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Fondren Presbyterian Church
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Reflections about Fondren on the Fourth of July

Let me speak this morning out of a deeply felt gratitude and affection for this church. It was fifty-five years ago that Elise and I almost by accident discovered Fondren. We had moved to Jackson the year before to a house on Northside Drive, and I had driven by this church almost every day on my way to work in the Woolfolk State Office Building downtown. For years before that I had passed by it when it was located in a modest little building on North State Street which was then U. S. Highway 51 – the road from my home in Grenada to Jackson when I was a member of the legislature. I had never heard anything about the Fondren Presbyterian Church. Even then it was a “well-kept-secret,” as someone has recently referred to it.

I had grown up in the First Presbyterian Church of Grenada. In fact my great grandfather had helped organize the church there back in the 1830’s. A beautiful stained-glass window in the sanctuary memorializes him and my great grandmother. The ministers and the members of that church along with my parents shaped my young life and left me with an indelible sense of obligation to my church and to those wonderful people in it who had helped raise me. That relatively small church was blessed with some great preachers. Two of the three pastors during my early years went on to become the presidents of Davidson College and Centre College. They were not narrow, dogmatic, sanctimonious fear-mongers. They preached love and unity and service to others. They made a huge difference in my life.

So when Elise and I moved to Jackson in 1958, we began looking for a church to join here like the one in Grenada, even as we continued our membership for a time in Grenada. We loved our church there and its wonderful minister, Dean Bailey. Then one day after visiting several churches here, we decided to stop by Fondren even though we knew hardly anyone there.

That is when we first met and heard its pastor, Dr. Moody McDill. We could instantly feel the warmth and kindness and compassion that he personified and that was reflected in the congregation that greeted us that morning. It was then that we recognized Fondren as a special place. It has been our spiritual home now for over half a century.

This is not to say that this church has not had its problems and difficult times. In fact when we first came here, the social and legal and theological turmoil of the 50’s and 60’s was beginning to rage in Jackson and across the South. It is not overstating it to say that Jackson, Mississippi was ground zero not only in the battle over segregation but also in the theological schisms that ultimately split the Southern Presbyterian Church. As a secular politician in those turbulent days, I found myself in many tense, heated political debates, but I must tell you that some of the bitterest and most hateful rhetoric that I ever heard was over theological hair-splitting issues in presbytery and synod meetings here in Jackson. But I later recognized that those issues were really grounded in race.

This church was the first and ultimately the leading congregation in our presbytery to open its doors to all worshipers regardless of race. That happened because one Sunday morning in 1963 after a group of black visitors were turned away, Moody McDill put his faith on the line and announced his resignation if that happened again. The session met the next day and the doors of Fondren were open the following Sunday. They have been open ever since.

Today it is hard for us today to realize the intensity of that issue. It was predicted by some that it would lead to Fondren's demise. We did lose some anguished members, but we emerged with a more unified and committed congregation that was comfortable with itself and that was not afraid to take an unpopular stand on issues of fairness and justice. Without a minister like Moody McDill and wise, courageous and respected lay members like the late Warren Hood and so many others Fondren could well have lost its way.

Moody McDill moved on to teach at Union Seminary in Richmond in 1967, but his spirit lived on. He was followed in the pastorate here by a series of able and dedicated ministers who did not let the social turmoil and denominational issues of the times divide us. Their names were Ed Wilson and Emmett Barfield, Diana and Donald Bell, Jim White and, of course, Mat Taylor. I must also cite the outstanding interim ministers which we were so fortunate to have had at various times—great ministers like Dwyn Mounger and Sam Marshall to mention only two. All of them brought differences in personality and leadership style, but they all had respect for a spiritual integrity that does not require us to conform to a narrow dogmatism. They all had a commitment to the larger community and a willingness to invest in the lives of our neighbors, both those whom we knew and those we did not. They demonstrated joy and love and compassion wrapped up in the Fondren tradition of giving and sharing. They all helped make this church the strong and vibrant church it is today.

In the almost sixty years that my family and I have been associated with Fondren, we have seen our community and our world undergo incredible change. This is a vastly different city from the Jackson of sixty years ago. And just as our community has changed, so has our church. Some of us are a lot older than we were then. We have seen our children grow up and move away. And so many of those old stalwarts who built this church are no longer among us.

But what has not changed is our commitment to the goals of Christian witness and service that have marked our progress over the years. One of those goals has not been to be the largest church in Jackson. In fact our mission in the 1950's and 1960's was to be the catalyst for the organization of new churches and we gave up many members in the process. As a result of Fondren's colonizing effort three new Presbyterian churches Trinity, North Park and Briarwood, were established in this city.

Fondren has never been content with simply maintaining a comfortable status quo. Rather than being intimidated by change, this church has never been afraid to confront it and shape it to our Christian purpose.

There is a dynamic about this church that rises to meet new challenges and to seize new opportunities. That is where we are today. Fondren, because of its historic vision and unity, is now poised to move into another period of growth and service. Located as it is in an area that

has dramatically come alive, Fondren is uniquely situated to be an even more effective spiritual force in this city than it ever has been.

I have never been more excited about the future of this church. I believe that the members of this congregation share that feeling. So today I feel that I speak for all of us in pledging our energy, our stewardship, and our loyalty to our church, our denomination and to each other to ensure that Fondren will continue to be worthy of the heritage which it bears.

Let me close these reflections by taking note that this week-end we are celebrating the Fourth of July. This is a holiday that should have special meaning for us Presbyterians. It is a historical fact that Presbyterians largely sustained the American Revolution. A disgruntled member of the British parliament at the time said America had run off with a Presbyterian parson, referring to John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian minister who signed the Declaration of Independence and was president of Princeton University. Gaius Slosser in his History of American Presbyterians makes this statement.

“When Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, all of the colonels of the colonial army but one were Presbyterian elders. More than one-half of all the soldiers and officers of the American army during the Revolution were Presbyterians.”

So this holiday is a Presbyterian milestone as well as a national one. I think it appropriate, therefore, that I leave you with these words from Mat Taylor’s Fourth of July message to our congregation three years ago.

“On July 4th,” he wrote, “we will celebrate 235 years of American independence, freedom, and democracy. Our Founders gave the world a bold, radical vision of a nation led by neither a king nor an oligarchy of divines, but by its own people. It was indeed a radical vision and also deeply Presbyterian. Long before the creation of this great nation, Presbyterians were experimenting with representative democracy as a form of church governance.....Neither bishop nor pope would rule the church, for Christ alone was to be the head of the church.

Our nation was born out of a radical declaration of fundamental equality among all persons:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’

America has always been growing into this vision, and surely, by God’s grace and divine providence, we will continue to grow into

this great vision of a people who, by voice and vote, rule themselves with justice and freedom for all. “

That is what Mat Taylor wrote three years ago and is meaningful today.

Now let us close with this prayer:

May God bless the Fondren Presbyterian Church and the United States of America.

Amen