

“A Cloud of Witnesses”

Hebrews 12:1-2

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1/16/2011

2011 has finally arrived! For many, possibly most of you, along with the rest of the world, 2011 has not been much on your radar. It doesn't raise Y2K fears in us, it doesn't prompt the contentiousness of an election year. There is another goofy Christian church predicting the end of the world in May – if it happens it happens, but most of have heard that wolf crying before.

In the great scheme of life 2011 is inconsequential, but for those of us who call this place, this congregation our spiritual home, it is a big year. It is the 150th Anniversary of our church beginnings. This year, in this place, you and I, and a host of others will do some remembering, some learning, some celebrating because in 1861 a small group of dedicated people wanted a community of faith to journey through life with. On February 17, 1861 records state that a group of 9 or so people gathered for the first official organizing meeting of the First Congregational Religious Society. This meeting was followed by several more during that same year to elect the first trustees, adopt a constitution and by-laws, call a minister and gather for worship. Because the founding of our congregation was a process over time it has been decided that our remembering and celebrating should take place all year long instead of on just one occasion.

So this morning we are just beginning our 150th Anniversary events, there is just too much for us to give thanks for during one morning. So enjoy and be inspired by the history and ministry of God's people in this place for 150 years – it is worth our time to see where we have been and to know the substance of the faith on which we depend, so that we can better see where we are being led.

In our Epistle reading from the letter to the Hebrews it is written: “since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and entangles us, and let us run with perseverance...”

During this past year several people in our church, Ruth, Lois, Don, Margy, Jacq, Frank, and others, have been poking around in the cloud of witnesses that constitute our church's ancestors. They have been trying to glean some of what

has taken place over the past 150 years to present the rest of us with a few more stories and portraits of people that have gone before us. What they have gleaned and focused on is of course selective and limited, history always has its bias, but even these gleanings help us know our cloud of witnesses better.

When some members of our church council heard for the first time the story of Kate Scritsmeier, a member of this church who wrote letters of encouragement to Dunn County men who served in WWI, WWII, and the Korean War, they found Miss Scritsmeier both intriguing and disconcerting. While Kate did encourage soldiers, she also started the Scritsmeier club for young boys and young men. Those who knew Kate said of her that she liked boys and not girls. When the council was told that Kate put a pool table and other games in her home, and only allowed boys to come over, the eyebrows of most people around the table were raised. On the wall just outside our sanctuary are plaques with the names of “Kate’s boys” who served in the war and a picture of Kate surrounded by “her boys.” Kate is a colorful part of our cloud of witnesses whose efforts were welcomed, and whose motivations seem complicated.

Another part of our cloud that was explored was the group of founders, including the first clergy.

Rev. Philo Canfield was mentioned as arriving in the Town of Menomonie in 1859, two years before the church was formed. Rev. Canfield was no doubt part of the expansion of settled portions of our country. The Congregational faith followed the expansion west, along with many Christian traditions. Wisconsin was embracing the Congregational belief that a Christian life included the education of the mind in moral development. Congregationalists were forming colleges in Beloit, Ripon, Sheboygan and Ashland. Rev. Canfield no doubt possessed these same leaning which must have been attractive to the founding families of the church.

Rev. Canfield held meetings in his home before the church was formed. In this way the seeds of the church were planted and tended.

Rev. Canfield gathered into his fold the Wilson and Knapp families, owners of the primary industry in Menomonie. It seemed however that these local titans and the other founding trustees did not have much regard for Rev. Canfield’s financial

well being. The minutes and notes found in the early church records, indicated that while Rev. Canfield was promised a certain living wage, during his three year tenure he never received more than about half of it. The lack of financial support seemed to be central to Rev. Canfield's departure, illustrating that it is typically practical matters and not our beliefs that cause divisions in the church.

Following Rev. Canfield's departure our church floundered for about 5 years. A less than one year pastorate with Rev. Iams, who wanted the church to move from the Congregational to the Baptist traditions, created great uncertainty for our fragile beginnings. It was Rev. John Sherwin who knew how to turn to the Larger Congregational Church Missionary Association, the regional Association of Congregational Churches and a few key relationships with members of the Menomonic community that our church gained surer footings. Rev. Sherwin believed that God was still engaged with our church and Sherwin utilized his knowledge, skills and faith to lead our church into the future. Turning to God, the larger faith community and being attentive to practical decisions helped build and focus the ministry of our frontier congregation. Opening the church up to more and broader relationships, instead of becoming more isolated and parochial breathed life into our church.

The sanctuary in which we sit was built within a year of the construction of the Mabel Tainter Theater on Main St. The organ that was installed here in our church is a nearly identical instrument to the one installed in the Mabel Tainter – they were made by the same company. The Mabel Tainter was built by Captain Tainter of the Knapp/Stout Company, our sanctuary was built almost entirely with funds provided by the Wilsons and the Knapps of the Knapp/Stout Company. Our sanctuary, when the doors to my left were lowered and raised was able to seat the largest number of people in Menomonic at the turn of the 19th Century – more seating even than the Mabel Tainter.

I don't know what was going on among the Tainters, Wilsons and Knapps, around 1890, but I haven't read anything that said our church was being built to the glory of God. Perhaps these families had decided they had so much money that they wanted to create some enduring edifices, and maybe they had a vision of a grand city that needed some grand buildings, and maybe they believed that places of beauty inspired faith. Whatever the mix of motivations we have been bequeathed a place in which good things can happen.

One of the great things that early church members believed would be a good thing to hold in our sanctuary were lyceums.

The lyceums were First Congregational's effort to bring significant and compelling speakers to Menomonie. Just a few years after this building was erected Booker T. Washington, the nationally known black author, speaker and civil rights leader came to our church to enlist the support of Northern, white Christians. By recording his presence in the records of our church it would seem that Mr. Washington had a favorable reception.

Just a few years after Washington spoke, William Jennings Bryan spoke here in 1904. Bryan was a congressman from Nebraska who ran for the presidency several times. Many of us know Bryan as the defender of creationism in the famous "Scopes Trial" of 1925. Bryan argued against Darwin and evolution and actually won the trial. That Bryan spoke here indicated our church's struggle to find the truth in a particular historic time.

The more I read about the cloud of witnesses that hover and settle in around us, the more I realize that all of who they were is still present here. They were and we are a remarkable mixture of eccentric personalities – there are Kate Scritsmeiers in our midst. We are people seeking the truth, willing to listen to many voices that we might grow in wisdom. Like the Wilsons and Knapps we have invested in this building for a host of different reasons, and in the end we know that it is what happens here is more important than the building itself. We are people who change and grow, yet we still honor many traditions and rituals that can't be easily explained.

During this anniversary year we will see how we are similar to our ancestors and how we differ. The gift of our cloud of witnesses is that they help us see more clearly and help us recognize that we are part of a greater journey, community and faith. As we joyfully celebrate the long life of this church I pray that in doing so we will draw closer to God who is eternal.

Dedication

Recognition of the people

Dedication –

- Scritsmeier plaques

- Clergy pictures

- Cabinets and page displays

- Contents – history and artifacts, will change during the year

Prayer of Dedication –

This morning, eternal God, we dedicate these historic displays to you. We put them in place not for nostalgia sake, but to enjoy and honor the saints who have gone before us. May their faith journeys inform us; may their struggles give us strength knowing they overcame them; may their kindness and service expand our hearts; may their wisdom help us embrace the ways of your kingdom. May what we do this morning be pleasing in your sight; and may what has been set in place today be gifts not burdens for future generations. Amen

Cake and Cider