection, as it were, by breaking ground on a chapel named in his honor.

Many years later, when Kenneth Goodson had become a bishop, he returned to Duke to preach on Founders' Day. In his sermon he focused on the relation of faith and secularism in the modern university. There are many memorable sentences in that sermon, but one in particular stands out. Goodson said, "When you look at the Chapel and the Divinity School, you realize the university has taken sides." Those would be fighting words on most campuses, including this one, and how he would have defended them I do not know, except graciously well and from a pastoral heart. I think he would have added that in this university, which, as many of you know, he loved very much, we have a school that is not ashamed to bless its origins in the faith of its founders.

Like every great university, Duke wants to become "better." I pray this Duke Divinity endeavor, which lies at the very heart of the university – both physically and spiritually – will witness to the best kind of 'better.' For the completion we seek is that which we have, in some measure, already experienced in the company of Jesus Christ. Call it the communion of saints. Today, we call it the sacred partnership we re-forge with our past and our future.

For Jesus is both the Pioneer and the Perfector of this enterprise. The great virtue of the pioneer is that he goes first. There is no danger that Jesus has not already experienced and no suffering from which he is alien. And he is the perfector, which means that of all who have lived he is the only one who has completed the course, not the course from birth to death – we're all on that track – but from birth to resurrection. From birth to divine perfection. That is why we follow him.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September this Fall, the maps we might have followed disappeared. On September 11 all the maps of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were blown to bits, and all the mapmakers discredited.

*A new world order?* No longer on the map.

*American invincibility?* Gone.

*A clear agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?* Missing.

But, then, if you are a child lost in a dark wood, which would you rather have: a map that may or may not be accurate, or one faithful guide who knows every inch of the terrain because he's walked it before?

Take the guide. Follow him. Forget the map. Take the guide.

Thanks to him, we will know the way. And thanks to those whose labors we complete and thanks to those who will perfect ours, we know who we are and what our mission is. We've heard it said, perhaps too many times, that on September 11 everything changed. With all due respect, our job description did *not* change. Our vocation – which is to prepare men and women for ministry in parish and classroom, which is to embody an intellectual witness to Jesus Christ on this campus and beyond, which is to be agents of reconciliation wherever and however we can – that vocation did *not* change but was given a terrible urgency.

Martin Luther is supposed to have said, “If I knew the world was ending tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today.” If I knew the world was ending tomorrow, I would build a church! I can think of no better time in which to lay plans and build buildings; no better time to invoke the memories of those who have come before and the

spirits of those who will follow; no better time to sing “For All the Saints” in all their  
breadth and grandeur. For as the Reformer also said,

This life is not righteousness, but growth in  
righteousness.

It is not health but healing. . . .

This is not the end [he said];

It is the road.

Let the procession continue!

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