

**Unfinished Business, Part 2**  
**Feb. 11, 2018**  
**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. John Cleghorn**

The headline was an eye popper. It was 1922 and Charlotte was booming, much like it is today. Across the top of the Sunday Charlotte Observer, big block letters blared the news “Five Million Dollars Going Into Buildings in the City.” That was serious money in 1922.

Details of the city’s building boom filled the front page – 25 new projects in all. A new dorm at Johnson C. Smith University, additions to multiple grade and high schools, and a big expansion to St. Peter’s Hospital.

The plans included Brevard Court, which is still today a thriving hotspot uptown, and a \$1 million hotel at the corner of West Trade and Poplar, later known as the Independence Hotel. Then, as now, Charlotte was a city of churches. So naturally the schedule of projects took in four churches, including the groundbreaking for St. John’s Baptist Church just up the street.

But the most prominent image in the paper that day was an architect’s drawing of the new Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church, the very space we occupy today. The congregation had outgrown its 1914 building, what we call today the Shelby Room and the administrative space above it. An enormously generous benevolence left to the church would pay for it all.

Months later, the Observer carried coverage of the dedication of the sanctuary upon its completion. What a proud moment it must have been for this congregation.

Thousands of years earlier, a similar scene played out, albeit in a vastly different time and place on nothing less than a truly divine occasion. We gather those details not from the files of The Charlotte Observer, but the writings of a chronicler of a different era, a scribe who painstakingly researched and reported on this era of God and God’s people. We know his works as First and Second Chronicles in the Old Testament.

The specific occasion we heard retold in today’s reading was the historic dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, the very place God’s people believed the Spirit of God would take up residence. This was, of course, not just another synagogue. It was the Temple, the highest expression of the Hebrew culture and the holy covenant God had made with God’s people.

David, God's chosen conqueror and king, had received God's promise to build the Temple. David died before its completion. Now his son, Solomon, took up the mantle to lead God's people and, on this day, dedicate the Temple.

For sake of brevity, we heard only three paragraphs of Solomon's prayer. Solomon asked for God's justice for the wronged and called on God to hold those who do the wrong accountable. He prayed for God's protection of Her people in war. He asked for God to hear the prayers of the people in times of drought and disaster. He asked God to bless any foreigner in Israel's midst and to grant liberation to any of God's children held captive in another land.

Then, when Solomon finished his prayer, according to scripture, the glory of the Lord descended into the Temple and occupied it.

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As we reflect on these two occasions when God's people looked forward to new sacred and holy places of worship, I admit that the parallel is a bit of a stretch. The announcement and subsequent dedication of Presbyterian church in 1922 in Charlotte, North Carolina is not at all the same as the dedication of Jerusalem's iconic temple.

But perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to overlook the parallel. Surely both the children of Israel and the Caldwell congregation were equally fervent in their prayers and good intentions. Surely both groups meant their edifices to glorify God. Surely both groups asked God for justice and mercy with the idea that God would use their house of worship and their organized ministries for good in the world. Surely they thought they were, more or less, worthy agents of God's will and purpose.

We do the same today. We ask God to use this place of worship and each of us as God's instruments.

But there is another parallel between these two episodes. It is this: Neither the old testament Chronicler nor the Charlotte Observer told the whole truth. Neither told the whole story, the back story we say today, about what led up to those dedications.

First and Second Chronicles were written, you see, centuries after the fact. God's people were questioning whether God's special covenant with them was still in place. They had lost their king, they had lost their power. First and Second Chronicles were written to remind God's people that God still loved them and that God was not through with them. In that sense, they are a kind of pep talk for Israel in how they retold stories already covered in the books of Samuel and Kings, Judges, Ruth, the Psalms and several of the prophetic books.

The Chronicler retold the stories to remind God's people what they once were and that God has not left them. But in the retelling, the Chronicler doesn't tell it straight. He leaves the ugly parts out.

First and Second Chronicles focus largely on Israel's two great kings, David and his son, Solomon. Both were mighty kings and famed leaders, the Chronicler tells. But he leaves out certain other facts – facts such as both David and Solomon were adulterers who wouldn't escape today's "me too" movement. The Chronicler also fails to tell how David and Solomon were ruthless leaders who killed those who crossed them or threatened their power without hesitation.

In all these ways, the chronicler is like so many historians who gloss over certain inconvenient truths in order to paint the picture that serves their needs. Yes, the books of First and Second Chronicles are in the Bible – there for us to understand in the sweep of the efforts of God's people to understand God's will and purpose. But that doesn't make them flawless and complete histories.

And that brings us back to the other moment in history, when news of the construction of this lovely old sanctuary led the Sunday Charlotte Observer. Neither the coverage of the plans for this sanctuary or its dedication told the whole story. After all, the newspaper was just participating in civic boosterism – not truth telling.

Last week, as part of Black History Month we heard City Councilman Braxton Winston tell us that, for the healing and reconciliation of our city, we need to tell our whole truth. Our whole truth, which for us and our black history, is as close and familiar as the brick and mortar all around us this morning.

The whole truth is this: We worship in a space made possible by the blood and sweat, tears and bondage, the life and death of enslaved people. The money that was given to this congregation in 1922 to build this sanctuary came from the estate of Sallie Caldwell White. Her parents and grandparents lived on what was known as the Glenwood Plantation in northern Mecklenburg County, where they owned more than land. They owned enslaved Africans. And we know their names: \_\_\_\_\_

How did the money get here all those years later, you may wonder? And what is the family connection? Sallie Caldwell White, who left the money to this congregation, was the last recognized member of the family that had owned Glenwood decades earlier. She had no heirs. She gave this church the money on a recommendation of local advisers. Because of the bequest, they changed the name of the church from Knox Presbyterian to Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian, to honor the family who made the donation.

So you see how it all connects. For those who have joined the Caldwell community since 2014, this is new news. For others, it is a reminder of what we learned when Elder Beth Van Gorp so studiously researched this story and so openly shared it with us then. Since almost all of us are new to Caldwell since 2006, it was not a part of our church history we received. But now we have it. And I don't think this story is done with us or us with it.

As I wrote last week in my blog about this, reactions will vary across the different experiences and perspectives that make up our congregation.

As disturbed as many of our white members were to learn this history, some of our African-American members had a different reaction. For so many African-Americans, contemporary, every-day reminders of the legacies of white supremacy are there for all to see – if we are willing to look.

Some may say that the Caldwell family's sin is not our sin. They may say we should just leave all of this alone. After all, look at our efforts and aspirations today, to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God?”

But that's just it.

Those familiar words from the prophet Micah are part of a much larger word from God. That word, that command by the prophet, is to plead God's case in the city, to praise God not just with pious worship but, more so, with lives that seek to level the playing field and with memories that never forget the lessons of our past.

And slavery is still with us. It is not a thing of the past. It is present in its legacies that, like the history of this church, are in plain sight in the institutional racism and structural prejudices that are built in the American way, the disadvantages and disparities that mark so much of African-American life today, from gaps in health and wealth to education, economic opportunity and steeply biased pipelines to prison.

What you do with all of this up to you. We have planned at least some initial gatherings, starting on Feb. 21. That night, Dr. Rodney Sadler, our friend and partner from Union Seminary, and Dr. Lori Thomas, our member and leader in reconciliation, will begin to lead us in dialogue and reflection about what, if anything, the whole truth about Caldwell church means.

What we do know is that we live in a time of a new-awakening in America as to the whole truth of slavery, its past and its present. Institutions of all kinds are re-examining their histories and determining what the whole truth means for their mission. Statues of Civil War heroes, for example, are being reexamined and, in some cases, removed. Our history is just as real and just as relevant.

For today, at least, we are about to enter the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday is this week, followed by 40 days of self-examination and spiritual rigor in preparation for Easter, our season of rebirth in Christ Jesus.

We might begin by reminding ourselves of the value of the whole truth and that God knows the whole truth about us as God's people, even when, like the Chronicler, we are not ready to tell it all.

When Solomon prayed that day at the dedication of the Temple, his prayer as both a sinner and a servant of God was one of submission. We, too, might submit. We can submit our lives anew for God's use and purpose. And we might examine ourselves, both our history and our living today, in as much honesty and objectivity as we can muster, using the words Solomon prayed eons ago, saying

"May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people .... Hear from Heaven your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive."

Amen