

A Great Cloud of Witnesses (75th Anniversary Celebration Sunday)
Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 15, 2022
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2, NRSV)

Several years ago, one of the cousins of my wife Lisa surprised and amazed us, together with the rest of the extended family. He's only a little younger than we are, and at the time was in about as good a shape as I am now. I'm sure there's backstory we don't know, but seemingly out of the blue, he announced that a year and a half hence he would enter, run, and complete the Boston Marathon!

He immediately changed his diet, starting exercising, and crucially, started *running*. Jogging went from *not* being a part of his life at all to being a *daily* activity, filled with incrementally more ambitious goals for distance and endurance. I have yet to hear from him a full explanation of what possessed him to make this commitment, but commit he did, and we enjoyed following his progress on a Facebook group page he set up, complete with regular updates and photos.

And within months, he was running 5K's, and months after that, half-marathons (that's 13 miles, folks!). Finally, the big day came. And he did it! He didn't *win* the race ... he didn't get a feature story in the *Boston Globe* or get offered free tickets to Fenway Park. But he finished. He kept his word. When he started, no one – including him – knew what it would take and what the journey would be like or what sacrifices would have to be made. And Lord knows, it wasn't easy, but he set out in faith and saw the race to the end. He made it home.

Today we celebrate a race that is still being run – a journey of faith over the last 75 years of Friendship Presbyterian Church. And what a joy it is to have all of you here – members and former members, old and new friends – to revel in this milestone with us.

As **Pattie Ivy** has preserved our story and recounted it for us, Friendship was the realization of a dream resulting from a challenge presented to the congregation of Central Presbyterian Church in Athens on February 23, 1945, by the Rev. Cecil Thompson of Valdosta. The challenge he posed was the General Assembly's goal that year to start 100 outpost Sunday School chapels.

Warren Robinson, a young family man and graduate student at UGA who was teaching a high school Sunday School class at Central, responded to the challenge that night, almost as if it were an altar call, and he led his class to sponsor such an outpost Sunday School. Mr. & Mrs. J. Swanton Ivy, Sr. of Central Presbyterian also responded to Thompson's challenge by offering Mr. Robinson's class an old farmhouse in a peach orchard as a meeting place. Renovations

began, and the first Sunday School on this site was held on Easter Sunday afternoon, April 1, 1945. As it turned out, it was the very first outpost chapel Sunday School begun in response to that General Assembly challenge!

Since the renovations were far from complete, those attending were seated in the farmhouse yard on pine planks laid over sawhorses and on old nail kegs. 38 people attended that first day with 14 members of Central including the Robinson and Ivy families. The other 24 were from this surrounding community and included members of the Gunter, Lee, and Ward families. Warren Robinson offered the first prayer, taught the first lesson, and Mrs. Mack, wife of the Central pastor, played the first music on a borrowed accordion.

By the *end* of April, the renovations had gotten the old farmhouse ready, with Central's pastor Joseph Mack being asked to serve as Chapel Pastor. On May 6, the children of the Chapel voted to name this outpost "Friendship Chapel" of Central Presbyterian Church. The Chapel building soon became the center of community activities in this area, with the formation of a 4-H club, a youth choir, and a Home Demonstration Club.

But Friendship Chapel was meant for even more. Two years later, on April 18, 1947, 72 persons from Friendship Chapel petitioned for a church charter, which was granted a month and a half later, on June 8, 1947, and the congregation of Friendship Presbyterian Church came into being, with the Rev. Cook Freeman being called and ordained that day as the first pastor. **[Four of those charter members are with us today and will be recognized by name after this sermon]**

In 1952, this current sanctuary building was erected, though only the basement was finished at that point (that basement being our choir room today and where our lunch serving lines will be!). The congregation worshipped there in the basement until this full sanctuary was completed in 1957, in time for the 10th anniversary of the church. The old Chapel/farmhouse building was moved to the rear of the building and renovated for Sunday School classrooms until it was torn down in 1987.

It was in the mid-60's that our education building was completed, and the Friendship Presbyterian Preschool began in 1966 with an enrollment of 15 children. In January 1988, what we know now as the *Friendship Room*, a space connecting this Sanctuary with the educational building, held its first activities.

All this talk of buildings reflects the *exterior* growth of our campus, but the true growth, of course, is reflected in the lives of our members and friends over generations and the vital part that this church has played in the life of the Oconee and Athens-Clarke County community for a long time. This is everything.

To borrow language from the old spiritual, I sometimes tremble a bit as I think about it – as we fulfil our own call in our own time in view of this great cloud of witnesses ... All the people who have come and gone and come again to this place ... who have partaken of the Lord's Supper together and been baptized here ... who have been married here ... all the worship services and

Christmas Eves and Easter Sundays ... all the youth activities, dinners, fellowship times, classes, and service projects that have happened here or been planned here. And all those who have had the final benediction over their lives pronounced here.

I tremble, but with joy and gratitude, knowing that we run this race as our forebears look on, cheering for us. It turns out that I am the 11th installed pastor at Friendship (we had a few *interim* pastors along the way too, including me!). And I am grateful to be joined in ministry by so many others, like the indispensable and indomitable **Donna Rigsby**, our office administrator, who keeps everything running smoothly and keeps me on track. And I'm grateful for **Kevin Kelly** and **Nan McMurry** who lead the best choir, pound for pound, that you'll find anywhere, along with making possible additional music to enrich our life together through the Friendship Community Choir and special music like the Hibbs Family Band and the Athens Chamber Singers and the Athens Recorder Ensemble. What a ministry!

And I'm grateful for the Friendship Presbyterian Preschool which continues its wonderful work, coming a long way from its 15 students in 1966, to 117 enrolled for this coming Fall, under the outstanding leadership of **Susanne Hayes**. It's our goal in the Preschool that the children who come here know this place as a *joyful* place, a place where they know that they are loved, valued, and celebrated.

And they get this message supremely through the best staff any preschool, anywhere, could hope for. I hardly have the words to describe adequately the dedication and commitment to our children shown by our teachers, especially in the face of the challenges and hurdles we've faced over the last two+ years. [**Carole Bolden, Chris Burr, Caroline Hargrove, Salinda Rogers, and Anne Thomas – more?**] This period forced a change of regular routines and plans, and challenged all to dig down deep and discover new ways to fulfill their responsibilities, express their passion for teaching, and show their love for our students. And in these things, our teachers have succeeded as spectacularly as any group of people I have ever known. It is an honor and a privilege to be in the company, daily, of such loving and faithful disciples of Jesus.

And I'm grateful for all the ways in which Friendship church members and friends volunteer, fundraise, and do outreach to make an impact in this area. The life of discipleship expresses itself supremely through service, and in Christ's name, we actively seek to make a difference. Our mission efforts have taken many different shapes, and our partnerships have varied over the years, working with and supporting the YWCO Girls Club, the Oconee County Food for Kids program, the Bigger Vision Homeless Shelter, One Great Hour of Sharing, Presbyterian Homes of Georgia, Presbyterian Student Center at UGA, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and many, many more.

Over the last many years, we have especially been connected to ACTS (Area Churches Together Serving), an organization headquartered in Bogart which brings many area churches together to provide material and emotional support for those with emergency needs in our community.

[Randy Dawson]

And I'm grateful for the partnership that Friendship Church has long had with Scouting. Boy Scout Troop 149 has been chartered to this church for 63 of our 75 years, There were 9 scouts in the troop back in 1959 when it was first chartered under Scoutmaster Starr Lee, and like our Preschool, it has come a long way and made a big, big difference in the lives of so many.

Today, Oconee County Troop 149 is one of the largest and most active troops in the Cherokee District, our 9-county area, and also provides leadership at the Cherokee District and Northeast Georgia Council level through adult volunteers. In its history and as of this moment, 130 young people from our Troop have earned the rank of Eagle Scout – and 108 of them since 1994, under the incomparable 27-year leadership of Scoutmaster **Paul Matthews**. (I should add that we have four more scouts who will likely be completing their Eagle requirements over the next few months!). And just as importantly, our *Cub Scout Pack* 149 too has also been around for decades, offering many opportunities for younger boys to grow and learn.

I am indeed so grateful, and for so much. What a journey it has been, and what a journey it *is*, still. Here we are, after 75 years – and we live and serve and strive *now*, knowing that we have a charge to keep. And as our forebears knew very well, so we now know that we can only continue this journey by *faith*.

As we are told in that wonderful eleventh chapter of Hebrews, faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is *trust* in the face of uncertainty. The scripture tells us that when Abraham stepped out the door he didn't know where he was going. He could not have imagined what awaited him on the other side of that obedience ... what adventures would be had ... what a destiny he would live! But his faith impelled him to *trust* God with that destiny, and he never looked back.

And as it was with Abraham, so it is with all those who are then named in that chapter ... Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, King David, and Samuel, and all the prophets. Each in their own time stepped out in trust into the unknown. And as it was for these, so it would be later for a band of fishermen on the shore of the Sea of Galilee who would be called to leave their nets behind and follow. And as it was for them, so it was for those 72 who came together on this hallowed ground in 1947, and so it is now, with us.

We are gathered here today because *we* are on a journey *together*, but we venture forward not knowing what the future will hold. That might be scary sometimes, *not knowing* ... not being in charge ... not being in control of where our story is heading. We would always love to know where we are, and what things mean, and how best to move forward. But such clarity is neither the promise nor even the hope of the gospel.

But here's what I *do* know: *We are* meant to do this together. We share our lives and our burdens with one another. Nobody pretends that it's easy. But as we go on together, as we serve together, as we break bread together, as we learn and grow together, we find that we are being rooted in a larger story and in a promise so much bigger than ourselves.

Abraham and Sarah ... Moses, Rahab, David ... those fishermen by the sea ... those 72 in 1947 ... all were/are human and struggled and sometimes doubted, but in the end all of them trusted that they were part of something bigger, something more. And so, they looked ahead and lived with hope. This is what their stories would teach us, and this is what we strive to do now. And so,

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” – to the glory of God! Amen.