

200th ANNIVERSARY SERMON AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSE
Old First Congregational Church
August 13, 2006

Text from 2 Chronicles 6

It was both a challenge and a joy to work on this service, deciding which of the odes and hymns that were sung 200 and 100 years ago we might sing today, or say together, as Charles Fox led us earlier; discovering the 1906 prayer by Mr. Mills that was slightly adapted for another of my predecessors, Arvel Steece to use this morning, and then the original sermon here on January 1, 1806 by Daniel Marsh, who was soon to become the pastor, and then elaborations on that sermon that Isaac Jennings, Jr., the 13th pastor, made 100 years later, as well as his historical discourse, plus the prior book by his father, Isaac Jennings, who was the 10th pastor, on the first 100 years of the congregation, that was “gathered,” as Congregationalists say, in 1762. There was Joe Parks and Tyler Resch’s recent history that they so graciously wrote for us as a source, and which you can take a copy of in the narthex today if you like. There’s an overflowing wealth of information, which is probably why the centennial events of 1906 took place over the course of two days. Now, it’s 100 years later – so we’ll try to get finished by 2:00, and maybe you won’t miss all of the parade!

I’m intrigued by this long prayer of Solomon, which was read at the dedication here on January 1, 1806. King Solomon had wealth and power and the perfect opportunity to wave the flag, if you will. He could have highlighted the great accomplishments of his administration and of the nation when it was at its peak, but he chose instead to call for trust in the strange God who formed a people out of nothing so

that they – our original forebears in faith – might gratefully be a blessing to the world. It’s easier said than done, but it’s what Daniel Marsh also tried to remind our founders in this building even as they celebrated their magnificent accomplishment here.

To complicate matters, we have guests here today. A hundred years ago, Isaac Jennings Jr. welcomed such as you are today by saying, “Passing reference here is appropriate to those who, though children of other churches in this town, are yet descendants of sires [and these days we might add, “and dams”] who drew inspiration from this pulpit in the long ago, when this was the only church here, each doing his [or her] work and doing it well. We welcome you back here today for their sake and join with you about the old hearth to receive our common mother’s centennial [now bicentennial] blessing” (*The Old Meetinghouse*, pp. 75-76.). Let me add my welcome to our Moderator’s, for no matter what your church history, no matter what your congregation, if you have one, or your rank or title in church or government, we are all children of God, equally loved, and our being here today is a brave reminder of that in a world where hierarchy and labeling and attempting to justify and establish oneself as better than another is so often the order of the day we begin to believe that THAT’s the real truth. We’re so glad you’re all here to witness to a faith otherwise.

Let’s try to string together elements of history and faith. Solomon asks in 2

Chronicles 6 that God's "ears be attentive to prayer from this place," which I take to mean was a way of urging that those who prayed should try to believe that there is, indeed, a God who notices, who actually has an opinion about how we live our lives – in short, who gives a heaven. So may the sermon today, which means not just the words spoken from even a high pulpit but also how they are heard, put us, as were our forebears, in touch with our strange God who calls people out of their safety and out of themselves, and into challenging adventures in faith.

Some words about this place as it began, then, first. Isaac Jennings the younger said in 1906 [p. 23] that early on in our history – and it's "our" history whether we're members here or simply represent – or have a good feeling for – the people of Vermont – early on in our history "church and town were one. All matters pertaining to either were settled in so-called 'Proprietors' meetings. They built their humble square meeting-house in the place they had cleared for it out on ... the "Green" [or the middle island] midway between this building and the Walloomsac Inn, but a little north. In conformity with the spirit of the times it might have nothing churchly about it. In shape, in appointments, even in location and character of pulpit, there must be nothing to suggest the churches against whose vain form of worship they thus raised visible protest. ... But the size of this house was only forty by fifty, and it could not always supply the needs of a growing community. So thirty years later, when the number of inhabitants had grown to two thousand three hundred and seventy-seven, we find an article introduced into the warning of the town meeting, March, 1792, 'To see if they will agree to build a new meeting-house.'

"Such propositions usually awaken, to say the least, a difference of opinion, and this was no exception. It was voted at once to dismiss this article. In 1793 a similar attempt met with like fate, and for three succeeding years the attempt was not renewed. The subject again coming up in 1797, it was voted: 'Not to act any further on the matter but to dismiss the same.' The next year, however, it was voted, at the March meeting, 'To choose a committee, according to statute directions; to stick a stake where the new meeting house shall be,' but alas, at an adjourned meeting it was voted: 'To reconsider the above vote,' and then voted: 'Not expedient at the time to erect a meetinghouse.'" No doubt the letters to any Bennington Pre-Banner flowed freely! And people wonder why it took so long to build the middle school!

"Now this apparent vacillation of purpose [Jennings goes on] covers a struggle; that struggle to get separated forever questions of church and state. They objected to being taxed by law to support the church or to being compelled by law to go to any particular church." Although we do know that, early on, the Proprietors sought authority from the general court of New Hampshire to "tax all owners of land in Bennington, resident and non-resident, for building a meeting-house, schoolhouse, mills and highways. They laid and collected that tax and later a tax to support the minister. They even voted in town meeting in 1777, 'That such persons as do continue playing in the meeting-house on the Lord's day or in the worship of God be complained of to the Committee of Safety of said town, who are authorized to fine them discretionary.'" The irony to me has always been that those who had separated from the standing order churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut, at least partly over the matter of supporting the

church by taxation – a church born not out of conviction, as they believed was essential, but simply because you were a citizen – they ended up being the state and the church together when they came up here, and it took a later generation to rebel again and force the church to raise the funds on their own when they finally ended up building this building so many have called home. Scripture, of course, is full of examples of this kind of thing, of repenting, of changing your mind. Solomon’s prayer in Chronicles, for example, speaks of a time when the people might be carried away into exile, and the theological spin of the actual writers, after the exile, was that people sin, we deny our commitments; but when that happens our gracious God is still there to hear our decisions to make a change. Maybe our forebears had such a sense of a change – “new light,” in the words of *their* forebear, John Robinson as he sent off the Separatist Pilgrims in 1620 – breaking again over them when they decided to build this place, not from the compulsion of taxes but out of the generosity of those who had declared their faith.

Joe Parks and Tyler Resch write more details. The Robinsons and other so-called “plain people” tended to live up what is now Monument Avenue from here, while those with more money, as in then-governor, Isaac Tichenor, and the Deweys, lived down here around the meeting-house. Joe and Tyler write that “The old meetinghouse...was seen by many as small and demeaning to a town that had developed pride in its growth and appearance.” But the plain people had problems with the idea of a “fancy” church. The third minister, the Rev. Job Swift, said the question of the new building ‘vexed’ his ministry, what with the warring factions of the elitists and the plain people. “Another matter vexing Rev. Swift’s ministry [write

Joe and Tyler] was the continuing demand for revival meetings, which the minister didn’t welcome because he didn’t approve the born-again belief, thinking that revivals made susceptible persons think they had experienced something connected to God that God didn’t do.” And then there were national politics. Mr. Swift was a highly respected figure throughout the state. A graduate of Yale and Williams, and on the board of trustees of Williams, Dartmouth and Middlebury Colleges, he outspokenly supported science and education and opposed injustice and racism. At the time of his death he was called “the apostle of Vermont.” But in 1801, according to Glenn Andres, Professor of Architecture at Middlebury College, Job Swift shared the conviction of other prominent New England clergy that Thomas Jefferson was an infidel, and he began to “word his prayers so as not to recognize the president as a Christian. The ensuing furor in a congregation with some strong Jeffersonians brought his resignation” (unpublished paper). Joe Parks and Tyler Resch say that “it is remarkable that during the first years of the 1800s while the question of the new church was being decided, there was no minister at all.”

It turns out that the revival meetings, which swelled the congregation and had to be held outdoors, may have helped convert even some of the plain people to want a new church building. They began to concentrate their opposition on the idea of selling the pews, the choicest pews going to the highest bidder. But the traditional way of raising money to build a church had been taxation, and the plain people, also called the New Lights, traditionally disliked all taxes. “To object to the minister and escape paying for his support [write Joe and Tyler] to them seemed their right.” Any of you who have anything to do with a

congregation that struggles financially today may be saying to yourselves, “Huh. The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

How to solve the dilemma? Says Jennings, “the congregation decided to try a call for donations. The amount donated was about half the \$5000 estimated to build the church. The donations were returned. The only remaining option was to ‘sell’ the box pews.” You can see a deed to one of the pews in the display from the Bennington Museum in the narthex. The box pews could be re-sold or inherited. We know that they raised the money from the sale of the yet-to-be-built box pews, with this pew [front right of congregation], bought by Moses Robinson, who came to Bennington in 1761 and was governor when Vermont became a state 30 years later, and the one in the south east corner, bought by Isaac Tichenor, who was governor when this building was built, each costing \$500 (determined by auction), while the back left pew, furthest from both the warmth of the preacher and the sun and the eyes of the rest of the congregation, cost \$40. Imagine that! The best seats in church up front! They raised almost \$8,000 in this way.

Now – where to put it? Joe and Tyler write that “the proponents of beauty wanted the church placed where it would be seen and admired from the roads approaching it from the north, south and west. But that area was partially covered by gravestones and by a little building that was a private upper school called Clio Hall.” But guess what burned in 1803? So they had their spot. They only had the graves to worry about, and the elitists, now in control, simply left it to families to move any remains. They probably didn’t. Any grave markers were pulled up and eventually stacked against the new church where they stayed for decades.

And then they eventually got lined up right out here [next to the church].

So, construction began. Lavius Fillmore was the architect. He moved to Bennington to supervise construction. It used to be believed that he took the plans from a book called, “The Country Builder’s Assistant” by Asher Benjamin, which would make *him* the architect. Asher Benjamin had ideas from the renowned Christopher Wren in London; and it’s interesting that a visitor here from Scotland just this past week remarked to me on the similarity between this building and those of Christopher Wren. But Glenn Andres at Middlebury College has recently found that before Benjamin’s book was published, Lavius Fillmore had already designed and built the church in East Haddam, Connecticut in 1794. We have pictures of that building, and a few weeks ago we had someone here in worship from East Haddam who had been in it and who confirmed that the similarity of the two interiors is striking. Our round dome, with the outline of the cross embracing the world, is much more elegant, as are the windows, but you can see that the idea of the box pews, columns, dome and high pulpit had been done by Lavius Fillmore before. As Vincent Ravi Booth put it in 1937, “Every column, beam and truss in the building, from the foundation to the roof, is in position with reference to that cross and dome.” The six main columns were made of single tree trunks “of the type previously reserved by British law for masts needed by the Royal Navy. There were no lathes in New England large enough for the job, so the work was all done with axes, chisels and planes [Jennings].” Columns with their capitals, high pulpit, stairway, pews and gallery, all this dental work by Asa Hyde – what a gift of love, all done by hand!

We're now going to leap over 130 years in a single bound or two. Suffice it to say that they made lots of changes in the course of the 19th century. Box pews fell out of favor and they put in straight slip pews. They pushed out the wall behind me to build a chancel, behind which they put a stained glass window. They took out the high pulpit and put in a lower, wider, darker one. No doubt such changes served the church's purposes at the time as not only this church but others grew. A colony of members organized a church in the southern end of North Bennington that was then called Hinsdillville. The recent history called "North Bennington and the Paran Creek" puts it that the "Old Stone Church was built by Deacon Hinsdill the Presbyterian in 1836." It lasted less than ten years, but was purchased by a Methodist Episcopal Church in 1858, which also didn't survive. A greater success, another colony of First Church, was Second Congregational Church, which was also organized in 1836, at least partly at the instigations of mothers who got tired of walking their families up the hill from where the town had expanded. We're proud to have had a part in our sister church's ministry over the years, which includes to this present day our mutual commitments to Church World Service, the CROP Walk, Habitat for Humanity, free Sunday suppers for the needy, and most of all the Interfaith Council's Emergency Assistance, or Food and Fuel, Fund. The mid-19th century was a heyday of church growth in town, with both Bennington's First Baptist and the Methodist Episcopal (now United Methodist) Churches being organized in 1827, St. Peter's Church, Episcopal in 1834, the Universalist meeting-house in North Bennington in 1836, the Baptist Church in North Bennington in 1845, and the first Roman Catholic Church in 1855, after they had held occasional

meetings in the courthouse for several years.

With all this growth, by the 20th century, what eventually became known as Old Bennington was in decline. Knowing the jewel this sanctuary had been in 1806, as well as having the vision that Vermont needed a place to represent its founding by those who held the often conflicting values of freedom and unity, the Rev. Vincent Ravi Booth, the 15th pastor, undertook the lead in the mid-1930's to have the building restored to its original shape. Denison Bingham Hull was the restoration architect, and they put back the box pews that had been removed, rebuilt the high pulpit, removed the chancel and took out its stained glass window and replaced it with the clear Palladian window, and got the Vermont legislature to declare this place, "Vermont's Colonial Shrine" in 1935. You can read the plaque about that on the side of the building. The word "shrine" is, I think, a mixed blessing. Ravi Booth was right; it does draw over 15,000 people here annually, to be astounded by what Lavius Fillmore and our common forebears here in Bennington were able to accomplish, and so it truly becomes a refuge of grace for travelers, which many intrepid volunteers from this church make possible, and which has been made more stunning after the major facelift and repairs in the late 1990's by the congregation and friends. But the word, "shrine" also helps make some of those visitors wonder whether the church is still active. "Shrine" isn't a word that has much favorable press, biblically, either. It's only found in the Bible ten times, mostly in Samuel as his sort of temporary worship base before he anoints Saul the first king of Israel, which turned out to be a disaster. And Isaiah (44:13) speaks sarcastically about a shrine as a place where a person sets up stuff basically to worship himself.

Jeremiah (17:12) speaks of it in a way that suggests that the presence of God means the opposite of dedicating one's life to the shrine of amassing wealth. But the letter to the Hebrews (6:19) speaks of Jesus as "hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain," meaning, I think, that in any place of worship, including sometimes our deep souls' desires, it's where the love of Christ abides that makes it holy. But regardless of the term, we can certainly be glad for the vision of those who put the sanctuary back, who rededicated it in 1937, when Robert Frost spoke here, and decided to recognize by the pew and wall plaques Vermonters who made significant contributions to society, who gave of themselves, which is what the love of Christ means. Those who are generous with their lives and struggles are often the ones who tend to reflect the very nature of God.

Speaking of the state of Vermont, with a governor in the house today, we should perhaps say something about one of his predecessors (from Jennings Jr. p. 61): "At first, there was no bell in the steeple, but a horn summoned people to church. In 1820 Governor Tichenor, having promised the church a bell, secured one from the foundry of J. Hanks in West Troy. This is said to have been rung formally for the first time at the dedication of Mr. [Absalom] Peters, [who was pastor here from 1820 to 1825], and to be the first church bell rung in Vermont. It proved, however, to have some flaw in it, and was returned to the foundry, being sent back here in 1823, and hung again, as the inscription on it tells us." You can see a picture of the bell in the narthex, in the notebook of events of our anniversary year that Bill and Carol Gordon have produced. Mr. Jennings goes on to say that the bell rang every Sunday morning at 9

a.m., but at first it was even a daily tradition. He also says (in footnotes to his discourse), "that it was desired to have the bell heard every day for its sacred associations and reminders. [He doesn't say desired by whom!] He says it was rung to toll the age of some citizen who had died, as well as during the procession to the burying ground. But then he adds, "This bell also had something to say on joyous occasions, night or day, for it used to be a custom...to let people know that the fourth of July or the sixteenth of August had come, and twelve o'clock midnight had struck, by tones from its brazen throat, and this even though the [town] fathers had taken all precautions to prevent it. [Maybe *we* could revive something historical here in Old Bennington this coming Wednesday morning, at midnight! And maybe you could say that the idea of restoring the clock chimes at the Four Corners has good parentage up here.] There [the bell] has hung for eighty-three years [said Isaac Jennings in 1906, so it would be 183 years now], its voice never silenced through all the years, when it had something to tell." And then this interesting comment: "Hardly another voice connected with this church has this record." I wonder, besides whether there were 83-year members then, if Jennings meant something else by that?

Could he be implying that our most basic task, at least those who gather in a special place such as this, is always to proclaim not so much the good news of this place, or the good news of any other particular congregation, or of a town (even when it's a "best small town"), or a state, or a nation, even, but the good news of God, as hard as that can be, when the world not only hears but acts as if the only news anyone would want to hear are the things that come out of our fear and grief and self-pride and anxiety? Could he be implying that our

task is always to be a lantern of hope, when the world is easily convinced by the dark cynicism that breeds war and mutual contempt, and that labels people in infinite ways – liberal, conservative; Muslim, Jew, Christian; flatlander, native; Old Bennington, Bennington? Could he be implying that, as Lavius Fillmore has spoken to untold thousands through the simple elegance of the place he built for the worship of God, that we can speak, too, with simplicity and clarity, speak and show the One who came to us naked and vulnerable, and gave everything, and yet was raised from the dead because that’s how God works? There’s always some creative newness up ahead with the love that is God, if we’ll only believe it. Shall we speak and act so we might know how crucial it is for our well-being and the world’s, that we all take to heart how much God loves not only us but our neighbor, as strange or annoying or maybe even dangerous as he or she is? Faith in God is the ultimate inconvenient truth. It is, in Robert Frost’s words, a lover’s quarrel with the world. It forces us to confront the very meaning of why we are here in the first place. And it calls us to join with others in communities like this one, sometimes fraught with disagreement, but who have still taken on the great privilege of demonstrating to the world the kingdom of God.

In his sermon 200 years ago, the Rev. Daniel Marsh said:

“We can say of the new meeting-house, it far exceeds the former in magnitude, riches, and elegance; but can we hope the glory of the latter house shall be greater than the former in the gracious presence of God? Though the latter Jewish temple was far inferior to the former in its earthly splendor and glory, yet the latter exceeded the

former in glory in being honored with the personal presence of Christ, and his promising that in that place he would give peace. But can we, my brethren [and sistren], hope for greater special blessings in this latter house than your fathers [and mothers] and yourselves have experienced in the former?”

What will the next 200 years bring, in this congregation or any other? God knows. But in the meantime, don’t be afraid to throw your hat in the ring of those who are called by faith – and have been called for generations – to show something new. Challenge your congregation – challenge the world – to concrete expressions of love. And may the things we prize, even this building, even the temples of our very lives, always gain their value from the experience, the evidence and the proclamation of the gracious love that comes as pure gift.

Dedication Prayer by the Rev. Daniel Marsh, 1/1/1806, *adapted both by Isaac Jennings in 1906 and for us today:*

O Thou great and eternal Jehovah, *Lord God of us all*, we, *your* dependent, sinful creatures, acknowledge that our blessings are flowing unto us through Christ, our dear Redeemer, and we do praise and adore *your* name, that you *did* put it into our *forebears*’ hearts to erect a convenient house to assemble in for *your* worship; that *you did cause success in their* undertaking; that we have enjoyed the fruits of the unanimity and harmony *as well as the differences* that prevailed among *them*; that the house *still stands* in readiness to be *re-dedicated* unto *you*, for *your further* gracious abode and our worship; and we do now, O Lord, in *your* presence, with deep humility, with holy cheerfulness, and with profound

adoration, re-dedicate this house unto *you*;
beseeching *you* to accept *again* this offering
which *through our forebears has* enabled
us to present, as *your* gracious abode so
long as *you* in *your* good providence shall
continue it in existence.

“Here, O Lord, *will you still* command *your*
peace, here *will you still* bless *your* people
with the fruition of *your* love, with the spirit
of prayer and merciful answers, causing
them to share largely in *your* grace and
behold displays of *your* glory. Here, O
Lord, *will you still* meet in mercy perishing
sinners, until all *your* gracious purposes
shall be accomplished, concerning the
people assembling in this house to call on
your name.”

In the presence of Christ, we, God’s people
gathered here today, all ring out, “Amen.”

Scott L. Barton
Old First Congregational Church
August 13, 2006