

## PASS IT ON

A sermon delivered at the North Scituate Congregational Church in North Scituate, Rhode Island on May 17, 1998 by the Rev. Robert Firby, former pastor of the Shepherd of the Valley United Methodist Church in Hope, Rhode Island. The Scripture is to be Matthew 16:13-20 and read from the New English Bible, first edition 1961.

*When he came to the territory of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." "And you", he asked, "who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Then Jesus said, "Simon, son of Jonah, you are favoured indeed! You did not learn that from mortal man; it was revealed to you by my heavenly Father. And I say this to you: You are Peter, the Rock; and on this rock, I will build my church, and the powers of death shall never conquer it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; what you forbid on earth shall be forbidden in heaven, and what you allow on earth will be allowed in heaven." He then gave his disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

Grace and Peace to all from Jesus Christ.

I have been invited to this special service to relive, if it be possible, the spirit of the church service as it was in the 1960's. Thank you for inviting me. I began in the early 1960's by serving the navy/civilian church in Groton, CT, then from 1961-1964, the small rural church in Windsorville- a two-point charge with the suburban church of Vernon, CT. Then I left the USA for four and half years to serve four congregations in Venezuela as an overseas English speaking pastor. One group was composed of employees for the American oil company -Exxon- in Tia Juana, another group worked for the British/Dutch run Shell Oil company in Lagunillas, another group was West Indian at the Mechanics Lodge in Cabimas, and yet another group was mixed -multi-cultural- at Christ Church in Maracaibo - all of these in Venezuela from 1964-1968. I also shared responsibility for a Spanish service- either as preacher or liturgist - with the local Presbyterian pastor there. For me there was no one type of service in the 1960's and that is still true in United Methodist churches today. I related to eleven congregations in ten years and they were all different. For example I can remember Malcolm King, a British Methodist in the British Dutch group, who did not want candles on the altar, but in with the West Indians we had incense when the occasion called for it. Then in 1968, I came to Hope and Phenix churches, antecedents of the present Shepherd of the Valley United Methodist Church. We used at that time the new 1964 hymnal and sang the responses to the Holy Communion served at the altar, devoutly and penitently kneeling in a rather high church tradition.

This was not unlike what we did in the 1940's at my home church, Hillsgrove United Methodist Church, in Warwick, RI. Later in my training in the early 1950's at Boston University School of Theology, our services were varied - sometimes "high church" and sometimes "low church"- that is to say, "lots of ritual" and at other times almost "no ritual" at all. Once we all laughed over the time we labeled the chapel at

Boston University as “The Church of the Vanishing Cross”- just because Edwin Prince Booth, late professor of church history asserted his influence to have the cross removed from the communion table in the center of the chapel when he preached. Such extremes would not happen today.

We did wish to have the sermon be a very important part of the service. I was taught to preach for 22 minutes and to take 22 hours in preparation. That was four pages of double spaced type. Today for me, I feel for the people in the pew when it comes to the sermon time. So many sermons appear to lack depth either because the speaker does not have the time – 10 minutes is hardly enough- to fully develop the theme or has not spent enough time in preparation. In those pulpit centered days, there were a number of giants in the pulpit to inspire us i.e. Ralph Sockman at Christ Church in New York, Allan Knight Chalmers, homiletics professor at Boston University, Dean Noble at Syracuse University, Bishop Gerald Kennedy, Bishop Gerald Ensley, Archbishop Fulton Sheen, Halford Luccock at Yale, who incidentally read his sermon word for word from a printed manuscript, Dean Howard Thurman at Boston University and The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, especially with his “I have a Dream” sermon. There were others too numerous to mention.

The sermon took a variety of forms - Inductive, Deductive, Topical, Textual (Biblical), and Centrifugal like “round and round- zeroing in until it zaps you.” Most of the time the speaker remained behind the pulpit with notes or a full written script. The expectation was that there would be good delivery.

Now let me take an idea from the 1960’s and develop it.

The theme is “Pass It On” – or if you prefer “Individual Evangelism” I have to confess to one of our sins of the 1960’s - we were into the “numbers game” and we wanted more souls on the church membership list! Many of our sermons had three points and like the black preacher said- I tells ‘em what I’s e goner tell ‘em, (point 1), then I tells ‘em, (point 2) and I tells ‘em what I told ‘em (point 3). Today we will have six points instead of three points and you can follow them in the printed sermon you have. (Someone or the congregation is to help me by reading the scripture, when indicated. It is printed with the bold italic Garamond font. See especially bottom page 2 and page 3.)

#### **I. FROM THE SCRIPTURES- WE ARE TO BE BUILDERS – pass it on!**

I love the scripture that was read about the disciple Peter – whose nickname was The Rock or maybe it was Rocky” In this powerful section Jesus displays his humor with a masterful play on words about Peter and the Rock, which in Greek are similar words. Actually Peter was not a rock for he went on to deny Jesus three times. One of the few times that the word “church” is used in the scripture is when Jesus is reported to have said, “I will build my church”. (Scholars of the Jesus Seminar group of today do not really believe that Jesus said those words- they sound more like the mindset of the early church reflecting on the implications of what Jesus said and did). But they were powerful words to the budding institution of that day and to those of us who preached in the 1950’s and the 1960’s. It was after World War II, the war to end all wars and we were going to build a new society! We were builders! People of different ages have been identified with labels from Millennialists to Busters, (Generation X) to Boomers, to Silents – my generation and finally “the Builders!”- people over 70 years of age. They lived it and deserve that title.

Paul says it in I Corinthians 2: 10. (CEV) *“God was kind and let me become an expert builder. I laid a foundation on which others have built. But we must each be careful how we must build, because Christ is the only foundation. Whatever we build on that foundation will be tested by fire on the judgment day. Then everyone will find out if we have used gold, silver, and precious stones, or wood, hay and straw. We will be rewarded if our building is left standing. But if it is destroyed by fire, we will lose everything. Yet we ourselves will be saved, like someone escaping from the flames. (Then come the familiar words) All of you surely know that you are God’s temple and that His Spirit lives in you. Together you are God’s holy temple and God will destroy anyone who destroys his temple.”*

## **II. WE HELP TO BUILD BY TEACHING – pass it on!**

We begin to be builders by being the priests in the family household. There is no hierarchy in present day Judaism. Each man or woman is accountable and according to the Old Testament, responsible to pass on the traditions of Hebrew faith and practice. “Pass it on” is the same for the Christian as well as the Jew. Baptism was not enough- in passage after passage in the Bible - the family was to be teachers.

However, in order to do this, we first have to be fed spiritually ourselves- we cannot pass on what do not know. Did you catch the “fish story” from the lectionary for the second Sunday after Easter? The disciples had been out fishing all night and caught nothing. Jesus arrives and urges them to put the nets over onto the other side of the boat. They did and caught 153 fish- not breaking the net. Why the number 153? Probably to represent the whole known world at that time- 153 countries! With the fish and bread Jesus served the First Breakfast- or was it the Last Breakfast? Anyway, Jesus feeds all of us with fish and the daily bread of life, so that we can teach others.

## **III. WE HELP TO BUILD BY THE SYMBOLS WE BELIEVE IN**

In an interesting way, Mrs. John Eaton has done that at the Hillsgrove United Methodist Church when she gave the altar cross in memory of her husband John. Johneric Wickstrom, a minister from Sweden, was asked to design it. In that same First Letter to the Corinthians, he read and was inspired by the verse that reads *“for what I received, I passed on to you, as of first importance that Christ died for our sins.”* The cross is made of old mahogany wood from the old front wall to symbolize that we are never to preclude, exclude or deliberately alter the “old gospel” or parts thereof. As it says in I Cor. 15:2 *“By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I have preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain.”*

The cross is also made of red oak, which represent the echoes of Christ-12 different boards to represent the 12 disciples with unique patterns of fibers in each board. This reminds us that we are all different. I Cor. 12:14 reads as follows, *“The body is not made up of one part, but of many.”* The flame is made of lexam- to represent the flame of the Holy Spirit- the fire of God- within us –firing us up.

The cross is empty and in the center of the reredos to remind us of the centrality of Christ and that it has power to save, heal and forgive.

We are called to echo the cross of Christ to the world. Again I say, **pass it on!**

## **IV. WE BUILD WHEN WE WORK WITH ONE ANOTHER.**

Paul continues to call us to unity with one another in the fourth chapter of this same Corinthian book (CEV), by saying:

*“Think of us as servants of Christ who have been given the work of explaining God’s mysterious ways. And since our first duty is to be faithful to the one we work for, it doesn’t matter to me, if I am judged by you or even by a court of law. In fact, I don’t judge myself. I don’t know of anything against me, but that doesn’t prove that I am right. The Lord is my judge. So don’t judge anybody until the Lord returns. He will show us what is hidden in the dark, and what is in everyone’s heart. Then God will be the one who praises each of us.”*

## **V. PASS IT ON- THE STORY OF THE BATON/TORCH**

I can remember as a child the relay races we used to participate in. We waited until our teammate brought us the stick; which we then took and ran as hard as we could until we reached the next member of the team. I saw it again when I got up early one morning to watch the Olympic torch being passed from runner to runner and going from town to town. The baton is still being passed from backyards and school playgrounds to modern professional tracks. Did you see the women and men who participated in the recent world event? One of the best runners of all time was on a team and she was to run last. When the baton was handed to her late, she tried to make up for lost time but she lost. Later the whole team was disqualified because the baton was not passed in the proper passing zone. Sometimes when we work together we fail to follow the rules and our team loses. Not only are we to run the race – the human race and come out a winner, but we are to “pass it on so that others also can also be winners.”

Now I know that Pastor Bill Flug has run in the Boston Marathon and runs daily. I was an earlier member of his relay team that passed the baton on to David Hollenbeck, who passed it on to Bill Flug, who passed it on to Pastor Virg or was it Fred Faria or some other member of this church? The baton (symbolizing the gospel) gets passed around and we are called upon to take it and run with it, then pass it on again. It is teamwork and not individual skill alone that will help us to win the race.

## **VI. WHO YOU ARE IN THAT RACE MAKES A DIFFERENCE.**

This story comes to me from a New York Pastor Marilyn, who every night “passes on” to several friends, her stories of inspiration on E-Mail. I have many such stories from her. The story concerns a New York teacher who decided to honor every one of her senior class students by telling them the difference each of them had made. Using a process developed by Helice Bridges of Del Mar, CA, she calls each student to the front of the class, telling them what difference they have made to her and to the class. Then she gives each one a blue ribbon imprinted with the words in gold, “Who I am makes a Difference.”

She decided to go one step further and use it as a community project. She gave each student three ribbons and told them to go out and spread this acknowledgement ceremony. They were to report back in one week. One of the boys went to a Junior Executive and honored him for helping him with his career planning. He gave him the blue ribbon and two others to go out and honor someone else. He asked for the executive to report back for the class project. Later that day the Junior Executive went in to honor his grouchy boss, but instead of dwelling on the boss’s attitude, the JE told him that he deeply admired him for being a creative genius. The boss was surprised as the JE pinned the ribbon upon him. Then he gave him the extra ribbon to pass it on. “Do me a favor he said, honor someone else, the young boy who gave me this is doing a school project and

wants me to report back to him. We want to keep this recognition ceremony going and find out how it is affecting people.”

That night the boss came home to his fourteen-year-old son and sat him down. “The most incredible thing happened to me today at the office. My Junior Executive came in and pinned a blue ribbon on me for being a creative genius. The ribbon says, “Who I am makes a difference.” He gave me an extra ribbon and asked me to find someone else to give it to. When I was driving home tonight, I started thinking about whom I should honor with the ribbon and I thought of you, son. I want to honor you. My days are really hectic, and when I come home I don’t really pay much attention to you. Sometimes, I scream at you for not getting good enough grades, and for your bedroom being a mess. But tonight, I just want to sit here, and well just let you know you do make a difference to me. Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You’re a great kid and I love you!” The startled boy started to sob and sob and sob. He couldn’t stop crying. His whole body shook. He looked up at this father and said, through his tears, “I was planning on committing suicide tomorrow, Dad, because I didn’t think you loved me. Now I don’t need to.”

That is a story that we need to take to heart. It has the possibility of doing something to help stop the trend of teenage suicide.

**PASS IT ON- HONOR SOMEONE WITH THE BLUE RIBBON AND THE GOLD WORDS THAT READ “WHO I AM MAKES A DIFFERENCE!”**

Our closing hymn –also from the 1960’s- actually 1969- a modern one to us back then, is Kurt Kaiser’s beautiful hymn “Pass It On” – Page 572.