

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
May 17, 2007  
140<sup>th</sup> Year of the First Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: More than a Social Club

I thought it would be a good idea to begin this sermon with a bit of church history. According to our church history book written by Mrs. Katherine A. Morton and William R. Dubois when we celebrated our 100<sup>th</sup> year as a church in 1969: "On April 29, 1869, the Presbytery of Missouri met in Sioux City, IA and appointed the Rev. Sheldon Jackson as the superintendent of an area that covered Central Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana, Utah, Wyoming and Colorado. This assembly of Presbyterians was 'deeply impressed with the extent and destitutions of the territory and the necessity of an agency for exploration and supervision.'" In other words, an undeveloped area of around 680,000 square miles needed to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and it needed to be presented in a decent and orderly manner as was and still is the Presbyterian way.

The Rev. John L. Gage was commissioned as a missionary to Cheyenne and Laramie, WY by Rev. Jackson. On May 18, 1869, he began his work with nine men and women in Cheyenne by writing and sending a letter to Rev. Jackson asking that a Presbyterian Church be established in Cheyenne. These nine people were: William L. Thompson, Mrs. E.H Thompson, S. J. Scribner, George H. Russell, Mrs. Anna Becker, Mrs. B. Lyon, Mrs. Jennie Hook and Mrs. M.K. Karns. The organizational meeting took place in the school house at the Southwest corner of 19<sup>th</sup> and Ferguson Streets (now Carey Ave). That school building eventually became Evers Hardware, but was torn down and is now a bank parking lot.

By the spring of 1869, Cheyenne had become the "Magic City of the Plains," but thirty persons had been killed by Indians within a radius of fifty miles of the city that year, so safety from attack was still of great concern. Seeing this problem, the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church and these dedicated founding members moved fast for by February 1, 1870, Rev. W. G. Kephart became the first installed pastor and by July 17, 1870, a small frame prefabricated edifice valued at \$7,000 was built and dedicated at 18<sup>th</sup> and Ferguson. (Where the Twin Dragon parking lot is now located). This land was given to the church by the Union Pacific railroad. The church was called Krebs Memorial after The Rev. Dr. Krebs, the beloved deceased pastor of the Rutgers Church of New York City which gave a great deal of the money to build the frame church in Cheyenne. At that time, the Methodists and the Episcopalians already had established churches in Cheyenne.

Now, what motivated these Presbyterians to work so hard in the face of the many risks and dangers of those days to establish a Presbyterian Church in Cheyenne? I cannot speak for those pioneers, but today's lectionary passages may give us some insights.

Psalms 98, the basis of our last hymn today, "Joy to the World," is a grand place to begin. This psalm opens with; "O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done

marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.” Could it be the Presbyterians of 140 years ago wanted to sing a new song to the Lord in Cheyenne? Could it be with the establishment of that framed church at 18<sup>th</sup> and Ferguson they saw God doing a marvelous thing? Could it be they saw God’s right hand at work and celebrated God’s victory over any obstacles that got in the way? Could it be they knew that God’s steadfast love was with them as they pioneered the founding of this congregation where they could “break forth into joyous song and sing praises to God?” I think all this and more was possible for those people of faith, courage and wisdom in 1869. Should not these insights from Psalm 98 also motivate us to sustain and grow the First Presbyterian Church in 2009?

The gospel lesson from John adds more to the motivation behind the founding of this congregation. I firmly believe that in 1869 the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. Jackson, Rev. Gage and those nine men and women were also motivated by the love of Jesus Christ for them. Jesus first chose to love them, abide in them and make them his friends. They must have known this for they had confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior which has always been the basis of membership in the Presbyterian Church. They must have also understood Jesus’ words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” in referring to his sacrifice on the cross for them. In response to this greatest of love, these dedicated Christians of 1869-70 practiced what Jesus taught them, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” “You see they understood that friendship with Jesus does not signify membership in some privileged social club, for in reality it is a call to service and to loving faithfulness.” Unfortunately, around that time there was a Cheyenne Social club, but it was not the love of Jesus Christ that was practiced there. In contrast, fortunately, the founders of First Presbyterian Church were motivated by the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ and knew they had been chosen as his friend by him to spread his saving love to others. [Texts for Preaching-Year B](#) pg.324

These Christian men and women of 1869-70 indeed practiced Christ’s call to service and loving faithfulness by bearing fruit for the Lord. They did not allow First Presbyterian Church to become a social club. They chose to express their faith in Christ by spreading the good news and love of Christ to the community of Cheyenne through their time, talents and money. By February 15, 1871, the church had grown to the point where it could become incorporated. The first purpose of this congregation listed in the articles of incorporation was: “for the support of the gospel and the maintenance of religious worship.” These pioneers of the First Presbyterian Church did this as they bore fruit in response to Christ’s commandment, “that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Over the 140 years of our congregation’s existence and ministry, nearly 12,000 members and many ministers have responded to Christ’s love commandment in good times and bad with countless numbers of prayers, millions of hard earned dollars,

thousands upon thousands of volunteer hours and an unstoppable faith in Jesus Christ. This magnificent house of worship is testimony to such love and faith.

140 years later, in response to Jesus' sacrificial love, and his choosing to call us his friends; we also have confessed him as Lord and Savior. We have also courageously continued Christ's ministry as the First Presbyterian Church. We do this not as any social club, but as the living body of Christ who continues to "support the gospel and maintain religious worship." In response to Christ's command "that you love one another as I have loved you," our vision statement has become "Bringing People Together in Christ's Love." Our bringing people together in Christ's love now includes outreach not only to the Cheyenne community, but to the State of Wyoming, the whole of the USA and to hundreds of countries in the world by our mission support through the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Yes, we have our own struggles in 2009 which are not unlike the challenges members before us had faced such as a hurting economy and an aging congregation. But the mission of this congregation to support the gospel, and provide a place of worship continues. Yes, through the friendship and love of Christ, we continue to receive new members of all ages, are expanding our programs of outreach through the Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality Network, the Day of Giving, by beginning a Mother of Preschoolers program, by our ongoing searches for a full-time Youth Director and an Associate Pastor, by inviting a retired Lutheran Pastor, Roger Rapp, to help us out in the meantime. By the grace of God and your generosity, we are staying on the positive side financially. Yes, the friendship and love of Jesus Christ continues to help us to bear fruit for his gospel in 2009. The members of this church still exhibit the same faith and courage of our founding members from 1869.

The story of Peter preaching to the Gentiles in Acts also speaks to what may have motivated our founding fathers and mothers in the faith in 1869. During the first century AD when the Christian faith was in its early development, there was debate about whether or not these Jewish Christians were to reach out to the Gentiles. As one reads the gospels, it appears that Jesus made it clear to do so, but the early church still struggled with the idea. Then God spoke through the Holy Spirit to Peter to go preach to a family of Gentiles whose head of the family was also a Roman Army commander named Cornelius. While sharing the gospel story with them, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word, they spoke in tongues and were baptized. This changed the whole attitude and direction of the early church to include Gentiles like you and me. This was a miraculous and blessed event brought on by the Holy Spirit of God because the good news of salvation has reached through the centuries to include and motivate

Gentiles like the Presbyterians of 1869 and 2009.

I believe that along with the friendship and love of Christ, the same Holy Spirit who spoke to the Apostle Peter in 30 AD and to those Presbyterians 140 years ago, speaks to us today to motivate or enthuse us to spread the word of salvation through God in Jesus Christ. It fills us with the energy to continue and expand on the fruitful ministry First Presbyterian Church offers today. The opportunities are before us. One area the Holy Spirit is calling us to work on is small groups so we might offer more and better

programs to include un-churched people of all ages. I hope a new associate pastor will help us there. Another area is establishing another Presbyterian Church in the south of Cheyenne, most likely a bilingual and multicultural church. How are we to do this? I have not a clue, but the Holy Spirit will show the way. The same Holy Spirit of the first century A.D., of 1869 and of 2009 is working on us to keep us from becoming a social club and to continue to enthuse us to expand on the fruitful ministry First Presbyterian Church offers today.

Returning to 1869 for a moment, let us recall what those Presbyterians saw as they looked upon 680,000 square miles of unsettled territory. They “were deeply impressed with the extent and destitutions of the territory and the necessity of an agency for exploration and supervision.” Today’s American society can still be seen this way but for different reasons. Our Dearest Friend Jesus Christ, and his love along with the Holy Spirit of God, are calling us to take on the same intimidating challenge offered in 1869. In the lesson from I John 5 we find the word from God that encouraged our church founders and encourages us today. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God!”

Let us sing to the LORD a new song, for in the midst of the challenges before us he has done and will continue to do marvelous things.