

The Twenty-Third Sunday after the Epiphany

"The Chapel -- 160 Years"

The Rev. Stephen Elkins-Williams

One hundred and sixty years ago today, on October 19, 1848, this chapel was officially consecrated by the second Bishop of the young Diocese of North Carolina. Abraham Lincoln was not yet forty years old and was still five presidents away from taking office. Electricity and indoor plumbing and automobiles were far in the future. Slavery – by most – was accepted as a way of life.

Ten years before that service, in 1838, the Rev. William Mercer Green, a UNC graduate, had resigned as rector of St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, and accepted an appointment as Professor of Belles Lettres at the University. After four years of gathering other faculty and spouses and students around him for worship in homes, he led them to the formal step of incorporating themselves as an Episcopal congregation. They soon set about purchasing land and, with the help of a nationally known architect, Thomas Walter, designing and building the chapel. What a bold and imaginative vision they developed! Keep in mind that the handful of University buildings, which then constituted the campus, were fairly conventional rectangular affairs. How striking the gothic chapel with its crenellated tower and buttresses and arched, beautifully traceried windows must have been! At least when it was finally finished!! The money ran out and for several years, without any roof or floor, the walls enclosed only dirt and leaves and snow instead of the dedicated worshippers who continued to meet in homes. Finally, five years after it was started, the chapel was dedicated to the worship of God and to the service of God's people. Both for those who entered its gates with praise, as we sang in our opening hymn, and those, especially students, who merely passed by it on their daily routines, the very presence of the chapel spoke of the majesty and the mystery and the mercy of God. That is called the proclamation of architecture.

But the imaginative and bold vision of these early parishioners was not limited to the physical structure of the church. It manifested itself also in their sense of who made up the Church, who constituted the Body of Christ, who was "in" and who was "out." When they signed the articles of incorporation in 1842, which required by national canons the signatures of twelve men, they obediently complied; but expressing their vision of the comprehensiveness of the Church, they also included on the document the signatures of twelve women.

The incorporation of the slave loft into the construction of the chapel – although such segregation and the practice of slavery itself rightly horrified later generations – made it possible at that time for slaves to be included in the worship and education of the parish. Most of you know that Cornelia Fitzgerald, who was baptized in this chapel and sat in the loft, later helped raise her granddaughter, Pauli Murray, who became the first African-American woman ordained an Episcopal priest. When she presided at our chapel altar in 1977 at her first service of Holy Communion, she was the first woman to celebrate the Eucharist in the state of North Carolina and so helped heal and widen the circle of the Body of Christ even further.

A story many of you do not know is that our chapel even opened its doors to the dreaded Yankee occupiers immediately following the Civil War! When Brigadier General Smith Atkins of Freeport, Illinois, called on the President of the University, former Governor David Swain, to pay his respects, the General and Eleanor Swain, one of the daughters, were dramatically smitten with each other. After a whirlwind courtship, which included the Union military band setting up on the Swain's front lawn to serenade Eleanor, a communicant of our parish, they were married in our chapel on August 23, 1865. The chapel has been a House of Prayer for all people!

After the following low period of Reconstruction, the chapel, along with the University, began again to thrive and grow. Kemp Plummer Battle reopened the University as its President and served as Sr. Warden of our parish for many years. He arranged for his boyhood friend, Joseph Blount Chesire, Jr. to have his first clergy assignment here in the late 1870's. Mr. Chesire wrote in his autobiography that during those three years he frequently caught rides

on the mail hack over to “the growing tobacco community of Durham, population 2000,” where he founded St. Philip’s. He later served as Bishop of the Diocese for 39 years.

In time, the chapel became inadequate to handle the number of parishioners, and shortly after firing the rector in 1920 for “not visiting students enough,” the Vestry again hired a nationally known architect, Hobart Upjohn. They continued the bold, imaginative vision of our founders but adopted a very different paradigm in designing and constructing the church, underwritten by philanthropist William Erwin and dedicated by Bishop Cheshire in 1925. A wonderful new expression were the stained glass windows to the left and right of the altar, which capture in lesser-known scriptural stories the continuing ministry “DNA” of the Chapel of the Cross.

The one on the left shows Peter risking ritual defilement by going into the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, to baptize his family. A divine vision has helped him understand that forgiveness and salvation are for all people and that in his words at the bottom of the window, “God is no respecter of persons” or in another translation, “God shows no partiality.” Our legacy from the founding of our parish on has been to welcome all people and in the words of the Baptismal Covenant to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

The window on the right features Paul in Athens, the intellectual center of ancient civilization. Many gods are worshiped there and their statutes literally put up on pedestals, but in case the Athenians missed one who might be offended, they also erected an empty pedestal “to the unknown God.” Paul ingeniously informs them that the God they do not know is Jesus and tells them his story. Founded on the campus of the first public university in the United States to open its doors, we too at the Chapel of the Cross are to proclaim the Gospel in ways that people hungry for education can understand and accept. We cannot simply be satisfied to be part of a parish that has done this for generations. Our anniversary celebration today is not merely a recounting and relishing of the past. It must also energize and engage us for the future.

A letter from Mr. Erwin in 1922, articulating his reasons for donating the land and the money for constructing the church, reveals that plans at that time called for the chapel to be converted into “an auditorium of the Parish House plant.” Thank God they could not bring themselves to do that! For the chapel remains the soul of this parish, both our link to our past and a living embodiment of the worship and the ministry that we are privileged to inherit and to be called to. Let us, with Jacob in our first reading, awake from any sleep that may obscure our eyes and acknowledge for ourselves, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”
Genesis 28:10-17