

"TRUE TO THE FUTURE; TRUE TO THE PAST"
September 22, 1991

TEXT: I Timothy 6:17-19: "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future"

As many of you already know, today is the "kickoff" for the celebration of our one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary. The big day, itself, is Sunday, March 1st, but we begin this morning, and we will have at least one special event every month from now through March, perhaps a bit beyond.

This is a very special time in the life of our church; and, even if you have not reserved a box lunch, I urge you to go over to the Kneeland-Walker house after worship to join the festivities. For a bit of nostalgia, you can take the trolley from the church parking lot. Or, of course, you can drive over there yourself.

But the celebration does not begin at the Kneeland-Walker house. It begins, as it should, right here in this morning's worship service. And what I would like you to do now is try to imagine what it must have been like in Wauwatosa one hundred fifty years ago. Perhaps it might help if I share with you these words written seventy-five years ago by Mrs. Vernon Kinney, a grand-daughter of Richard Gilbert, in whose home this church was founded. Addressing the Sunday School, Mrs. Kinney wrote:

"You all know how Wauwatosa looks now, and the country about it, also. Now forget it a minute, and think of a great big woods, oh so big. No house, no roads, no fences, no bridges, just a big lot of trees and a pretty little river winding in and out from somewhere, on and on till it reached Lake Michigan. That is the way Wauwatosa looked seventy-five years ago. I mustn't say there were no houses at all, for if there had been no houses there could have been no people. There were a few scattered log cabins before 1842.

"Now think of families coming here from New York and Massachusetts with slow ox teams hitched to big covered wagons, and leading a cow or two and always a dog, up through Indiana and Illinois, till they got right here. Then they stopped, because it looked like a good place to make a home and while they were chopping trees to make a house, they lived in the wagons."

We might also add that there was no doctor here till 1845 and no store for several years after that. But, though they lacked many of the things we take for granted, what those hardy pioneers wanted most of all was a church. So, on March 1, 1842, six men and five women, meeting in a log cabin at what is now the southwest corner of Mayfair Road and North Avenue, organized themselves into the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa.

At first, they met in homes and in school houses, but, in May of 1852, they voted to build a house of worship. A committee chose our present site, which was purchased from Charles Hart for the sum of fifty dollars, and construction soon began. Many of the timbers were hand cut by the men of the parish, and finally, on October 27th, 1853, the finished building was dedicated. According to the records, the cost of that building, with its furnishings, was \$3,347.80.

Now, that might not seem like much to us today, but it represented a huge commitment for a small congregation in a time when hard cash was very difficult to come by. And, as we celebrate this one hundred fiftieth anniversary, one of the things I would like us to remember is that all of us who love this church are deeply indebted to those men and women who sacrificed so much to make it possible.

But there are others to whom we are indebted as well. Throughout the years, virtually every generation has made some kind of sacrifice to build and maintain the plant and ministry which you and I enjoy today. Had it not been for them and for their generosity, we might have no First Congregational Church today, certainly not the beautiful building and extensive programs we so often take for granted. We are indebted to them all. And, if we are to be true to the past which we celebrate this morning, we must be as generous as they were.

After all, compared to those first pioneers, and to many of the generations which followed, you and I are rich beyond comparison. There is not a person here this morning whose life-style is not far more luxurious than any of them ever even imagined. And, in First Timothy, chapter six, we read "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future" (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

When I read those words a few days ago, I thought to myself how appropriate it is that we are beginning this celebration and our 1992 Stewardship Drive at the same time. We have a very beautiful, well equipped building. We have a dedicated staff. We have worship, fellowship, and service programs of which we can all be proud. But these things all cost money. And, for several years now, the cost of maintaining them has risen faster than our giving.

What kind of future, then, are we laying up for our children and our children's children? Fifty, or a hundred, or a hundred and fifty years from now, when future generations have their celebrations, what will they be saying about our stewardship of this church? This year we balanced our budget only by taking money from our Growth and Development Fund. A fund that was meant for growth and development, not for everyday expenses. Are we to live off the future by repeatedly funding our needs in that way? Or must we cut back what we do, and the legacy we leave to posterity because we can no longer afford the cost?

There are many ways to raise money, some better than others. I remember reading about one pastor who had a rather crude, but well-meaning, layman who wanted to do something for the church. So the pastor gave him a list of church members and some church stationary and told him to write letters to all those who had not been pledging.

Not long thereafter, he received a letter from a parishioner with a check for a thousand dollars inside. And attached was this note: "To whom it may concern. I received your letter and I want to remind you that there is only one "T" in dirty and no "C" in skunk."

I think you will be glad to know that our appeal is a good deal subtler than that. Your Board of Christian Stewardship has been working hard for several months to develop a stewardship campaign that is dignified yet honest in describing the church's needs. As a part of that campaign they have once again asked me to preach a stewardship sermon.

And I can think of no better way to encourage us to be generous than to remind us that we are the beneficiaries of generous men and women of the past. We are stewards of a wonderful church which they sacrificed to build, not just for their own benefit, not for ours, but for all posterity.

To be true to them --and to posterity-- we must be willing to do what they so freely did. We must give of ourselves to the work of this church, to the work of God's kingdom. Give, not sparingly or grudgingly, but generously and joyously. "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future" Only in this way can we be true to the future, true to the past, true to God, and true to ourselves. "For what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his life?"