

Reflections on Faith and Central United Methodist Church Franklin Street

Delivered during Worship

by Jim Lambert

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A month or so ago Rev Ferree told me he would be gone today and asked me to speak in his absence about my faith. "Just 5 to 7 minutes" he said. "Sure" I told him. I thought there would be others speaking and I could just slip something in between them. I didn't realize I would be the main act.

I hope all of you were here last week to hear the message from Joe Banner. What a great job he did! You know, when John asked me to do this, he didn't tell me I had to follow Joe.

But to illustrate the depth of my faith, I was confident a good message, or perhaps even something profound, would somehow materialize from the depths of my consciousness. Just to be sure I breathed a few quick prayers over the past 4 weeks and even tried to assemble some topics and quotes. 2

As this past week progressed I thought about it a little more, and even did some research on our friend the internet. I was amazed to find complete sermons on just about every topic you can imagine, but I'm certainly not the one to deliver some deep theological message. Thank goodness we have a real preacher to do that.

As today drew ever nearer, I was still somewhat lost in the wilderness as to what I was going to say. I think God was speaking to me. He was telling me: "Stick to what you know, and don't say much", so I will try to obey Him, keep it short, and not get too fancy.

I'm going to tell you some stories about Central and about myself, and some of the things I remember about my journey of faith. I always embarrass my kids when I start telling my stories, so fortunately for me

they are not here today! I hope I don't embarrass anyone else. All of what I say will be true to the best of my recollection. Some of it will be serious, and some might even be funny. It's OK to laugh.

It occurred to me that I've been attending Central Methodist church much longer than many of you. Some of you newcomers might be interested in hearing some things about what our church was like before you joined us. I include in the newcomer group anyone who has been attending Central less than 53 years. Raise your hand if that fits you. Thanks! Here we go.

First off, it would be hard to grow up in the same house with my Mother & Father and not end up with strong faith of your own. My sister Arlette, brother Fred & I were immersed with examples of their faith every day, and that stuff soaks in, even into a hard head like mine. Our grandparents, aunts & uncles and all the rest of our family just reinforced what we learned at home. 3

We 3 siblings started our church-going just up the road at Salem Methodist Church where we were all baptized and attended regularly. You'll never meet a nicer, more humble, or harder-working group of folks than the congregation at Salem. I still feel welcome there when we occasionally go back there for homecoming or other special service. As the 3 of us grew older, our parents decided to transfer to Central, primarily because of the youth program. Central had a new Director of Christian Education named Charles Vaughn.

I was about 6 years old when we moved to Central. Of course, that was at the old church at the corner of Franklin Street and Dixie Street. It was a great church, and I don't think I've ever seen one more beautiful. It still makes me sad that it is gone.

It was an old two-story brick building with beautiful stained glass windows all around, a towering steeple, floors that creaked, and doors that squeaked. I also later heard it had a roof that leaked, and there were some other structural problems, but I never saw the flaws. To me it was just what a church should be. It looked like a church, smelled like a church, and sounded like a church.

Just as now, we had great Sunday School teachers. The children and youth Sunday School rooms were all upstairs. The stair treads were worn slick from thousands of footfalls, and they groaned under the weight of the rambunctious crowd of kids who spilled down those steps when the Sunday School bell rang. There was good reason to hurry down the steps. Back in the 50's and 60's, Mount Airy was still a lot like Mayberry. There were 3 or 4 drug stores on Main Street, and they took turns so one drug store was open every Sunday, just to handle emergency prescriptions and that sort of thing. In those days nothing else was open on Sunday.

Each drug store also had a soda fountain, and it was a real rite of passage when a kid got big enough to walk 2 blocks "up the street" between Sunday school and church to get a cherry-coke. Ten cents went a long ways in those days. You better hurry back though if you ever wanted to go "up the street" again!

When we got back, there were big wooden front doors to the church just a few steps up from sidewalk level. In the entryway where the ushers stood there was a big rope that hung down from the ceiling. That rope went to the church bell in the steeple, and a few lucky boys & girls, if they were there at just the right moment, got to help the ushers ring the bell on Sunday morning. On the upstroke that rope would pick a little kid up off the floor, which was called "riding the rope".

The bell in our new steeple is the same bell from the old church. You know now the ushers just flip a switch to ring the bell with an electric motor. It may sound the same but something is lost without a kid hanging on that rope going up and down.

Just as an aside, no one seems to know exactly how many times we should ring the bell each Sunday morning before the service, and I've even been asked why we still ring it. So far the best thing I can come up with is "Because we always have". If anyone has a better answer, please let me know!

The Sanctuary of the old church was more square than rectangular like this one. It was built in the days before microphones and loudspeakers, so the pews were arranged in a big horse shoe shape close to the pulpit. I

don't know how many people it held but to a child like me it looked enormous.

The pulpit was almost in the middle, and the choir sat behind the preacher where everyone could see them (I think that's why our choir now sits in the back – some of the choir members had input into the design of the new church). Can I get an "AMEN" from the choir loft? Thanks!

On each side of the pulpit there were some small pews that sat perpendicular to the front wall. They called those pews the "amen corner". They were really close to the pulpit, almost like a baseball dugout. Not many people sat in those amen corner pews because like the choir, everyone else in the congregation could watch you.

At some point almost every kid made the mistake of sitting in the amen corner with their friends. Since it was sparsely populated by the adults, it looked like a good place to get away from your parents, but many was the child who went home to a scolding after spending the service misbehaving in the amen corner. We learned the hard way that sitting on the back pew was much safer.

At the old church there was a big room with sliding doors beside the sanctuary they would use for overflow crowds. I can still remember occasions when the place was jam packed, which of course prompted the move to this facility.

There was no air conditioning at the old church, but in those days few people were used to air conditioning like we are today.

The basement of the old church had a big kitchen and dining hall, as well as meeting rooms. I remember having great meals in that church basement. One week the church was having a revival, and we met for a brief service every morning before we went to work and school. I don't remember everything the Methodist Men served for breakfast, but I do remember it was the only time in my life I could have all the milk and white sugar donuts I wanted. It's funny what you remember sometimes isn't it?

Boy Scout Troop 596 met on Thursday nights in one of those basement rooms which again explains why we have a scout hut here. The scout room always smelled like a combination of bacon grease, sweat, and smoke. It is much wiser to keep a group of savages in a separate building! Anyway, that is where I joined Troop 596. My scoutmaster was Richard Vaughn, who in my mind was the greatest scoutmaster ever. He spent so much time with us and taught us so much. I believed that man could walk on water, and he remains to this day one of my life's heroes. It scares me a little bit to think that the Boy Scouts I led 30 years later might put me on such a pedestal.

Richard made sure we had church on our camping trips Sunday mornings before we broke camp to head home. I still remember us singing hymns from the tattered song books stained from rain and grime. We continued that tradition when I led the troop.

I'll probably get emotional just telling you this, but I've never heard more touching renditions of "Church in the Wildwood" than from a bunch of wet & weary Scouts gathered around a smoky campfire. I always tried to be a tough guy, but my scouts knew I was just a big softy when they saw me tremble and sob when they sang "Amazing Grace" without even looking at the words.

Let's talk about something else for a minute!

Across Dixie Street from the old church there was a Shell Service Station run by a Mr. Cooke. It was a bright yellow building with big red capital letters that spelled out just the word "SHELL". That's all it said. The letters must have been 4 feet tall, and they faced directly at the front door of the church. I remember one time for some reason the letter "S" fell off the building, so our church was right across the street from you-know-what. At least it wasn't on our side of the street! Mr. Cooke eventually got around to replacing the "S" but it seemed like it took a long time. I don't know what that has to do with my lesson; I just always thought it was sort of funny.

I was confirmed in that old church, and on that day they presented me with this Bible. I remember thinking at the time it was a great gift. I was about 14 when we all moved to the new church, and I continued in the Scout Troop with Richard Vaughn as well as MYF with Charles

Vaughn. You know 2 of the most significant men in my life were named Vaughn. I don't believe they were closely related if at all, but they are family to me because I consider them both to be my "big brothers". They were two very different men, but both set sterling examples of how a man should act.

Charles worked hard to build the youth program at Central. He provided lots of activities to keep kids interested in church and entertained in a good atmosphere. Charles showed movies and hosted record hops in the fellowship hall on Saturday nights, and he took kids on all sorts of outings. We may have had some TV time too. Charles saw to it we had sports equipment for things like volleyball, ping pong, and basketball. He even got us a pool table, which brings me to another story.

Most of you are familiar with the movie and play "The Music Man". The main character convinces the folks of River City that their troubles with juvenile delinquency all stemmed from the pool halls in town. He said "You've got trouble right here in River City, I said "Trouble" and that starts with "T" which rhymes with "P" and that stands for POOL". Anyway, Charles was trying to give kids a place to hang out and play pool somewhere better than the pool halls, but those good intentions didn't prevent some criticism from the community.

There was a well-known fire and brimstone preacher at a church out in the county, and he was also on the radio. He was a fine man and he saved a lot of souls, but you know how they say you're either "fer something or agin' it?" Well he was agin' a lot of things that kids liked, including movies, rock and roll music, dancing, and especially TV. If you had a TV in those days you also had an antenna on your roof. He was known to say "You can tell the houses where the devil lives by the horns on the roof". Apparently radio was OK though.

Well that fellow was also agin' POOL. When he heard that Central Methodist had a pool table inside the church building, he told his congregation we were a bunch of heathens. In those days I bagged groceries at the A&P alongside one of his church youth who gleefully reported that to me. There was more than a hint of "holier-than-thou" in his voice.

With the pool table, movies, music, and dancing I think we gave his preacher enough fodder for several weeks of preaching. I don't know if Charles' pool table is still in our fellowship hall, but whether it is or not, I don't believe any of us were then, or are now, heathens.

The reason I know we're not heathens is the way I've seen faith manifest itself in this place over the years. To illustrate this point I want to tell you the story about Woody Clark, Bill Clark's brother. Woody grew up in Central Church. He went from Mount Airy High School to the U S Air Force Academy. Woody had the right stuff, so the Air Force trained him to fly in jets, and then sent him to Viet Nam. On one of his missions, Woody's jet was shot down by a surface to air missile. Woody ejected but parachuted into enemy territory.

Word reached Mount Airy very quickly of Woody's plight. It was not known if he had survived or been captured. Immediately the men and women of Central commenced a non-stop prayer vigil right here at this altar. The congregation turned out en masse around the clock. Woody survived the jump, but then he was nearly captured or even killed by the Viet Cong. I'm sure Woody whispered a few prayers of his own, and mercifully he escaped several very close calls. Over a period of 8 days he finally made his way to a clearing where he activated his emergency radio beacon.

Central Church did not stop praying until word got back that he was rescued and returned to safety. The prayers turned from pleas for mercy to joyous thanksgiving. Woody Clark continued to serve out a long, distinguished career in the Air Force including an assignment to the Pentagon.

On a more personal note I want to tell you about what happened to me in 1973. The most wonderful girl in the world agreed to marry me, but we didn't want a big wedding. As a matter of fact, we wanted the most basic ceremony possible – just Jim, Mary, and the preacher. We didn't plan to tell anyone beforehand, including our parents.

We had a conversation with Reverend Bob Ralls to make the arrangements. Reverend Ralls was a nice man, very reserved and reassuring. He told us that he understood our wishes, but he convinced us that we really owed it to our parents to let them be a part of the ceremony. So on June 26, 1973, the 3rd anniversary of our first date, we had a small wedding right down here, and besides our parents we even let a couple of our siblings attend as well. That was 37 years ago, and so far it's working out. Just to let you know a couple of things, she's still most wonderful girl in the world, and we made up for not having a big wedding when our son Luke and our daughter Emily held their weddings here. You know that stuff they say about "Pay me now, or pay me later?" Well, it's true.

As long as I can remember our family has sat near the front on one of these pews in the left front section. We started out with anywhere from 2 to 5 of us on any given Sunday, and there were always other families who joined us on our pew.

Over the years our family grew until we squeezed out all the other families. We had to scrunch up just to fit all of us into one pew. We don't have names assigned to our pews, but if we did, that one right there could have said "Lambert" on it. It was always very reassuring to be seated there surrounded by all my closest loved ones.

Now our family pew is not as crowded as before. Some have moved away, and others have departed. But I am still reassured knowing the time they all sat in that pew was well spent building the faith they now carry with them wherever they go.

If I go on from here telling you stories about my family and started naming names, as you've already seen I probably couldn't do it. If I could do it we'd be here all week, so I'm going to stop here.

Suffice it to say that almost everything about my journey of faith either happened at Central Methodist Church or because of Central Methodist Church. Please forgive me for not saying "Central United Methodist". Somehow it just doesn't roll off my tongue.

I'm not sure if I've told you anything about my faith, or perhaps I've told you everything about it, but here's the bottom line:

My faith is pretty simple. I believe if I trust in God, ultimately everything will be all right. I know that might sound naïve, and I also know that I don't always get what I want, but in the long run God always provides me what I need, and I know He will do the same for you if you put your faith in Him.

**Jim Lambert
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Central on Franklin Street, in the heart of downtown Mount Airy, as it looked in the author's reflections.