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Tryon Presbyterian Church

Sanctuary

Text: Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. (Psalm 96:6)

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

I suspect that many of us make our way into this sanctuary each week without thinking too much about it. But that's not true for everyone. Recently I was talking with one of our visitors who was deeply moved by the experience of being in our sanctuary for the first time. It made me remember the first time I walked into this space in the spring of 2008. I was teaching at Columbia Theological Seminary at the time, and Mary Potter had called the seminary to find someone to lead the Stephen Ministry retreat. At the time I had never been to Tryon and didn't even know where it was. I agreed to lead the retreat. A couple of months later when I arrived to lead the retreat, I got to the church a bit early. Immediately I was struck by the sanctuary. It was totally unexpected to find such a structure in a small town in rural North Carolina. When I went inside for the first time, the interior almost took my breath away. I loved the stone, the wood, and the colors, and the magnificent way the nave, or ceiling rises, and even the fact that the pews weren't in straight lines.

This sanctuary is a big part of our building renovation project that we announced last week. This morning I want to take a few minutes and tell you why this sanctuary is important. In the weeks to come I will highlight other aspects of this project.

First a little background. The word sanctuary comes from the Latin *sanctus*, meaning holy. The root of the word holy means to “set apart.” Something is holy when it is not ordinary or profane, when it is special, when it is inspiring, when it moves us, humbles us, and touches our hearts and souls.

Our ancient Hebrew foreparents believed that God was present in a special way in certain places, the Temple in Jerusalem for example, or the Tabernacle, the large portable tent like structure that the Hebrews carried on their way to the Promised Land. They called those special places where they felt God’s presence, “sanctuaries.” And so the psalmist could write in Psalm 68:35: “Awesome is God in his sanctuary.” Or as Psalm 63:2 asserts: “So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory” (Psalm 63:2). Sanctuary is an important word in the Bible and actually occurs over 200 times.

Our Biblical foreparents believed that God’s presence in the sanctuary brought peace and protection. And that led to another meaning for the word sanctuary – a place of refuge. For centuries people believed that the sanctuary of the church was sacred, and when someone was in the sanctuary they could not be harmed. That is no longer true today, but sanctuary is still important. I’ve heard more than one person speak of the sanctuary as a place of spiritual refuge from today’s often noisy, chaotic, and uncertain world. And I don’t know about you, but I do experience a peace in this building that I don’t usually experience on Trade Street, for example.

Protestants have long been reluctant to associate God’s presence with any specific physical place or thing, and for good reason. The building may be inspiring, and my experience of being in the building may in fact seem to mirror some sense of God’s spiritual presence, but God is so much more than any one experience of his presence, or the sacredness of any building. At times it’s all too easy to let a building become so important that it can overshadow the reality of God’s presence. At the same time though, it is also true that there are churches and other places in our lives that are special, even sacred spaces and places. And they are sacred to us because the experiences we have in those places are sacred.

One of the reasons is that sanctuaries remind us of God’s presence has to do with their architectural design, and the symbols they incorporate. Sometimes it is almost like the structure itself seems to give voice to God’s Spirit. This morning I want to walk you through some of the elements included in our sanctuary.

Some of you know these stories better than I do. Jim McPherson preached an excellent sermon describing this sanctuary in January 1985. Now I know some of you were here then and you’re pretty good at remembering things, but that

was a while ago, and before the time many of us who have come to Tryon, so this will be a good reminder.

Our sanctuary is actually built in the shape of a boat. The image of a ship was often used in the early church as a symbol for the church. The image also recalls Noah's experience of being saved from the flood through the use of an Ark or ship.

The sanctuary was designed by Holland Brady and given to the church through the incredibly generous gift of Frank MacGregor in 1957, a gift that was made to honor his sister Ruth MacGregor who died at sea in 1918 on her way to Europe to serve in the armed forces, hence his interest in the image of a boat.

Technically our sanctuary is neo-gothic in design. The high ceiling or nave draws the viewer's eyes upward, and toward the large cross in the front, not necessarily because God is literally up there somewhere, but because it reminds us that as human beings we are pretty tiny in relation to the grandeur of God. The church is actually in the shape of a cross, and there are also crosses on the pulpit and baptismal font.

The natural materials, the stone, wood, and natural colors are subtle reminders of the doctrine of the Incarnation, that just as God was present in the person of Jesus, God's Spirit is also present in the common ordinary elements of life.

Robin Lattimore, gifted historian author of numerous books focused on the history of this region wrote a history of Tryon Presbyterian Church in 2013 as a part of our celebration of the 90th anniversary of the founding of our church. (Copies available in the Narthex – or through the church office – if you haven't had a chance to read it). One of the unique and beautiful aspects of our sanctuary are the stained glass windows. Also not something many of us spend a lot of time thinking about. Robin is going to tell us a bit about the history of these windows. [Robin described the windows and their symbolism derived in part from the seal of the PCUS (the old Southern Presbyterian Church before reunion in 1983. He pointed out that the windows were designed and built by the Wilbur H. Burnham Studio of Boston Massachusetts, the same firm that was responsible for seventeen windows in the National Cathedral in Washington DC, ten windows for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and five for the Riverside Church in New York.]

You will notice that we have two candles on the Communion table. The light of a candle traditionally symbolizes the presence of God. In the Gospel of John Jesus describes himself as the "light of the world." The candles are symbolic of that light. Some churches use many candles. We use two, symbolizing Jesus' divine and human natures.

It is no accident that the Communion Table, the Baptismal font, and the pulpit are central elements of worship, all reminding us of Jesus' ministry, his presence, and our response in following him.

Many have asked about the ringing of the bell. The bell was a gift to our church by the family of Robert L. Dick in 1972. The bell weighs 400 pounds and was manufactured

in South Carolina. Traditionally bells were used as a way to mark time. We ring ours every Sunday as a way to signify that in worship we move from the ordinary events of our day into a special time, awareness, and openness as we worship God.

Fifty seven years have passed since this sanctuary was dedicated. Although there have been a few changes over the years, it is still much the same as it was when it was dedicated on October 12, 1958. And one of the reasons for our building project is that this sanctuary is badly in need of an update.

- Repairs are needed to the cross on front of the sanctuary, the slate roof, the church's exterior, and electrical system.
- Pews: the distance between them makes it very difficult to climb over people and the side aisles too narrow for wheelchairs and walkers. Last week at the meeting to describe the building plans, Ken Shull described the problems with the pews as similar to mass economy class on a cheap airline.
- The existing bathrooms have the same problem as the economy class restrooms on an airplane and need to be updated.
- The chancel area is crowded and difficult to access for the choir, and too small for the number of choir members that we have, and has no flexibility for special programs or the use of instruments.
- The lighting and sound system badly need updating.
- The stained glass windows need attention. The old glazing on the outside needs changing in order to see the windows. New glazing will allow 20% more light into the sanctuary. The windows themselves need some repairs, and a new cover to protect them and ensure good weather seal.
- In addition, making any major changes to the building obligates us to meet Building Code requirements such as more than one exit to the building, adequate width to the aisles, and accessibility for those with disabilities

The plan for renovation is designed to address these and other concerns while maintaining and enhancing the beauty of our facility.

In 1958 our spiritual foreparents dedicated this sanctuary to the glory of God. Together they worked to build this facility. It wasn't easy. Their commitment to quality, beauty, and function was in many ways a statement of their faith. To be sure their faith lived in their hearts, and not literally in this building, but for over fifty years this building has been a reminder of their vision, commitment, and their faith. In a world like we live in such a reminder is still important.

At times in our lives when the faith inside us may not be as strong as we would like, sometimes a symbol of that faith, like a cross, or a beautiful window, or even the beauty of a sanctuary, the sound of a brilliant pipe organ, or the sounds of people worshiping together can remind us of our own faith. And in a strange, humbling, and awe-inspiring way such things can make us a little more

aware of the magnificent glory, and incredible love and mercy of the God we worship.

That is why we have a building for worship. And that is why we are undertaking this renovation. The work that we will do in this project is important for all kinds of practical reasons, but it will also be a statement of our faith, and at least a small part of our witness to the world. On July 17 you and I will make a statement of our faith as we make our own commitments to support this effort. The question each of us will have to answer in making that commitment is what do we believe?