

### **(3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)**

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler

January 27, 2019

“Happy Birthday, Church!”

Nineteen years ago today, our phone rang around 6:30 am. It was a call from the hospital in Monroe. A parishioner's mother was dying and the family wanted me to come to be with them. At the same time, Staci had just gone into labor, the contractions were getting stronger and closer together. We called another woman, one of the three nurse midwives that had seen Staci through the pregnancy. She came over the house. I went to the hospital. I sat with the family as the doctor updated them on the decline of the mother. A few hours later, I was paged. I met up with Staci in the birthing unit. Around 12:30 pm, Sam was born. The mother? Well, she lived another five years.

For the first time over those nineteen years, we are not able to be with Sam on his birthday. We were able to drive up yesterday to be with him and to celebrate.

Our baby is no longer a child, rather, a young man in college. What will his future be, I wonder? What will our future, as his parents be?

Robert Frost famously said, “In three words I can sum up everything I have learned in life - ‘It goes on.’”

As it does, things change, people change and so does our experiences. The hospital where Sam was born is no longer there. It was torn down to make way for a new, bigger, more modern hospital. Sam is no longer a baby or a high school student. He is now, as you know, a college student, learning about how to be out on his own. And Staci and I are learning new ways of being parents and “Empty Nesters.” Life is different once again for us. We are making the adjustments to new ways of being his parents as Sam is to being our son. Together, we talk about our futures, thankful for what has been and excited about what lies ahead for him and for us.

Birthdays, like holidays, are often a time to look back, share memories and remember days gone by. Oh, and eat dessert too!

Birthdays are also a time to look forward, hopeful of a new year of life, new possibilities, new adventures before us, knowing that as life moves on, so do we. Try as we might to hold on to days gone by, changes come around, people age, and life keeps moving onward into the future.

Whether you know it or not, 2019 is your “birthday” too. On March 3, 1849, on the shore of Lake Ripley, Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church was born. OCPC is 170 years old! Happy Birthday or if you wish, Happy Anniversary!

All around us are items that adorn the sanctuary and fellowship hall that serve as reminders of these past 170 years. The picture of the founding pastor, Rev. Dr. William Cargen, who came from Scotland, settled here and started the first congregation. His original tombstone lies outside in the Peace Garden, having been replaced by a newer stone in the Lake Ripley Cemetery. Which if you did not know, is the location of the original church, or should I say, two rooms built into the side of the hill that served as the “church”.

In the display case are other items dating back to the beginning of the ministry of OCPC.

There are many things that adorn the sanctuary - communion table quilt, the members quilt that hangs out by the kitchen, memorial plaques on some of the pews, baptismal fount, and many other pieces of furniture in the sanctuary.

Each thing has a connection to the past, that for some of you, connects you to a loved one or former church member, who was known to you. They help us to remember our story, who we were, where we have come from, and who we are today. Though, who we are today is not who OCPK was in the past. We know longer worship in the dug out two-room space in the hillside at the cemetery. Do you ever wonder how those who first worshipped in that dug out two-room space out at the cemetery felt about moving from that location to this one? What vision did they have for the future of their congregation? Did they ever think it would look anything like it does today?

Over 170 years, life has moved on, many changes have occurred, and things are different.

Actually, we are no longer who were five years ago when I started. We have lost some members to death. A few have moved out of the area. The children who made up our Sunday School and children's time have, like us, aged, and now are busy with all kinds of new activities on Sundays.

We also have added some new members to our church. Changes have also come to the sanctuary. We know longer have a choir or choir loft.

Some of you might lament these changes? Others welcome them. And again, "life goes on".

If as Frost says, "Life goes on", then were are we headed as a congregation?

What is our future? As we know church and the expectations around it are still changing.

When I started in the ministry, pastors could expect to serve full-time with benefits. That has changed. It is now the expectation and not the rule.

You no longer have nor can you afford a full-time pastor with benefits. I serve now in a bivocational ministry, serving you and the McFarland School District. That is a big change for both of us.

Mark Touhey is not here this morning. He is representing John Knox Presbytery at a meeting with two small congregations who are for their first time considering sharing a minister if they are to survive.

One of the congregations Staci is serving is now considering, if they are to remain a viable ministry, finding grant money to turn their building into a neighborhood center. Already their building is being used by the school across the street for meetings, strings lessons, community theatre groups, and a Spanish speaking pre-school. They are looking for ways to expand the usage, knowing that the church they once were no longer exists and if they are to have a future, they must adapt to the changes in church and cultural.

Some congregations are selling their buildings, looking to find new, creative spaces that allow them to better serve the members and community.

"Life goes on" for them, as it will for us. What will our future be?

About 25 years ago, members of this church wisely decided to do a major remodeling. The kitchen and fellowship hall were moved upstairs, so were the bathrooms, making them handicap accessible. The sanctuary got a face-lift. Now everything is pretty much on one level. If they had not thought to make those changes, how many of you might not be able to join us for worship or would be more limited in how you could participate?

In more recent years, we as a congregation have been blessed with and relied on two generous gifts in the form of financial endowments to sustain our ministry. Since I have been here, we received a timely gift that allowed us to re-roof the church. The market was strong enough that we were able to repave the parking lot, add much needed storm windows for the stained glass windows and replace many of the windows.

While these are all wonderful and necessary repairs and improvements, is this what the original founding members envisioned for the future of this church? Is all that we have to offer as a congregation going into our future, simply maintaining a building for use on Sunday morning?

Or is there a new, creative way for us to be the church? Changes will come. Like our building, we will continue to age, and with age, find we too are in need of constant repairs. We will no longer be able to do some of the things we used to have the time, energy, and ability to do.

But that doesn't mean we no longer have a purpose.

What will our future be? That becomes a question we should begin to explore together as we celebrate our 170th birthday this year! Because the time will come, when like those original members, we will no longer be more than a distant memory of some. But what we do now, will make a difference in what, if anything, a future generation might be able to do in ministry as a part of OCPC.