

PEOPLE ARISE
Randall Tremba
May 23, 2010
Pentecost Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

This sermon is especially for Katya Quinn, Kate Byrne, Justin Kinney and Jay Holliman who today made their first public profession of faith, confirming for themselves the promise veiled in their baptism. I hope baby Lily (Lilliana Patricia Nicodemus) baptized at the early service will hear of this from her parents and grandparents in due time.

One hundred forty eight years ago blood ran thick on the floorboards under this carpet, by some accounts blood was ankle deep. It was Sept. 1862 and the people of this church had removed the pews and opened the doors to the sons of this nation, wounded in what we now call the Battle of Antietam. It was an act of mercy and compassion. It didn't matter what side they fought on. None were turned away.

Today we are sitting in a holy place.

Katya, Kate, Justin and Jay, you now belong to those who opened these doors to the mortally wounded. Not by blood kinship but by baptism they are your people. You now belong to their history, their story and their tradition, a 2000 year old Christian tradition that nudged and formed them and others like them over time to walk in the way and the spirit of Jesus to build the land that God has planned where love shines through. We are glad to welcome you as companions and fellow students on this way that leads to many souls wounded by life in more ways than one. There is much to learn along this path. But we have help, seen and unseen.

Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. It is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows. You know, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, which is to say, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:15ff)

As it turns out, there is much to be afraid of in this world. There is much to fear but the spirit of Christ gives us courage in fearful times and places. You will never stand alone.

Twenty-five years before the Battle of Antietam, the doors of this Meeting House were opened for the first time. In 1836 this was a brand new church. Our first church located where the post office now stands had burned to the ground.

In 1836 this house of prayer was quite plain. No organ, no piano, no wall, no cross. Instead, with three windows up front along with the windows in the back of the balcony and on both sides this space was bathed in natural light. The people who assembled here did not come to escape the world behind stain glass windows. They came here to learn how to open wide their eyes and hearts and to touch the world with love. They weren't perfect but they would make progress.

In 1836 there were balconies along each side and two off-centered aisles instead of a center aisle. The pews on the main floor were rigid and boxy just like the ones still in the balcony. In 1910 or so these comfortable pews were added and in 1990 these "plush" cushions.

In 1836 this Meeting House was symmetrical. The right and left side was identical except for one irregularity. You can see it in the vestibule. On the left as you enter is a grand staircase ascending to the balcony; on the right an enclosed, narrow staircase with its

own side entrance. In those pre-civil war years that side entrance and narrow staircase was just another way of keeping slaves in their place. Slaves and servants of Presbyterians were not allowed to enter the same door or use the grand staircase reserved for their masters.

Here, ironically, slaves sat above their masters while Sunday after Sunday the Word of God was proclaimed from a pulpit much like this one but set about four feet higher. Here the congregation, slave and free, heard of a God who liberates those enslaved by the rich and powerful. Over time the gospel would penetrate the darkened minds and hearts of those who assembled here.

Kate, Jay, Katya and Justin, you now belong to those people, their story, their history and the Christian tradition that formed and transformed them over time and led them to see the sinfulness of that grave social injustice. It wasn't quick or easy but eventually they renounced their evil ways, repented, and amended their lives under the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who himself had come, as he said, to set captives free.

You belong to a people who long ago, here and elsewhere, arose in the spirit of Jesus to set the captives free in more ways than one. You belong to a people who keep rising in the face of evil, rising in bleak and hopeless situations, rising up to reach out and touch the world with love. You are part of this people and we can't wait to see the many ways you will touch the world with love.

Sixty years ago a young couple with two small children moved to Shepherdstown and became members of this congregation. They had a soft spot in their hearts for those whom society shunned. Soon all kinds of people felt welcomed here who hadn't before. That spirit grew and grew and grew in this place. Eventually a former member sent a complaint. *The Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church used to be a nice church, the letter said, but now anybody can go there!*

I hope you are proud to belong to this people, this story, this history, and this tradition.

Twenty-five years ago this church learned of a mother and her three-year old son who had fled the killing fields of Guatemala. They crossed Mexico into the United States, were arrested and confined to a detention center in Laredo, Texas, waiting deportation.

The minister of the Presbyterian Church in Laredo heard of our desire to help people in such predicaments. He called and told us of this mother child's sorry plight. This congregation raised bond money and rallied its resources, material and human, to resettle that mother and child here in Shepherdstown and then helped them to apply for and receive legal status. That mother is now a nurse in this community. Her son graduated from Shepherd five years ago.

I hope you are proud to belong to this people, this story, this history and this tradition.

Twenty years ago someone left a note on this pulpit. It said, *today I was at the end of my ropes. I saw no hope in life. I was on my way to commit suicide. I saw that this church was open and I stopped to pray. I felt God's presence in this holy place and changed my mind. Thank you for being open.*

This is your church.

Ten years ago in the face of opposition and disapproval from other churches this church ordained a homosexual to the office of deacon. We were officially rebuked by the Presbytery but we did not back down from what we understood to be the way of Jesus. After all, as Jesus said, the Spirit still has much to show us. And so we pay attention to everything and listen carefully to everyone.

Justin, Kate, Jay and Katya, this is your church.

Today of your own free will each of you now stands in the Christian tradition that continues to form and transform us. It's why we ride bikes to raise money for abused and neglected children, why we patch homes and porches in Appalachian, why we serve meals to the homeless, donate clothing and food, and knit prayer shawls for troubled members. It's why we listen more deeply and why we invest our jobs, whatever they may be, with a little more love than we might have otherwise done.

Why? Because like Jesus in his baptism, we have been called in our baptism to serve God and others wholeheartedly. Not half-heartedly; wholeheartedly. With all we are and all we have.

This particular church is not all there is to the dynamic tradition still rising from the spirit of Jesus. But this particular church is where you've gotten your feet wet. May your journey be full of wonder, grace and endless opportunities to reach out and touch the world with love.