

THIS MEETING HOUSE
Randall Tremba
August 23, 2015
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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1 Kings 8:1-43

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!

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At 9:00 this past Tuesday morning five Shepherd University freshmen walked into this Meeting House for the first time. One of them in particular was so stunned by the beauty and peaceful feeling in this room, she exclaimed: "My parents need to come here! They've been looking for a good church for a long time and this looks like it could be the one—a nice, traditional church."

Ethel and I looked at each other. *Should we tell her?*

Those five students were just a few of many participants in Shepherd's "Day of Service." Our own Emily Gross, Director of Academic Support at Shepherd, arranged for the visit and supervised their work.

The students hastily armed themselves with cleaning supplies, tools and equipment and got to work on the nursery, lower lounge, bathroom and closets, and even did some sweeping in the parking lot. They worked hard for three hours and by the end all they touched sparkled. Ethel happily laid out lunch for them in the Fellowship Hall.

While de-cluttering a certain closet, a few buried artifacts were discovered. Two framed certificates from 1912 and 1914 for our Sunday School's financial support of overseas missions investment in Japan and China; also a certificate citing A.D. Kenamond as an Elder Emeritus. Kenamond served as dean of Shepherd faculty. He also wrote the definitive history of SPC in 1966. And finally this blemished portrait of the Rev. John Hargrave. Hargrave served this church from 1834 to 1852. When he came the Presbyterians had no building; when he left this Meeting House stood in place.

And that portrait got me to thinking again about this Meeting House.

This Meeting House was built in 1836. The previous one burned down in 1831. That building had stood on the lot where the Post Office now stands.

In case you hadn't heard, this Meeting House is a near architectural twin of the Presbyterian Meeting House in Old Alexandria, VA, which was built in 1837, one year after this one. The interior and exterior designs are nearly identical. But unlike ours, the Alexandria church still has its balconies along the sidewalls and a high pulpit that is reached by seven or so steps (where the preacher can stand six feet above criticism!)

As far as I know, not many Presbyterian churches are called Meeting Houses. The one in Old Alexandria always has been. This one, there's reason to believe, once was and now is again. Chapter four of A. D. Kenamond's history about SPC is entitled "Church Buildings or Meeting Houses."

Like the Quakers, certain 19th century Presbyterians favored unadorned church buildings over highly ornamental ones. No towering steeples. Stark pews. No stained glass windows, just plain glass to let in natural light. In other words, we don't come here to escape the world. We come here to remember who we are and what we are meant to do and be in this world.

This is a Meeting House. It's not "God's house" anymore than Solomon's spectacular Temple bedecked in gold in Jerusalem was God's house.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!

This is not "God's house" or even a "church," since "church" initially meant a certain community of people formed around "the heart of Christ." It's more proper to call this a "house of prayer," which is to say, a house of meeting, a house where the church meets in prayer to be mindful of others and The One, the Holy One.

Prayer, by the way, is not so much *what* we say as *how* we attune ourselves to the Holy One by opening our hearts to receive and give love. Prayer is not about getting something. It's about being with Someone—the One who made heaven and earth and loves you dearly.

In September 1862, the wounded and dying sons of this nation were carried from the Battle of Antietam in Sharpsburg into Shepherdstown. Many were brought into this house and laid upon bare wooden floors.

In this Meeting House strangers met. Strangers cared for strangers as though they were family. Some were mended and lived out their days. Some died and were buried. This floor and this room are forever hallowed by the presence of deep and abiding love.

That was a time of prayer in this Meeting House.

Thirty-five years ago we met here on a Sunday afternoon. A seven-year old child of the church had been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. He was admitted to Children's Hospital in DC. The prognosis was grim. We assembled with his parents for prayer. Some spoken prayers were offered. But mostly we sat together in silence.

That was a time of prayer in this Meeting House.

Prayer isn't magical. It's not a coin for the great vending machine in the sky. It doesn't cure as much as it heals and makes us whole. It doesn't change things as much as it changes the ones who pray.

Prayer with or without words is a way of meeting the One whom heaven and earth cannot contain and yet dwells within our hearts. Prayer isn't about getting things; it's about being with our Lover.

Twenty-five years ago I found a note on this table. It read: *I was on my way to take my life when I noticed the sign on your gate: Open for Prayer. I came in and sat. Something in this room touched my heart and gave me hope to go on living. Thank you. (Signed)*

That was time of prayer in this Meeting House.

Five years ago, in the wake of a series of violent attacks against Muslims and mosques and in the wake of certain Christian religious leaders threatening to burn the Koran, we invited the imam and Muslim congregation from western Maryland to join us here on the first Sunday evening in October to affirm God's love for all people. That night we stood together in solidarity.

That was a time of prayer in this Meeting House.

The very next year, 2011, in the wake of a series of violent attacks against LGBT persons and in the wake of certain Christian religious leaders denouncing gays and lesbians in the name of Christ, we invited our local LGBT community to join the larger community here for a celebration of God's great and wondrous gift of diversity, including sexual and gender diversity. Some of you remember that LoveFest. That night we stood together in solidarity. That night heaven and earth met in this Meeting House.

This Meeting House is the site of many different kinds of events, but none more important than our meeting here alone or with others to be mindful of the presence of the Holy One and to lay bare the longing in our hearts for healing, for wisdom, for courage, for kindness and for peace.

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HYMN

“There Is a Longing in Our Hearts”