

Fathers of the Church

Jamaica Plain, June 16, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

In the past I have preached on the "Mothers of the Church," women like Susanna Pemberton, who convinced her husband to help build a church on the Jamaica Plain, Helen Holmes, the "guardian angel of the church," Elfie Barnard, now in her 98th year, the honorary church grandmother, and Ellen Morse, whose portrait hangs in the nursery, and who taught church school for over 70 years.

For Fathers' Day, my wife Ellen McGuire suggested that I speak on some of the historic "Fathers of the Church." These fathers have helped preserve the institution, and have helped serve as keepers of the tradition, something like keepers of the lore in a tribal society.

The text from Matthew today is one of the Lectionary readings for this Sunday. Saying that the "harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few," Jesus gives authority to the original 12 disciples. This varied bunch includes the tax collector Matthew, a former collaborator with the Roman overlords, and the former revolutionary Simon the Zealot, and of course, Judas.

Today, in talking about the fathers of our church, I want to speak especially about our lay leaders; in the past I have focused on our clergy types. I earlier mentioned Susannah Pemberton. Her wealthy merchant husband helped in the negotiations that led to the creation of our congregation. He promised to continue paying his pledge to the 2nd church in Roxbury (now the Theodore Parker Church in West Roxbury) as well as pledging to our new church in J.P. Legend has it that he became angry with our first minister, Dr. Gordon, when the cleric tied his horse to Pemberton's wet fence. In any case, he left his large estate for the welfare of the widows and orphans of Boston, and is remembered by Pemberton Square downtown.

I met Clifford Bond at the end of his long life; he died in his mid 90's. He had worked for the Boston Chamber of Commerce, and on a business trip to New York City he met a woman who struck him as "the one." He invited her to dinner at Delmonico's restaurant, then didn't contact her again until the next time he was in New York, six weeks later. During a second dinner at Delmonico's, he proposed marriage. She said "No," arguing that they barely knew each other. Returning to Boston, Bond wrote a Machiavellian note that, "Of course you are right in turning me down. It wouldn't have worked out." His future bride wrote back, "Let's not be too hasty," and they were wed for over 50 years. Mr. Bond had what was described as a "loping style" as he went down the aisle to help take the collection. He enjoyed inviting our music director Ellen McGuire and our then soloist Susan Brodie over to his home for homemade popovers before church. Ellen and Susan would worry that they would be late for the service as he slowly prepared the popovers, but he always finished in time. Mr. Bond was also a great keeper of records, serving as our church clerk for 54 years.

Last week we awarded Thalia McMillion the Ellsworth Winchester Award for church leadership. Ellsworth was proud of his family's long connection to this church; Winchesters are buried in our graveyard going back to the 18th century. This is a photo of Ellsworth's church school class. He would tell me stories of an earlier Jamaica Plain, where he and his siblings would take turns bathing in a tub of heated water in the middle of the kitchen floor. It saddened him that the name of the street where he grew up was changed from Winchester to Westchester Street. Ellsworth married a Catholic woman, Estelle, and everyone said it wouldn't last. When in her 80's, Estelle told me how they'd courted by going out riding in the early morning hours in J.P. During World War Two, Ellsworth served as an officer in the military, traveling around the country trying to convince workers not to go on strike. In the work world, he was known as "Fred." When the church was at a low point in the 1970's, his brother Artemas, the standing committee chair, asked Ellsworth to join the committee. A few months later, Artemas died of a heart attack, and Ellsworth became chairperson of the standing committee, and later head of our new trustees, who were set up to safeguard our endowment.

Ellsworth kept a close eye on our church building. He told me once, "The most important thing is to keep the roof tight." He felt that our relationship with the 1st and 2nd Church downtown had saved the church, and he was reluctant to sever that relationship for new experiments. He was a fiscal conservative, a stay agent who was not convinced for a long time that the church could revive. Yet as head usher, he would grab newcomers by the elbow and tell them the history of "his" church. He had a wonderful institutional memory, and eventually delighted in the revival of the congregation.

Stannard Bristol also grew up in our church. His father was a prominent obstetrician; Elfie Barnard was his nurse. Dr. Bristol took his young son with him for a delivery which turned out to be a C-section; Stannard never had any interest in following his father's career. His family moved upcountry to North Sutton, New Hampshire when Stannard was going away to college. Stannard later restored their historic home, worked as a land surveyor, and ran the town of Sutton as head selectperson. (I once had the delightful experience of "perambulating" or walking the town boundary between Sutton and Warner with Stannard and what he described as "colorful Warner types"). Acquiring many historic buildings, he had his Muster Field Farm worked as a traditional farm. Stannard (known upcountry as "Bob") created the tradition of Farm Days, a celebration of traditional rural crafts at the Muster Field Farm, now an incorporated museum. I have fond memories of attending Farm Days; when the day ended, thousands of people would leave, and Stannard and Ellen and I would fix dinner.

Stannard loved tradition, but he was willing to experiment with change. He remained fiercely devoted to our church as a result of a transformative confirmation class that he had with our minister, Dr. Frank Holmes. In the late 1970's, he served as our standing committee chairperson, riding the bus 100 miles each way on Sunday morning from North Sutton. Stannard proposed that the church experiment by cutting its ties with First and Second and hiring its own minister. He was a strong supporter of my ministry to revive the church. I remember walking on Eliot Street with him just before my first Easter Sunday service in 1983. A seagull swooped down and pooped on my new suit. "That's good luck," said Stannard.

Soon after I arrived at the church, Stannard revived a custom he remembered from his childhood, having undecorated trees in the front of the church for Christmas. He'd cut the trees in his woods and haul them down to J.P. He once told our church school that it was important that they were wild, natural trees, and hadn't been cultivated and shaped.

In our lesson from Wendell Berry's *The Memory of Old Jack*, Mat Feltner exercises his prerogative as an old man at Jack Beecham's graveside service, and turns his back on a garrulous young preacher. This story reminds me of Stannard Bristol, someone I think of as giving me "old guy lessons" before his untimely death in his early seventies from diabetes. Ellen and I were honored that Stannard visited us for two days in Maine for the only vacation anyone could ever remember that he had taken. He said that he wanted to see where his friends Frank and Helen Holmes had vacationed. While staying with us in Maine, Stannard expressed an interest in seeing a local 18th century building, the Parson Fisher House, now a museum. "I guess I'll get dressed for town," he said. He emerged from his room a few minutes later, dressed in jeans and a clean white "T" shirt.

His friend Dr. Frank Holmes, who had been our minister from 1927-42, retired with his wife Helen to JP in the early 70's just as the diminished congregation considered merging with the Brookline UU church. Instead, Frank arranged with his friend Dr. Rhys Williams for First Church to be a preaching station for student ministers serving the First and Second Church downtown. Frank had a strong sense of worship and the importance of music in the liturgy. He gave good advice to the students, who included now noted preacher Forester Church.

Frank Holmes also had a strong sense of justice. He was active in organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Urban League, which was putting his beliefs on the line in pastorates like Oklahoma City in the 1940's. He once held a community meeting in Oklahoma City to denounce the evils of McCarthyism. A non-church member rose and said to Holmes, "You're nothing but a commie dupe!" To which Frank Holmes responded, "You can call me a communist, but don't call me a dupe!"

We give thanks today for Mr. Pemberton, a founder and generous benefactor; for Cliff Bond, a keeper of the records; for Ellsworth Winchester, conservative stay agent, who cared for this building; for Stannard Bristol, creative traditionalist and change agent; and for Frank Holmes, forging our traditions of worship and music and social justice. As we go through a time of congregational growth and transition, we give thanks for the caring and keeping of tradition of these church fathers. We give thanks that they have helped give to us this gift of community.

Readings

Prayers of the Mad Farmer, Wendell Berry

At the start of spring I open a trench
In the ground. I put into it
The winter's accumulation of paper,
Pages I do not want to read
Again, useless words, fragments,
Errors. And I put into it
The contents of the outhouse:
Light of the sun, growth of the ground,
Finished with one of their journeys.
To the sky, to the wind, then,
And to the faithful trees, I confess
My sins: that I have not been happy
Enough, considering my good luck;
Have listened to too much noise;
Have been inattentive to wonders;
Have lusted after praise.
And then upon the gathered refuse
Of mind and body, I close the trench.
Folding shut against the dark,
The deathless earth. Beneath that seal
The old escapes into the new

Ezekiel 29:3-6

Thus says the Lord God:

I am against you,
Pharaoh king of Egypt.
The great dragon sprawling
In the midst of its channels,
Saying, "My Nile is my own;
I made it for myself."
I will put hooks in your jaws,
And make the fish of your channels stick to your
Scales.

I will draw you up from your channels,
With all the fish of your channels
Sticking to your scales.
I will fling you into the
Wilderness,
You and all the fish of your channels;
You shall fall into the open field,
And not be gathered and buried.
To the animals of the earth and
To the birds of the air
I have given you as food.
Then all the inhabitants of Egypt
Shall know
That I am God