

Faith for the Future
John Wilkinson Third Presbyterian Church
April 6, 2008 Psalm 122

In “Choruses from ‘The Rock,’” T.S. Eliot utilized the notion of the *rock* as a metaphor for the church in Britain between the two world wars. The church is not wanted, Eliot was saying, but is needed more than ever.

“...I perceive approaching/ The Rock. Who will perhaps answer our doubtings./ The Rock. The Watcher. The Stranger. / He who has seen what has happened./ And who sees what is to happen./ The Witness. The Critic. The Stranger./ The God-shaken, in whom is the truth inborn.”

Does any of that represent a vision of the church for you? And then this: “And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored.” I don’t think that Eliot had a capital campaign in mind – perhaps something deeper than that.

Perhaps this: “What life have you if you have not life together?/ There is no life that is not in community,/ And no community not lived in praise of God.”

And though a little less poetic, the words of Avery and Marsh are no less true: “I am the church/you are the church/we are the church together./ All who follow Jesus/all around the world/ yes, we’re the church together./ The church is not a building,/ the church is not a steeple,/ the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.”

If all that is true, and I believe it is, then what on earth are we doing? We, whose tradition has moved from an understanding of God in a particular location to God in a particular person and relationship. We, whose Reformation forbears would have been horrified by the “ostentation” of our stained glass windows. We, who know how important, how vital – to our lives and to the life of the world – the church is, but who also know that it could never be captured in bricks and mortar.

What on earth are we doing?

“I was glad when they said to me – let us go to the house of the Lord.” I learned those words in Sunday school; perhaps you did as well. Perhaps that’s what we are doing – providing a place for God’s people to go, not to stay, but to go. To go to worship. To go to learn. To go to connect. To go to organize. To go to eat. And then a place from which to go back into the world to serve. A place that matters, that has mattered and will matter. That’s what we are doing, or seeking to do.

By now you might have heard the rumor that we are launching – today – a capital campaign, called “Faith for the Future.” If you are a visitor today, I apologize for the insider conversation. This effort has been at least five years in the making, with concentrated effort in the last 24 months, and a charge to the goal line since last June.

Hundreds of volunteers and hours too many to calculate. I am grateful for the extraordinary commitment that has been made thus far, by committee and cabinet members, by countless volunteers, by the fine staff of this congregation.

What we have learned is that this has become much more than we bargained for – and thankfully so. Much more comprehensive. Much more visionary. Much more extensive, clearly much more expensive.

We've not spoken of a specific dollar goal whose attainment will either make the campaign a success or not. Rather, we've spoken of a vision, a plan, needs, aspirations.

Following worship today, the visiting stewards we will commission in a moment will begin to place calls to schedule visits. We know you've received mailing upon mailing, had opportunity to attend multiple forums, visited the website. We hope that you are well informed, both about the vision undergirding the campaign and its specifics. These visits, then, are less about the campaign, and more about the church – the rock. Consider it a friendly chat about the church that matters to us.

One of the things that has struck me throughout this process is that this is a different kind of conversation. There are important institutions in our lives – our alma maters, museums, hospitals, cultural and civic groups. But I do believe that this is different, and your membership and participation here function in a distinct way. There is a transparency here, and faithful give and take about vision and opportunity. You belong here in a different way than you belong anywhere else. The vision is stronger because of the interaction we've had over the past months, and it will continue to strengthen because we are all in this together.

We've learned some interesting things thus far as we've planned and prepared and trained. We've been reminded what a wonderful treasure this facility is, and how complex it is, and how much it matters, and what we *haven't* done to maintain it over the past quarter century. And because we haven't really had a conversation like this in such a long time, we've realized that the needs produced a facility goal much larger than we anticipated.

And we've learned that the conversation about a capital campaign, the conversation about money, doesn't happen automatically or always easily. Institutions like ours should do these things a little more regularly than we have, and get used to the language. Get used to the question of "how much," for example. Unlike other campaigns that you may have experienced, we are not "suggesting" a specific amount for you to give. Churches do things differently, and this is one example of that.

Following your visits with a congregational visitor, and after prayerful consideration, we invite you to respond as you are led. No gift is too small, by any means. No gift is too big, either, we should add! Unlike those other institutions, we have no research department, no giving calculation.

The vision is expansive and calls for us to stretch, and then stretch a bit more. We believe the capacity for such a response exists in our life together. We are mindful of many things. The market, believe me. Our timing is what it is, and can't be anything else, but we are aware of market realities. We are aware that other wonderful Rochester organizations are doing similar things right now. And we are aware that individuals and households all have financial realities.

This is not about guilt...but grace. It is not about scarcity...but abundance. What we propose is a conversation, and an invitation, and prayerful consideration. If that happens, in good faith, how can we be anything but satisfied and gratified with the result?

There is no doubt that this vision represents a stretch in many ways for the Third Church family, including a financial stretch. And it should. As we've said, it's been a long time since we have done something like this, and the needs are real and important. At the end of the advanced and congregational phases of the campaign, we will pause and take stock of where we are. Right now, before we begin the congregational phase, and with many more leadership/advance gifts still being considered, we have already received commitments of \$3 million. We are hopeful that this preliminary result will still rise significantly.

This is terrific news, and, in fact, trumps all of the fundraising metrics that fundraisers use – multiples of annual giving, for example. Our realistic expectation – based on this early result, based on congregational capacity, based on apparent enthusiasm and support for the vision – is at least \$6 million, which would be a significant accomplishment for this congregation and would move us significantly ahead on our vision.

We would not stop there, of course, and will not. People have wondered, at least to me, what will happen if we do not reach our overall, long term vision of \$11 million. When I am feeling clever, I ask what we will do if we should surpass it! But it's a good and fair question. The Facilities Committee is at work looking at phasing and sequencing of the facilities plan, and other groups are doing the same. It would be premature at this point to “drop” anything off of the list. When the time comes for discussions of prioritization – that is, when all of the phases of the campaign are complete – the Campaign Cabinet will consult with appropriate church entities, including the Session and Trustees, to propose the wisest programmatic and financial recommendations that we can.

But even now, as we enter the starting block, I would call this a success. The result I just shared with you is significant. The planning and collaborating we have done has already raised the level of discourse among us. The information we've shared has heightened awareness of our vision and the resources we need to pursue it. And the conversations we are about to share will undoubtedly deepen our sense of connection and faithfulness, a result that we could never quantify but that will continue to bear important fruit.

Rummaging through the church archives, I discovered a sermon preached by one of my predecessors, Andrew Gillies, on January 2, 1927, at the time of the centennial

anniversary of Third Church. Gillies spoke of the Rochester of 1827, a rugged frontier village. “It was thriving, but it was raw.”

He then told the story of the building of the first Third Church, at Clinton and Main. “One Sunday the virgin timber stood there, untouched by the hand of man. During that one short week the trees were felled, the timber sawed, the walls were erected and the building complete even to the floors and seats. The following Sunday this enterprising people worshiped in their new edifice..” Holy cow...one week! “A fitting symbol,” Gillies opined, “of the spirit of that newborn church.”

Later in that sermon, he seeks to capture the spirit of this congregation. Try this on for size: “a widening vision of the nature of the Christian religion and of the function of the Christian church.” What he said of another predecessor, Paul Moore Strayer, we would say about this church: “proclaiming the larger gospel of the larger Christ and the greater task of an awakened church.”

That is our task. We stand on the shoulders of giants, and what we seek to do is to build on their legacy and to meet the evolving needs of a new church for a new generation living in a new world, forever building, forever decaying, forever being restored.

The calling we share is as vital as ever. And we need a place – a rock – from which to do it, a place that is hospitable and accessible, for us and for the community, a place that enhances our worship, that draws us in well and sends us out joyfully. It will take more than a week to pull off, to be sure, but will be worth every minute and every dollar.

In many ways, I imagine a frontier little different from that raw and rugged Rochester frontier of 1827. Women and men, children and youth, having been transformed, being called into the world with the task of restoration and reconciliation. A little less muddy, perhaps, but no less challenging – culturally, politically, theologically.

“I was glad when they said unto me – let us go to the house of the Lord,” our past teaches us. Let us seek such gladness for the present, and faith for the future. Amen.