

HISTORY AS SPIRITUAL GROUND

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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CALL TO WORSHIP - Phil Wentz

I grew up in a house that was built in 1710 with a final addition in the mid-1800's. I loved the 24" thick walls with those deep windowsills and the substantial might that kept the winter winds at bay. I loved the texture and colors of the Pennsylvania field stone that created those walls. One of my early heroes was a stonemason who worked on our house from time to time. History was a physical presence in eastern Pennsylvania all my life, yet the physical changes. What remains for me is the memory of my family and friends, family events, parties and weddings that happened in that house. Even the many craftsmen that worked on our house remain alive in my memory. Marshall McLuhan said **Tomorrow** is our permanent address and **We look at the present** through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future. My beloved home is only a memory now and can only be visited in my dreams. But my family and friends and the good times we shared and still share are alive and well. We can, as it seems only humans in community can do, look at the present in our mutual rear view mirror and know we walk arm in arm into the future, even if it is backwards.

Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

You sit this morning in an historic congregation. Founded in 1844, Atkinson Memorial Church was the third church in U.S. territory west of something – it's either the Mississippi River or the Rocky Mountains. Yet what is significant is that this church was founded quite intentionally as the first Free Church in Oregon Territory – west of whatever.

Here is an excerpt from the original Articles of Incorporation: [in its original and gender-specific language]

The object of this corporation shall be
to promote justice,
to defend the separation of Church and State,
to defend the right of each man to seek his God according to the dictates of his conscience,
to long for the right and be merciful,
to pity the suffering and assist the weak,
to forget wrongs and remember benefits,
to promote education and defend our public schools,
to love the truth and speak honest words,
to defend our American heritage of freedom,
and to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as its spiritual head and recognize his teaching
in faith, ethics, and discipline.

Can you see yourself standing in a lineage coming forward from that lofty statement of purpose? Surely, we have grown more inclusive in our language and our religious embrace, although the statement's lack of Christological language is significant for its time. But the key principle for the three founders – Peter Holt Hatch, Robert Moore and Osborne Russell – was to create an alternative to the two creed- dominated churches already in Oregon City. They wanted to create a free church for the free expression of thought and religious values. And so, here we are today.

Through all the ups and downs, twists and turns this congregation has taken over the past 163 years – and there have been many including at least two mergers and two schisms – throughout it all, an independence of spirit has been a strong thread running through congregational life. As Horace Bachelder wrote in his history, *The Liberal Church at the End of the Oregon Trail*, the lack of a binding creed of belief "drew free thinkers who were unable to accept the doctrinal positions required by other churches."

Some highlights of the past 163 years.

The church was founded in 1844 and served part-time by a couple of local ministers. George H. Atkinson was the first settled minister, arriving in 1848. Two years later, the first church building was constructed on the corner of Main and Moss Streets down below the bluff. It was a sanctuary, 36 by 21 feet. It cost \$3900, of which \$2300 was borrowed.

Atkinson served the church off and on for the next four decades. He was also busy founding schools as the first Superintendent of Schools in Clackamas County – he is known as the father of public education in Oregon. He also established many Congregational Churches throughout the state. He died in 1889 just at the time the congregation was expanding the original building. They laid a cornerstone in that new building in his honor. It read, In Memoriam, G.H. Atkinson, D.D. – Doctor of Divinity.

According to a newspaper report at the time, the first church building “is so skillfully incorporated into the new church as to puzzle the casual observer as to which is the old and which is the new.” It was built at a cost of \$7,425. Old pictures show an impressive, gabled edifice built of wood.

The building served the growing church and the wider community well until Feb. 4, 1923. That was the Sunday morning when fire was discovered in a wall at 5 o'clock in the morning. Can you imagine coming to church that Sunday, seeing smoke in the air and realizing, as you grew closer, that it was your church that was on fire? The blaze moved so quickly through the wooden building that members were only able to save a few pieces of furniture – including this Atkinson's pulpit chair. It now sits in my office. It has since been re-caned – I have no idea what they would say on Antiques Road Show about that. It probably needs a sign that is less raggedy and faded.

When the fire was out and the ashes cleared, they also found the Atkinson memorial cornerstone, now cracked in two by the heat. You can see that very cornerstone in the glass case in the Library, which also includes such artifacts as the uniforms from a church baseball team.

The congregation moved quickly in the face of disaster, a month later they made the decision to buy this lot for \$7,000. The new cornerstone for the building was laid in September 1924. The church, which eventually cost \$72,782, was dedicated in February 1925. Willard Tobey was the architect. The windows are by the Povey Brothers. It seems that in this building, the members were honoring the past and building for the future.

This building continued to serve both the congregation and the community. According to Bachelder's history, it once could hold over 1000 people. That was 260 on the main floor, 200 in the balconies, 300 on the floor of the Dome Room and another 200 in the center balcony. There was also overflow seating for another 200 in the library and in what is now the office. I think people were smaller back then and more comfortable sitting far closer to one another. Oregon City High School held graduation ceremonies here for many years because it was the largest meeting space in town.

Many of you know the stories. The roof leaked from Day One. Bachelder wrote: “On rainy days the minister and others regularly emptied the pans and buckets that were placed in the balconies below the towers.” Someone got the idea that the tower was causing the leaking and so the tower that once rose above that balcony was dismantled. Alas, it did not have the desired effect. The roof continued to leak until it was completely redesigned and rebuilt in the 1980s. The leaks didn't go away but are greatly diminished. The Facilities Folks think they just may have the last major leak in the Library fixed. [KNOCK WOOD!]

I tell you these stories not for themselves alone. We stand at a key point in the history of this congregation, as did those people 80-plus years ago. We have a chance to build on what has come before us and give a gift to the future. As Phil said earlier, quoting Marshall McLuhan, **Tomorrow** is our permanent address and **We look at the present** through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.

I loved it when, at a recent meeting with our architects, William Gifford said that we want to be sure that what we build today will still serve a congregation that will be here 100 years from now. We are looking both backward and forward simultaneously.

This is how the late Rev. Peter Raible put it:

We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
(and) we drink from wells we did not dig.

We know the gifts of those from the past – mostly nameless to us, unless we read the church history on-line. We can see the foundations we did not lay – even the heat-cracked cornerstone that another group long ago dedicated to the free expression of religion. We are still warmed by fires lit more than a century and a half ago. We drink deeply of the wells that others dug. We plan to keep those fires of inspiration and spirit burning and that well full of the sweet clear water of a free faith.

Yet there are traps that we must take care to avoid.

Billy Collins warns of the trap of nostalgia. Looking backward, enamored of the past, failing to greet the present moment, capturing its gifts and its potential.

Even this morning would be an improvement over the present.
I was in the garden then, surrounded by the hum of bees
and the Latin names of flowers, watching the early light
flash off the slanted windows of the greenhouse
and silver the limbs on the rows of dark hemlocks.

Yet for all Collins' backward looking, he does embrace the future:

that place where people are doing a dance we cannot imagine,
a dance whose name we can only guess.

We must use the past, carry it with us here in the present and even into the future, but not let it hold us apart from what is happening now and all that we might create together.

Another trap is thinking that the building is our central concern. Yes, we are attached to this building; it is so beautiful and noble.

And it's not that the building is utterly separate from our spiritual experience. We speak proudly of the warm and welcoming nature of this congregation, our wide embrace of one another and of a wider religious view. I have always thought the architecture of the sanctuary especially feeds that spirit. The arching embrace of the pews that is wider than they are deep. The height of this chancel, which makes those in the balcony seem so close. This is a round, and warm and embracing building. Its character is reflected in the character of the people who inhabit it on Sunday and throughout the week.

Still, putting the building and any part of it as central can become a trap, a kind of idolatry.

As Phil told us of his centuries old boyhood home – it's not about the building, but the memories and relationships fostered there. We, too, need remember that it's not about the church building; it's about the people and the community we create.

Except that can be a trap, too. When we place the community at the center, we can become self-centered and self-absorbed. We can come to think that what we do here is just about us. Our central concern can become how the church serves our needs alone.

It's not just about the building or just about the community, although it is about both. We are not just our history. The history and the building are foundations upon which we stand, and they do matter. Just as being a people in

community matters. Yet if we put any one of those – history, or the building, or community – at the center, we are diminished. Our religious task must be to land in and on all three, and yet not to land too hard.

What must lie at the center is the spirit, the mission of the church. Why are we here?

Our mission has clear roots in the past. From the first Articles of Incorporation:

we are here to promote justice...
to defend the right of each man to seek his God according to the dictates of his conscience,
to long for the right and be merciful,
to pity the suffering and assist the weak,
to forget wrongs and remember benefits,...
to love the truth and speak honest words

Those early founders indeed planted trees we still find shade beneath, fires that burn yet in our hearts.

And the legacy of George H. Atkinson, in whose memory we still stand, continues to be reflected in our present.

From his obituary, we find a man of great energy and spiritual depth, yet with a decided this-worldly focus. He knew that our purpose is to contribute "to the growth of the Kingdom of God." Yet he knew saw that as a "demand of this, our mortal life." Our energies should be spent on promoting "the growth of mind and soul," living lives of spirit even in the face of "the multiplying activities and efforts called forth in the endless differentiation of modern life." (I think in every age, the present can feel overwhelming, perhaps why as Collins notes, we spend time more easily in past and future.)

Atkinson also was clear that his work – the work of creating the Kingdom – must be done in the real and material world of affairs – the world of schools and public institutions – that they might help people grow and develop as whole and healthy people serving a greater good.

Certainly, we still warm ourselves at the fire that Atkinson lit. We know that the Holy calls us to nurture the spirit, growing in mind and soul, that we might

We stand on the spiritual ground of a long and storied history. We will spend time quite intentionally this fall, reflecting on our history. In a few weeks, we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of this church with the Boones Ferry Unitarian Universalist Congregation – a more recent turning point in the life of this church.

We stand on the spiritual ground of a long and storied history, of committed and passionate people who dreamed of creating a better world in the present, here and now, within the span of their lifetimes. Indeed, may what they dreamed be ours to do. Yet what they dreamed arises from an even more ancient source.

We are the inheritors of the Living Word that has sounded through ages, calling us to respond to the call of the Holy, calling us:

to promote justice
to seek the Holy according to our conscience,
to long for the right and be merciful,
to forget wrongs and remember benefits
to love the truth and speak honest words

To see the holy as it arises anew in every age, in our time and in time to come.

Amen and blessed be.