

No Better Time than Now  
Psalm 100, II Corinthians 6: 1-13  
“See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation.” II  
Corinthians 6: 2b  
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Birthdays provide the occasion for celebration, and today we celebrate together the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Morningside Presbyterian Church. In 1925, First Presbyterian Church, in conjunction with Atlanta Presbytery, acquired a site in the new Morningside neighborhood of Atlanta, and Carl M. McMurray was called to organize a church. Through his tireless, enthusiastic efforts, the new mission that was Morningside began meeting in the cottage at 415 Morningside Drive on July 19, 1925. Twenty-three persons attended the first Sunday School. Thirty-five were in the morning worship, and sixty-two were present for the evening service. The church was formally chartered on November 15, 1925 with seventy-five persons listed as members. (1)

1925, Calvin Coolidge was president of the United States. Mussolini took on dictatorial powers over Italy. The Scopes trial raged on in the state of Tennessee. *The New Yorker* published its first issue. Some of us were alive in 1925, but not many of us. All of us are, however, heirs of the legacy of that handful of visionaries who seized the opportunity that was before them and discovered that, because they believed anything was possible, God brought a new community to life. That community has blessed the lives of countless people for the past 80 years.

By 1943, the church had grown to 564 members. Twenty-four years after its founding, in 1949, the congregation moved into its new home here on North

Morningside Drive. The pastor during that era of vitality and change was Dr. Arthur Vann Gibson, who served this church for almost thirty years a senior pastor. Vann Gibson, Charles Benz, Perky Daniel, Joyce Rimes, John Dickson: the honor roll goes on and on in terms of pastoral leadership, but the church has never been the pastor. The church is the people. The people call the pastor, and all of us, both congregation and pastor, are called to the body of Christ by God's actions through the power of Word and Spirit. (2) Morningside is not our church. Our history is really not our history. It is the history of the things Christ continues to do. We are a part of the narrative of creation and salvation that began at the beginning of time and which will continue until the one seated on the throne says at last, "See I have made all things new."

Birthdays are for remembering our past and our place in the grand scheme of things. They are also for rejoicing with thanksgiving and gladness in our hearts, two states of being not easily come by. One day last week, I sat stuck in traffic on I-85, I looked at the car stopped in the lane beside me. To tell the truth, there was not much gladness in my heart, but I noticed that the entire interior of the car next to mine was filled with brightly colored, helium-filled balloons. I could not even see the driver, though I assumed one was in there somewhere. Whoever the driver was, he or she had celebration as their destination. God blessed me with that sight. I stopped fuming over that traffic jam and began to do a little bit of rejoicing myself – that I am alive in this world right now, that God has given me good work to do and great people with which to do it. I became grateful that the sun was shining. There is so much grumpiness and negativity around these days, you **have** to laugh. You **have** to rejoice. These are the most important spiritual disciplines I can name.

When I finally broke free of the traffic jam and made it to the exit, I had to sit some more, this time at the traffic light. I began to notice that, as the cars in front of me came to the light, the late afternoon sun would shine on their left side so that they shimmered like diamonds. I began envisioning the drivers ahead, not as being in my way, but beloved by God. I found myself rejoicing that we were members of the human family, together in the world. It occurred to me that we reflect God's love by how we live our lives in the present moment, which, after all, is really all we have.

Remember Emily's haunting question in Thornton Wilder's, *Our Town*?

"Oh, earth, you are too wonderful for anyone to realize you! Do any human beings ever realize while they live it-every minute?"

Realizing the importance of the now: that is the most important activity associated with a birthday. More important than remembering, more important than rejoicing, as indispensable as they are, is the realization that today is the day of salvation. Now is the acceptable time, because ours is the God, not only who was or will be, but who is, active and present, building a new spirit of community among us now.

We are grateful for the heritage that lies behind us. We are hopeful for the future that will unfold before us. But now is the time for us to be and to do. This is our moment in healing. God has a plan and a purpose for us to fulfill. It's good to look at the scrapbooks and reminisce, but it's essential not to live in the past or to try to recreate it. It's good to dream dreams, but it's important to step up and do what needs to be done right now. We are here to respond to the new demands of this new day. The programs of our church must express and fulfill the longings of people now in 2005, not 1925, with relevant language and ministries that intersect with people's actual lives and the needs of the community in which God has placed us.

Parker Palmer, a thoughtful commentator on church and community, has written, “It is my view that the mission of the church is not to enlarge its membership, it is not to bring outsiders to accept its terms. The mission of the church is to love the world as God did and as **God does today.**” (3)

I am convinced that the most important growth issue for Morningside on the eve of its 81<sup>st</sup> year is not increasing the number of names on the rolls. It is to grow in our capacity to love the world as God does today. What does that love look like? It looks like our preschool. It looks like the seminar Jill Morehouse Lum offered on Friday for moms trying to avoid Christmas overload for themselves and their families. What does growing our capacity to love as God loves look like? It is offering healing spaces for all kinds of people. It is being a community of belief for people at different points on their journey into the mystery of God. It is Bible study and theological reflection. It is concern for the environment. It is nurturing a new generation of Christians eager to be faithful. It is glorious worship offered in praise to God. It is embracing people of different races and backgrounds, and physical and mental abilities, with no barriers to their full participation. Loving as God loves is being a community in which sexual orientation is the one of the least important things people need to know about one another. (4)

To love the world as God loves is to reach out in compassion to others. How we treat one another and we treat strangers on a daily basis are matters of eternal importance. That is the point of the parable of the final judgment in Matthew’s gospel. At the end of time, Christ, shown in the parable as king, judge, shepherd and lord, will sit upon the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. What will be the basis for his decision? Whether or not those who stand before him were

merciful to people in need. Both those who performed acts of mercy and those who did not were unaware of what they had done. They had responded or not responded when confronted with the need of another.

On Thursday, I attended a meeting of Intown Community Assistance. Our church has not been a part of this ministry in recent years. Yet, in Virginia Highland and Morningside, there are numbers of people without adequate food or shelter, whose utilities have been cut off, who are about to be evicted from their apartments or homes. I am glad that now we can join the effort to help our neighbors, since Christ himself is found in the exchanges of simple human kindness: “When you did it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me,” he said. You see the need. You do what you can, and the kingdom of God breaks through.

If I tell you what I am about to tell you, you will think that I am a little nuts for having religious experiences while waiting for traffic lights to change but I really did have another one last week. On Thursday, on my way to that meeting I just told you about, I was stopped at the light at Virginia and Highland. I noticed a man in a wheelchair on the sidewalk near the corner. I watched him try to wrap a dirty white blanket around himself. He finally got the blanket in place and was still. Only he wasn't still. He was shaking from the cold. All I could see were his feet sticking out and a trembling blanketed ball of human misery. I watched two people step round him hurrying along, neither looked at him. The light changed. I drove on to the meeting, where I was to be introduced, but I knew I had to come back. I excused myself as soon as I could and asked Leslie Prince to excuse herself. We arrived at the corner of Virginia and Highland just as a police officer was pushing the man in the wheel chair toward a patrol car. “Where are you taking him?” I asked.

“To Grady,” the young officer replied. “The thermometer is dropping to 20° tonight. At least he’ll be in out of the cold for now.”

Where was Jesus in that moment? In the kindness of the young officer?

Perhaps he was the one in the wheelchair.

Now is always the moment of decision: Do we pass by or stop and do what we can?

A young professional was asked if he could give a definition of apathy and agnosticism. “That’s an easy one,” he answered. “I don’t know, and I don’t care.” What our church must do is to offer an alternative to the twin epidemics, agnosticism and apathy, that threaten our society and our souls today. I believe with all my heart that the church, the body of Christ, serves its Lord best when it is willing to lose itself for the sake of others. Seminary Dean Michael Jenkins has written that the challenge before the church in 2005 is the recapturing of a vision of God’s mission in, for and to the world, a vision beautifully expressed fifty years ago by George MacLeod, of Scotland’s Iona community: “Our calling as followers of Jesus Christ and the mission of the church to which we belong is to be to others what Christ has become to us.”(5)

Here is the deal today, Morningside. All around us are people yearning for spiritual values to guide them to lead less selfish lives, yearning to connect with the mystery that is God, the love that is Christ, the new life that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. For their sake and for our own sake, (we, after all, have precisely the same longings) this church is still here. You and I have a wonderful opportunity today to ensure that the work will go on.

You who are members and friends of Morningside have thought about what this church means to you in recent days. You have reflected with gratitude on the ways your character has been strengthened, your heart lifted and your

home enriched by what happens here. I hope that you will be as faithful and as generous in this generation as those who founded and built this church were in theirs. I hope you realize the importance of this moment in the history of our church and the importance of the role you personally play in its present and in its future. I see you bathed in the light of God's love this morning. I am most grateful to be a part of this community of faith, where every day is the day of salvation.

Peter Gomes tells of an ancient lady who was asked on her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday the usual question, "To what do you owe your many years?"

"To time," she answered wryly. "The Lord has kept me around for a mighty long time; I guess He still has something for me to do, so I'll keep trying to find out what it is." (6)

Let me ask you this. What are you waiting for? In your own life, what is keeping you from doing the life-giving thing? What is keeping you from making the decision you know you need to make?

I have spoken before of my friends, the Brumleys who gave so much to their church and to their community before they were killed, along with other family members, in an airplane crash in Kenya. The Christmas before the crash, they gave to their friends a framed copy of a 2,000 year old Sanskrit poem which reads,

Listen to the salutation of the dawn.

Look to this day,  
For it is life,  
The very life of life.

In its brief course lies all  
The realities and truth of existence,  
The joy of growth,

the splendor of action,  
The glory of power

For yesterday is but a memory,  
And tomorrow a vision.

But today well lived,  
Makes every yesterday a memory of happiness,  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well therefore to this day.

This day, it is you and me and the ministry of Christ. Today, it is you and me and the Power of God.

Notes:

(1) From *Our Fiftieth Anniversary Year*, Morningside Presbyterian church, 1975.

(2) Michael Jinkins, "Courage, Fear, and the Future of the church," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005, p.22.

(3) *The Company of Strangers*

(4) Jon Walton, *To See the Future from Afar*, October 24, 1999.

(5) Jinkins

(6) *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 168.