

A Tale of Two Churches

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Susan McGarry on March 8, 2009

[Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Psalm 22:22-30 Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38](#)

I present to you the tale of this church and the land that holds it as I know the tale. It has two purposes. It supports the sermon I give this day. It also makes a beginning of the tale we should tell when we dedicate our natural habitat and new trail on May 3rd.

The land under this church was a hillside farm, maybe as early as the first days of Ann Arbor. We know some of the early houses in Ann Arbor were on Broadway, houses like the Traver house that was demolished a couple of years ago.

When I first lived here in Ann Arbor in 1978, actually a few houses down on Broadway, it was already one of the last open spaces on the hill. From Plymouth road, there was still a grassy knoll before you got to the woods. There was an apple orchard in the more sparsely covered property. The secondary forest was not so old.

When the city developed in the northern quarter and the north campus of the University of Michigan was built, Harbal Drive was one of the last streets to get houses. Most of them were fine constructions, newer than the Broadway stock yet certainly no less grand. The city had a master plot that showed Harbal Drive developing down the hill and curving around to finish at Plymouth road. On that hillside there were to be more quality

homes of the kind found on Harbal drive. The drain sewer that did not quite serve the end of that street was to be continued down through the property that we now love, providing proper drainage for those last houses.

That didn't happen and there have been drainage problems ever since. Instead the owner of the land upon which Harbal drive had been projected decided to donate it to a fledgling Presbyterian congregation that had been meeting in a Fraternity house. They took the name of Northside and banding with another fledgling congregation of Episcopalians, alive with a vision of ecumenism, they began building the education building for a church. The Presbytery discouraged them saying the site was ill suited for a church. Yet they persisted. The Episcopalians sold land they had on Green road and bought into the project and the Education building was finished. The church was planned for further down the hill where the Harbal houses had been planned and additional chapels were imagined in a plan that would involve many denominations, maybe even many faiths.

The two churches grew and matured. Many families raised their children together and became community in a way others would admire. The simple building would house them, a drop-in day care, friendship nursery, the cadet training program. Around town, St. Aidan's was known as Dick Singleton's church, in respect for the dynamic priest who led the church for 17 years. He was radical, did anti-war draft counseling, and was a founder and constant supporter of the Interfaith Council for Peace, that started as one of

the nations most active chapters of the anti-war Christian coalition, “Clergy and Laity Concerned.” After the Viet Nam war was over, the Women’s Action for Nuclear Disarmament, was founded and remained active throughout most of the cold war period.

The church, however, was never build, nor were the other buildings planned for the hillside that was occupied by an increasingly mature forest. No longer was there a grass covered hillside near Plymouth, the apple orchard was eclipsed by new growth, invasive species began to take hold. The woods remained undisturbed except for a path that basically followed the sewer line and the natural drainage swale of the parking lot run off and the drainage off the back portions of Harbal drive. In addition a trail was developed by generations of dog owners from Broadview Apartments who used the woods as their doggy run and personal backyard exercise terrain.

Richard Singleton left St. Aidan’s to become the dean of the Cathedral in Providence RI. After 3 short term appointments by priests, St. Aidan’s proved itself the first Episcopal church in the Diocese of Michigan willing to extend a call to an openly gay or lesbian priest to be rector of its congregation.

The two churches began to see the wooded hillside less for its potential as a multi-faith spiritual center and more for its potential as a service to the community, particularly the part of the community most in need, the sick, the homeless, the aged. NAM, the

organization of both churches began to explore options for developing the land. The churches were always liquid asset poor but felt themselves land rich with a responsibility to share that wealth. There were many people, truth to tell, who were skeptical. Many loved the view from each sanctuary and conscious of the fact that the actual church building was yet to be built, worried that developing any land in service to the community would jeopardize future church development. Others simple did not want to develop the land. Among them Paula Uche urged keeping the land as a gift to wildlife and the many plants and creatures that used it for a habitat. At one point she oversaw a project of planting 150 evergreen trees to enhance the development of the forest.

To answer the concern about saving enough land for church use, the churches sponsored a fund drive to raise the money for a site survey. The \$4000.00 that was raised was used to hire Kadushin Associates, who had already successfully assisted the Messiah Community in Detroit to rehabilitate its inner city neighborhood. Abe Kadushin developed a site plan that allowed for the completion of a sanctuary, a green barrier, and several quadraplex units that contained both low-income and handicapped housing. The one stumbling block to this plan was the city of Ann Arbor's denial of a curb cut on Plymouth road citing the impossibility of making a safe left hand turn from anywhere on the Plymouth road property. We were invited to hire (at our expense) an engineering study to access the feasibility of a right turn only option.

Others stepped forward as well to dream about uses for the land. U of M professor, Kurt Brandle, assigned a graduate student to develop the plan for a Senior High rise that would use the Eastern slope and have roof top parking accessible from Broadview drive. The project proved too ambitious for the student and we never received the report. We engaged Washtenaw Affordable Housing Coalition to assess the land for low-income development. They found the slopes would make it too expensive to development for low income housing. Private developers, Jeff and Jack Baker, assessed the land for handicapped housing and came to the same conclusion.

Meanwhile we developed our own handicapped accessibility plan and paved a portion of our heretofore unpaved parking lot. The latter demanded a detention pond and berm at the foot of the property. Changing county conservation laws designed to protect the integrity of sloped land have made development less and less of a possibility. So we improved the land. Removed invasive species, planted hardwood trees, built a new path. This winter an Eagle Scout project delivered a second “expert trail” to us.

St. Aidan’s and Northside have continued on in congregational ministry. Known throughout the community mostly for the activism of their members and clergy, and the 12-step groups they host, the congregations, committed to open hospitality and inclusive welcome, have continued to nurture individuals and families.

The economic times, loss of members to other parts of the nation, and struggles to find ways to grow and regroup have taken a toll on both congregations.

A renewed visioning process this past December brought us face to face with our hopes and dreams for St. Aidan's. It became clear that two things were terribly important to St. Aidanites. The beauty of the woods and the ambiance it lent our worship, and the involvement of people with each other and their desire to serve others. The woods were the clear winner until one added the delight people had in the community with the desire to serve others and then people concerns eclipsed all else in the survey. This seemed to signal two things. 1) Even though St. Aidan's may be made up of rugged individuals and radicals, the beauty that surrounds us is very important to us. 2) Though worship, education, and preaching are important to us, it is the people and community that really make this church.

So having come out of the closet as nature lovers and people lovers, what do we do with this insight?

I advise, with renewed vigor, that we employ these assets to serve God and God's people. Yet in echo of the lesson we heard this morning from Genesis I think we need to experience a name change.

Abram lived almost 100 years with a name that meant “exalted father.” God changed that name to “father of multitudes” and explained that many nations would come from him. It was a change in character and importance, no longer would his fame and importance be stressed, rather the nations for which he was the progenitor.

I think for too long, St. Aidan’s has seen itself as an activist parish because of the work of its clergy and some of its members. We have not, however, for a long time really done ministry outside of ourselves that is ours. Sure we help with food and shelter, we have helped habitat, IHN, and any number of projects. I have been active in Peace, housing, LGBT concerns, and racial and economic justice. But St. Aidan’s hasn’t been active as an entity.

\

Right now we face one of the biggest humanitarian crises in our nation’s history. It is affecting our state and is truly affecting our church, all the churches. Yet, as our bishop has recently asserted, “what an important time for ministry.”

I really believe St. Aidan’s needs to be about a ministry that helps others in this time. No longer can we be known as Dick Singleton’s church, or Susan McGarry’s church, or any other person’s church, rather St. Aidan’s, the church that offers the community something uniquely its own.

What that unique offering will be is for us to determine. We were involved in a visioning process during Advent. We held two visioning sessions using your data identifying both our passions and our assets. The Vestry and other church leaders have distilled three favorites from a long list of possibilities. We will present those to you as fleshed out ideas, not finished plans during the next three weeks. Lent is a time for desert reflection. Even as we use it for our own self-examination, let us use it to imagine the ministry we can do together. Some of us may say. We cannot do this. We are too stressed and tired ourselves to reach out to others. That may seem to be true reality because so many of you have lots of responsibilities here. Yet remember, every time we do something here for others, whether it is the shelter, or the Jesse tree, we do end up with the energy and much more as well. We have a treasure to share. Two of the projects that will be presented are directly related to our natural habitat. The other, involving education, could happen elsewhere but would be enhanced by the ambiance and beauty of our place. Despite our best intentions, the land has in a way protected itself by being too difficult to develop and by enlisting aid from County regulators who want to preserve stable slopes. Perhaps Paula was correct in asserting this is something we should protect for all the life it fosters. Perhaps we need acknowledge how it has fostered ours and find ways to share it with others.

Today we heard the story of Peter's resistance to Jesus' troublesome journey. While I do not pretend to have his foresight, I suspect that our service is part of our journey. When

Jesus says, take up your cross, he does not just mean your persecutions, toils and sorrows, sometimes it means, take up your joys, your assets, your gifts and with them follow me in this life of discipleship. May it be so for St. Aidan's. May we be a church not just known for its people, but for its ministry as well.

It is the tale of two churches and some land. May it be a tale of our ministry as well.

AMEN