

## Voices of the Faithful

October 2, 2011

10:30 a.m.

### **The Reverend Patrick Allison**

*He said about the government:* we have quotes only from his pamphlet (by a pseudonym) in 1782 critical of State taxation and support of the Anglicans now split from England. He is uniformly characterized as leading the way to oppose legislation preferring or supporting on religion or another: “All possible descriptions of Christians are equally entitled to the countenance and favor of government.”

Patrick Allison’s own words in his pamphlet are highly charged to condemn any encroachment on religious freedoms as “...unjust distinctions and impolitic discriminations...” He passionately supported “equal impartial liberty” and cited our collective responsibility to keep “the fair inheritance of impartial freedom...”

*He wrote about the church:* In all public meetings for transacting Congregational Business of any kind, and these have been frequent, the utmost Harmony has prevailed among the People, nor has the Spirit of Forbearance, Candor, and Conciliation ever departed from them on any such occasion, and they are now a respectable flourishing Church, comprehending above one hundred and sixty families. Their Secular Affairs are managed by a Committee, who meet at each other’s houses in the evening, commonly once a month.

### **The Reverend James Inglis**

In the awful reckoning which awaits you, (and how soon it may be instituted, Omniscience alone can tell) this day will be forced upon your recollection. This day, in the name of God, I again admonish you of a judgment to come – of fiery indignation that shall devour all those who are lovers of the world and its pleasures more than lovers of God. By the mercies of God – by the love of Christ – by your immortal spirits - by heaven and hell – I adjure you, prepare for your escape. “Flee for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before you.” Embrace religion. Be the followers of Jesus/heirs of immortal blessedness, or misery! Let me once more remind you that the world of gaiety, of fashion, and of folly, is not your resting place. However you may desire it, you cannot be here forever. There is a solemn hour approaching. It is an hour of apprehensions – an hour of honest and searching potency – an hour which teaches more than years had done – the hour of death. At that hour, what shall become of those who know not God, and obey not his gospel? At that hour, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?

### **The Reverend John Chester Backus**

*Spoken in the old “Two Steeple Church” as the church moved to its present location.*

During all this time our city has been rapidly extending in every direction – and that central portion of it, in which our own church was located, was becoming fast converted into a mere place of business. As early as 1852, at a social gathering at Mr. Stirling’s, the necessity of an eventual removal of the church was discussed. And subsequently a number of persons, belonging to the congregation convened at the parsonage several times, and at length determined to purchase the lot on which the new edifice has been erected. In October, 1853, the congregation was convened to consider the question of removal, and after full discussion resolved to accept the offer of the lot by those who

had purchased it, and to go forward with the erection, as soon as the old church could be disposed of, or other arrangements be made.

But now that, through the good hand of God upon us, we have been permitted to see our new enterprise brought to so desirable a completion, and are just about to enter upon a new era with so encouraging a past to look back upon, and so promising a future to look forward to, shall we not this day renewedly consecrate our service unto the Lord.

What may we not accomplish, if with cheerful hearts, and willing minds, with prayerful spirits, and devoted lives, we heed the call of God's providence and grace, and present ourselves a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service.

### **The Reverend Harris Elliot Kirk**

*Preached these words on the 40th Anniversary of his ordination on the eve of World War II*

We came eventually into the First World War, emerged into the pagan twenties, and then passed into the deep depression of the thirties, and now again into the dark cloud of a Second World War. Everything imaginable has assailed the great plant bedded down here in 1844. And yet, in spite of the expansion of the city in all directions, the immense scattering of the people, and the tremendous alteration of the social habits and customs of the family, we are here today, stronger, more united, and I believe more determined than we have ever been before. We are no longer conscious of a downtown problem. On the contrary we are realizing that a central church of long standing has an influence citywide that cannot be gained by churches in uptown neighborhoods; that such a church offers the minister an opportunity for a greater teaching influence than any other, and that such a church never reaches the limit of its growth simply because that growth is not local. From such a church religion spreads as leaven to many lives that do not come directly under its membership. That is made clear to me from multitudes of letters...that stress the influence of the church on life and thought...WE are not a loose aggregation gathered here temporarily because of the labors of one man, but a congregation, linked together by life, thought and faith, in a common work for Christ. The work is more important than the workmen, and in this the servant finds his keenest joy.

### **The Reverend Philip Rodgers Magee**

*Challenged the church in the late 1960's*

Stephen Rose, I think it was, once described the contemporary Christian Church as a kind of prim Victorian-type dowager mincing down the street, concerned above all else with keeping her skirts out of the mud. Perhaps we would rather not fess up to this image. But all-too-often it proves itself to be embarrassingly true!

Some years before I was called to be your minister (six years ago) you had made your decision to retain your 'center of operations' in the inner city, instead of up-rooting and re-locating in a suburb. This was a brave decision especially in a time when the majority of members on the church rolls lived a considerable distance from the 'central headquarters,' the church buildings, and still do. It was brave, further, because other church buildings were being disposed of and their congregations moving away. And brave too because, at that time, all the other Protestant clergy commuted into town as most of their members did. And it was bravest of all because it seemed as if the members and the problems of the members were different from (and maybe even alien to) the people and the problems of the people encircling the church building itself.

But we need remember: even as SERVICE must be our hallmark and not RESPECTABILITY, so SERVICE must be our raison d'être and not merely SURVIVAL! We deserve to survive as a beautiful church building on this well-traveled city corner and as a Community of Christians gathered in common cause, only as we fulfill our functions as SERVANTS and MESSENGERS to whomever and whatever we find here. This cannot be the dream and the commitment of a percentage of the congregation. This must be the dream and commitment of a WHOLE PEOPLE. And this too will be hard.

### **The Reverend David Colman**

*Preached to urge the congregation to put their actions where their words were.*

We spend a great deal of money in this church trying to attract people and our radio advertisements are an important part of that effort. Despite their effectiveness, I think it is safe to suggest that no one seriously imagines that the future of this church hangs on the promise of a free doughnut. Because of this it is important that having encouraged people to become part of our life and work, you and I have a clear understanding of just what it is that we want people to hear and experience should they choose to accept our invitation to make each Sunday rise and shine.

For example, the first thing that I think people should hear is that the church can make good on its promise that having made known to us the ways of life, God will make us full of gladness with his presence. In order to do this, however, we in the church are going to have to affirm the seriousness of our commitment to nurturing spiritual growth by creating the atmosphere and designing the structures that will enable that growth to take place. Structures that will help people develop a sense of interiority, structures that will help them connect with the movement of the spirit within their lives. Structures, finally, that will fan those fires of gladness that for many people lie forgotten in the unexplored depths of the soul.

### **The Reverend Harry Holfelder**

*Challenging the congregation in the middle of the AIDS crisis.*

Since the gospel maintains that grace is not dependent on my goodness, then, suffering is not dependent on my badness. AIDS provides the church with an opportunity to point to grace!

In some church circles AIDS is too frequently identified as a homosexual disease. The matter is further distorted when AIDS is theologically interpreted as God's punishment, or judgment, on this unnatural sexual activity. What appalls me is how the Christian community, grounded in grace, can so quickly respond theologically to a health crisis with judgment.

The Christian community is a community that points to signs of God's life-giving power. The Christian community looks initially for grace notes. If there is one reality of which the Christian is aware, it is that the grace of God shapes and informs each and every human situation. The Word from God is that God is with us and for us.

This reality informs our approach to all issues, especially a public health crisis such as AIDS. The word of the church to the person with AIDS, to the families of such persons, to the friends and colleagues, to the AIDS virus carriers, to the worried as well, is not YOU ARE UNDER JUDGMENT. You need to be avoided, or removed from normal human communities, or isolated from normal human relationships. The word of the church is that we will be with you and for you.

## **The Reverend Doctor Alison Halsey**

*October 2, 2011 at the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The First and Franklin Street Presbyterian Church*

In preparation for today's service I have been reading sermons spoken by the great pastors of this congregation. Let me say first it is both humbling and an honor to be standing where many of those same pastors stood and spoke the words which were read today. You have been blessed by those saints who were called by the voice of this family of faith. Thanks be to God for their undying witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Then let me say reading old sermons is an interesting way to read and understand the history of a church. It is very much like reading one of the Apostle Paul's letters to all the churches he established and in which he preached. We only have half of a dialogue but we can surmise what was occurring within the life of the church to which he wrote. With that in mind this is what I have come to learn about The First and Franklin St. Presbyterian Church.

- You have always been out on the forefront of issues and are not afraid to stand up and let your prophetic voice be heard. From Patrick Allison promoting the separation of church and state to Harry Holfelder welcoming those who were struggling with AIDS, you have not wilted in the face of heated opposition.
- You have long sought to reach out in the name of Christ to serve those who society considered the least of these. Service and mission are a part of your DNA.
- You are a church which has a long standing love affair with the city of Baltimore. At times when other churches or even when some of your members left the city, you chose to stay. Here is home, you thrive on the diversity of the city, your energy comes from seeking to serve those who call Baltimore home and as the city grew and changed so did you. You view the problems of the city as a challenge to be solved not as something to be feared. You are to be commended for this. You started the Holly Tour to show those in the suburbs that the city was not all that scary.
- You have always sought to provide an incredibly high standard of worship, with carefully crafted services, prophetic preachers, and music which must please the very angels of heaven.
- You have found ways to care for and support one another; being there, listening, offering aid, and raising up one another, reminding each other that all are beloved Children of God and all are of value to the whole.
- But most of all you have sought to fulfill your high calling as disciples of Jesus Christ in every age and time, seeking to discover him in the Word of God and being open to the freshness of God's Spirit blowing through your midst

So on this day when we celebrate our semi-quincentennial let me offer my congratulations to you, for your rich history and your faithfulness in times gone by. May that spirit and those patterns in your past long continue and let me rephrase Paul's thoughts as a bit of a charge to us this day:

*Not that we have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but we press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own. Beloved, we do not consider that we have made it our own; but this one thing we do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

So may it be! Amen!