



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: January 4, 2009

The Sanctuary That We Are, Robert B. Culp

1 Peter 2 (Selections)

*(A "Dialogue Sermon" with Dr. Walter Wagoner in Celebration
of Worshiping in Our Sanctuary for 25 years this Sunday)*

Twenty-five years ago, members and friends of the Round Hill Community Church assembled in this sanctuary to mark a new beginning in their historic life together. Since 1921, they had been worshipping in this area of Greenwich. And even before that, stretching back into the 1800's, they had been a part of a Christian congregation that had worshiped at the corner of Round Hill Road and John Street, served by a series of "circuit riders" and other temporary ministers. The court battle had been settled, the church's organization and leadership matters were decided and in place, and after two years of worshipping in the Community House, the congregation gathered here on New Year's Day, 1984, poised to start a new chapter in their life and ministry together.

The congregation had waged a revolutionary contest for religious freedom and independence, and their cause ultimately prevailed. No longer having any denominational ties nor safety net, our church embarked on a grand adventure along which every single member was engaged and involved – giving generously of their time, their energies, their expertise, their financial gifts, their hopes and dreams ... and they did so with great joy and enthusiasm! They were creating a gracious and inviting fellowship of faith where all were welcome, where other traditions were respected, where people could explore their questions and cultivate new friendships along the shared journey of faith.

Dr. Walter Wagoner, the called minister of this community church, who had provided great spiritual support and smiling encouragement along the way, entered into this pulpit 25 years ago on New Year's Day, and he shared a special message that still has relevance and great power for us today.

He began in a celebratory tone, indicating that the mood of Round Hill Community Church was that of "Hosanna" and "Hallelujah," which he reflected in the anecdote of a stiff, reserved college professor who, in running for public office, would often begin her campaign speeches by saying, "Fellow citizens, let us reason about the issue." But one day, after hearing those words, an avid follower jumped up and shouted, "We didn't come here, sister, to reason, we came here to holler!" And Walter commented, "So have we!" Indeed!

Looking back over the years leading up to the construction and completion of the new church building, with all the ups and downs and readjustments that took place, Walter wondered aloud as to how the congregation ever arrived at such a wonderful moment. He then observed wryly that the reason was embedded in an insightful definition of a good marriage he had run across in his readings; namely, "Marriage is a contract in which each person agrees to overestimate the other!" He suggested that this sanctuary was completed because this

congregation did not accurately estimate what had to be done; and that if the members had made a realistic estimate of what lay ahead, they might very well have gone into shock! But the congregation went ahead and did it anyway. Hallelujah!

While Walter confesses that had there been a cornerstone for this building, he probably would have placed a bottle of aspirin in it, he notes that the great lesson of this wonderful and rewarding endeavor was found in compromise, stress, and persevering friendship ... that while some might have done things differently, no one could have planned for this edifice to have emerged as handsomely as it did. And Walter acknowledges profound gratitude for all who contributed time, money and service in creating such a plant of solid craftsmanship.

Walter then asked a central question that has been posed of any congregation that has begun a building project: “Why have we built?” He shares that an honest answer is a mixed one. In part, it had to do with the congregation’s commitment to assert the strength of our independent type of community church, that this was a congregation that had staying power and was resolved to continue in ministry in this place. But also it had to do with the exciting adventure in church architecture – a once-in-a-life-time opportunity. And indeed, how many of us, along the course of our faith journeys, have had the chance to build a new church building? Can you imagine the excitement of being a part of such an endeavor that, by the grace of God, would stand the test of time?

Quite rightly, though, Walter admits that such reasons were quite secondary in the grand scheme of things. For the primary reason for such a building project, he said, was to be found in the word “sanctuary” itself. A sanctuary is a holy place of worship, set apart for the praise and service of God, and as such it is “holy ground” in many respects. It is a sacred place of refuge, a hiding place from oppression and oppressors, a place “where the sheriff really had no power.” Walter then observed that we still use the word in that sense – such as “a wild-life sanctuary” which he said (with tongue firmly in cheek) every once in a while might still be “a pretty good description of this church!”

Walter then described in his message what I believe is a good description of what occurs within a sanctuary such as ours. It is a house of worship dedicated to the joining of the human spirit with God’s Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ. Recognizing that God is not bound by any human walls, we still strive within these walls – through worship and liturgy, in music and prayer, by means of education and fellowship and social life – to enrich our awareness of and response to the wonder and mystery of God. Our steeple points to the heavens, and the ringing of the bell each Sunday continues to sound to all men and women and children the awareness of our Creator God – the intelligent, purposeful, loving God who is most gloriously seen in Jesus Christ.

Then Walter reflected a powerful truth (still very much alive) when he observed that one of the key meanings of a sanctuary, especially in this type of Christian church, is that we extend here a genuine welcome to all those who may be quite undecided about our Creator God, all those who need a forum and an atmosphere where they are free to inquire and ask questions. In other words, this is a place of grace, a place where people are encouraged to give voice to their doubts about our Creator/Redeemer God, can express their anger or struggles with God, and can even confess their rejection of God, and not be rejected themselves.

As Walter said in his message, this sanctuary itself is an expression of our communal faith and trust in God (however we may understand and imagine God to be) ... and our openness to share “in the spirit of Christ each other’s joys, sorrows, and passing days,” as well as our faith journeys and questions. As such, this sanctuary is really a symbol of the need to get our priorities straight.

In Walter’s own words, “Our first priority is not our nation, though our flag is here. Our first priority is not our

church, though our church flag is here. Our first priority is the truth, beauty, and goodness of God, seen in Christ. Our challenge is that we have many sanctuaries in our lives, enshrining other gods. Some are worthwhile; some are jealous competitors. This 'Holy Ground,' though, reminds us," he said, "to keep those other gods and sanctuaries in their proper places, in order that we may rejoice and serve the ... God who made heaven and earth."

In quoting the Psalmist's phrase "who made heaven and earth," Walter then alludes in his message to the noblest sanctuary of them all – namely, this world and universe, the great globe itself.

One of the interesting decisions made by our leaders in building this sanctuary was to make sure that the windows were clear glass, and not stained glass. In many respects, that meant this sanctuary itself became a symbol that the world we see through these windows – all of creation – is itself holy ground. One of the basic messages of the Christian faith we share is that we are stewards of the world we have received – the streams and lakes, the mountains and valleys, the countryside and the horizons of our sight and imagination. This world is so precious! And, as we are recognizing with increasing awe and wonder, it is a fragile and delicate world that can be affected profoundly by the priorities we embrace as its inhabitants. The world we see from our vantage point here, through these windows and reflected in our very lives, is a holy place to be guarded and cared for, for it is "God's greatest sanctuary."

Walter then observed that a favorite writer of his illustrates what he was meaning to say. This writer notes that on a very hot summer day he asked a friend how he was holding up in the hot weather. The friend replied, "I don't mind the summer heat. I also really love the spring and the fall. Actually, I also dig the winter. I guess I like the whole year. In fact, if you really want to know, whatever the season, I like it very much above ground."

Walter concluded, "That is nicely put. I, too, like it above ground – in this magnificent, miraculous sanctuary of the living universe. My prayer is that the sanctuary of the Round Hill Community Church may deserve its name by bringing us closer to God and Christ in order that we then may better care for and serve the sanctuary not made by human hands, the sanctuary that is God's world."

My hope is that in this, our 25th Anniversary Year in this sanctuary, we may make Walter's prayer our own as we continue to serve the Lord with gladness in this wonderful and historic "place of grace." To be sure, challenges we have galore in this new year, both as a church and as a country. By the grace of God, though, we are here together as a people of God, and we are being called to proclaim a powerful message in these challenging days.

For we are called to share with all whom we are given to see and touch and love that life does go on, and that we can dare light a candle of hope rather than curse the darkness of despair. Indeed, we are here ...

- * because God's 'Yes' is greater than the world's 'No,'
- * because love is stronger than fear and death,
- * because truth is more enduring than falsehood,
- * because beauty is beyond all ugliness, and
- * because freedom to live the questions of our faith is more promising than narrow-minded sectarianism.

And with God as our guide and companion, with Jesus Christ as our life-giving Lord, and with the Holy Spirit continuing to free us to overestimate what we can do together, as God's very own we can still "holler," and sing forth our full-throated Hosannas and Hallelujahs.

Let us pray:

O Lord, here may the faithful find salvation, and the careless be awakened; here may the doubting find faith, and the anxious be encouraged; here may the tempted find help, and the sorrowful comfort; here may the weary find rest, and the strong and joyful be renewed; here may the aged find consolation, and the young be inspired ... all within the sanctuary that is your world, and the sanctuary that we are, in Jesus Christ. Amen.