

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

September 20, 2009

The Treasure of the Church
(first in series, *Treasures of the Church*)

Ministry group recognized: Sunday School Teachers

This week I learned that while I was absent, Children's Day was celebrated around the theme, *Treasures of the Church*. The treasures of the church were defined as the people of the Church, in other words, the church itself; we who are united in friendship through our common faith and dedication to the Christian cause at this time and in this place. It was a fine Children's Day theme grounded in solid theology. The *Treasures of the Church* theme will be continued this fall. Each Sunday a different ministry group within the church will be emphasized. Today that group is Sunday School teachers.

The old Avery and Marsh refrain captured the idea so well for many of our generation when we sang:

The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.

Indeed. How well I know the value of such a treasure having so recently been away from it. Even though I did what were for me fascinating and inspiring things while on Sabbatical leave, which I would never have wanted to forego, somewhere around mid summer I found myself yearning to be among you once more. I began to wonder just how everyone at First Church was doing, what was going on, what good things were happening?

Good things, of course, are what happen in a church. I don't say this because I am such a Polly Anna that I do not face up to trouble, either for individual members or for all of us together as an organization. After over thirty years of pastoral ministry I certainly know that trouble for the church and its people is as regular as morning clouds. There is always trouble or illness or heartache for at least one someone in our faith family, and usually for many more than one, and there is never a time without institutional challenges of one sort or another. Never. That might merit repeating. In any church, there is never a time without difficulties of one sort or another. If anyone would ever look for a church whose members never have problems or pain, and which as a

congregation never has stressful challenges to face, such a church would not be found. Not even for a day.

Now, here's the point. And perhaps you would say the same thing. So often when I have experienced the difficulties of church life I have also witnessed the difficulties overcome. First the bad, then the overcoming, than the good. First the bad, then the overcoming, than the good. First the bad, than the overcoming, than the good. It is the rhythm of Christian life, the rhythm of church life. That is why I wondered this summer what good things were happening at First Church. I know your faith! I have seen it in action many times! I know it is always overcoming something!

This week I could not read the beginning lines of Paul's first letter to the ancient Corinthian church and not be struck in particular by the fourth verse. *I give thanks to my God always for you.* Oh my! How I thank God for all of you with whom I am blessed to serve in the great calling of our lives, to proclaim by what we say and do the gospel of love and reconciliation to our needy world. So much hope is needed during this time of extended economic recession. And in the church we have this treasure, not of gold or silver, but of people of faith, the treasure that ultimately meets every need, that always finally overcomes.

While on Sabbatical I was privileged to visit the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. This is the first church which Martin Luther King served as pastor. It was to Dexter Avenue Baptist that he moved as a young man fresh out of seminary with his new bride to begin his ministry. He intended his coming there to be the beginning of a lifetime of local church pastoral service. But within almost a year of his arrival Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat located toward the front of a bus to a white man and suddenly for Martin Luther King his world changed, and overcoming, of going from bad to good, would become his *life's* theme. Rosa Parks was not a member of King's church, nevertheless along with his new friend Ralph Abernathy who was the pastor from a church a few blocks away, King gathered with other local pastors in the Fellowship Hall of King's Church. That was the first meeting of leaders of what would become the Montgomery Bus Boycott which for thirteen months provided transportation primarily through local church volunteers to anyone who would otherwise have used the public bus system. I stood in that basement Fellowship Hall at Dexter Avenue and just marveled at it. I had shivers of excitement. It looked simply like thousands of other church basements in the United States, much like our own dining room on a smaller scale, tiled floors, every so often steel poles bracing the upper levels, eight foot folding tables, paint chipped steel folding chairs, Sunday School pictures posted on the walls. Yet such a holy and powerful place! There in that little church basement, those gathered pastors would face the bad, and plan the Montgomery bus boycott, and then together with the real treasure of their churches begin the overcoming. How those pastors might have thanked God for *their* people!

The present economic recession has created difficulties for First Church as it has for many other churches. I do not return at a time of no challenge for us. There are budgetary uncertainties now and into the next few years that are at least as significant as ever before. Some of us have lost jobs, others received a cut back in working hours, still others a decrease in salary or pension and investment income, some of us are being required to take unpaid furloughs.

And yet we have this treasure, our Christian friends in the church. We continue to love and understand and encourage and help each other, and together, as the church of the Living Christ, we keep sailing upon the turbulent waters. And day by day, year by year, we ride out the storm. With the Ruler of All in the prow, who orders the winds, *Peace! Be Still!* together, we ride out the storm. What one can not do another can, and together we ride out the storm. What a privilege to be your pastor! What a privilege for us all to be friends among each other! Where else is treasure like that in the world? Where else is treasure like that?