

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

**Alice M.C. Ling, Senior Pastor**

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Founders' Day

6 May 2007

Two Oxen and a Church

Acts 11:1-18  
Revelation 21:1-6

Okay, so maybe it wasn't every rule in the book, but it was a lot of them. And a lot of very important ones. That little sheet coming down out of heaven, loaded up with all that forbidden fruit and contaminated meat, wasn't just a dream or an illusion that Peter had triggered by having had too much garlic the night before. At least Peter didn't think it was. If that's all it had been, maybe he could have, should have, would have kept it to himself. But he was convinced it was a word from God, especially once it had happened three times. Then three strangers showed up and asked him to follow them to Cornelius' house. He felt the Spirit nudging him out the door, so he went with them. When Cornelius met him at his door and fell all over himself in welcoming the great Peter, Peter was quick to tell him to relax. He wasn't anybody all that special. But what who he was was a good Jew who wasn't supposed to fraternize with the likes of Cornelius, a Gentile. Not only had his mother taught him to avoid these people, the rule book forbade it. So what was going on here? They were just beginning to share and compare their experience of voices in the night when the Holy Spirit swept through again and landed on Cornelius and his entire household. Peter was attentive enough to recognize that they were being baptized with the Holy Spirit, and humble enough to know that it wasn't his place to get in the way.

We all know how people like to talk, and no matter how hard we try, not everything that happens in Caesarea stays in Caesarea. There began to be quite a commotion in Jerusalem about the reports they were hearing, so Peter figured he better go back and let them know what he was up to. Or more accurately, what God was up to. He told the story, what he had felt and heard and seen. And then he looked them straight in the eye and asked, who was I that I could hinder God? He was confident it had been God's voice that had spoken to him in that vision and said, if I say it's clean, it's clean. And he was positive that it was the Spirit that had swept over Cornelius and baptized him with faith. The good church leaders were silenced for a moment as they thought about what Peter had just said, and then they joined him in praising God that even the Gentiles had received the repentance that leads to life.

Peter may have messed up a lot in his younger days, but once he received the Holy Spirit, he was a new man. He knew what it meant to be attentive to what God was doing and where God was moving. He'd learned a long time ago to not presume what God had in mind, or that the way they'd always done things in the old days, before the crucifixion and resurrection, bore any resemblance to how God was doing things on this side of the empty grave and Spirit filled church. The best thing he could do was pay attention, stay as open and receptive as he possibly

could be and pray with everything he had in him so he wouldn't miss the voice or the movement or the will of God.

Attentive, open, grounded in prayer, responsive to the word and will of God. It worked for Peter, and it worked for the founders of this church. They had a breathtaking commitment to gathering as a church and coming together as a people of God. They arrived in Nutfield in 1719, and before they named the town, before they incorporated, before they had legal claim to the land, probably within 6 weeks of building the first log cabin, they formed this church. It took them a couple of years to build a building, and then 50 years later, they built a larger and nicer one. The church flourished and grew, and when they were just over 100 years old, they began to feel crowded. They knew they had a good thing going, and wanted to make room to offer it to more and more people, so they took on a building project. By cutting the church right down the middle, pulling one end away from the other and inserting 24 feet into the middle.

As I dig through the reports of our history, I don't find any writer as amazed by that as we have always been. In fact, when George Willey wrote in the 1950's, he was much more amazed and troubled by our founders' comfort with the 3 barrels of rum and 5 barrels of cider that accompanied the construction of the building than by their methods of enlarging the property. And yet to our ears and sensibilities and assumptions, you just don't enlarge a building by creating an opening in the middle. It simply isn't done. Add on to one end, maybe. A second floor, maybe. A new wing, maybe. But not a dozen saws, a team or two of oxen and two new panels of wall inserted in the middle. It just isn't done. It just doesn't make sense. It simply isn't reasonable. But those are our ears and our sensibilities and our assumptions; not theirs. They lived with an openness and an energy and an attentiveness that made that not only possible, but practical. Not only reasonable, but realistic. A downright brilliant idea. Go figure! Who can imagine what might happen when God is at work and the people are listening!

Those are two wonderful stories of a rich and exciting legacy on which we can stand as we come to our annual meeting. We have some challenges in front of us. None of us can be confident going in to the meeting about how or where we will come out, and I hope that none of us are casually comfortable. What decisions will we make about our life together in the coming year? And perhaps the more important question is how we will make those decisions? From fear? Based on perfectly solid, logical reasoning? Presuming that the things and teachings and truths of the past continue to be appropriate for the future? In faith? Maybe God wants to do a new thing in our midst today. If that's the case, I hope we have the openness and the humility and the attentiveness to know better than to try and stand in the way.

We have some challenges in front of us, and we have some hopeful good news. How will we hold those pieces together and what sense will we make of the next steps? Over the past few years, we have accumulated a deficit of more than \$50,000. AND this year, we virtually balanced our expenditures with our income. We sit in a very old building that needs a staggering amount of work if it's going to continue to stand strong and secure. AND this week, we were accepted into a program called New Dollars/New Partners that will help us get our head around how we are going to do that work, and assist us in taking the first next step. We will look at a proposed budget with more expense than income, and we will need to decide what the faithful equation is to moving forward into this fiscal year. Cut back and do less? Dig deeper and give

more? Or some other option we haven't even thought of yet. AND this week we learned that one of our beloved saints, before she died, named us in her will. Dena believed in us enough to do that. How much do we believe in us and in our future? How much do we think God believes in us? How open will we be to the movement and will and way of God stirring in our midst?

Peter and the earliest Christians in Jerusalem were attentive and open and grounded in prayer and responsive to the word and will of God. Our ancestors in faith put God and this church first, and dared to do what to us looks like a preposterous thing in the name of that same God. What will future generations say of us and of the choices we make today? By the grace of God, let us do our very best to be attentive and open and grounded in prayer and responsive to the word and will of God – wherever God may be leading us.

Amen.