



"Framing Lumber and Picture Frames"

Text: Heb. 12:1-2 Date: 4/29/07
A Sermon for Golden Senior Sunday
by The Rev. Samuel A. Schreiner III

Noroton Presbyterian Church

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us... Hebrews 12:1

In Hebrews, chapter 11 we read a summary of the saints of the Old Testament. This has been called the gallery of heroes of the faith. Immediately following, in the twelfth chapter, the author reminds believers who are carrying the torch of faith that they are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses. He encourages them to run their "leg" of the faith in an equally heroic fashion.

As I studied the history of our church and the generation that preceded us, some who sit here today, and as I reflect on the many wise, sacrificial and strategic decisions that they made, I realize that we too are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. This golden senior generation has handed us a tremendous legacy. Through their work, gifts, service and prayers, we worship today in the largest Presbyterian Church in New England. There is no question that the most pivotal time of numerical growth in this church's history was in the 1940s and 1950s. After World War II, during the early years of Dr. Horton's ministry, many families moved to Darien. From 1945 to 1960, as our golden seniors gave their hearts and souls to this church, the membership grew from 480 to 1900 followers of Christ.

When this faithful group embarked on the campaign to build our present sanctuary, there hadn't been a new church built in Darien since St John's was constructed in 1888. The town's population had climbed to more than 10,000. Houses were being built on every available plot of land. In the early 1940s, Rosemary Mace's father, Roger Hull, led a campaign to retire the \$12,000 debt that had been carried by the church since the construction of the second parish house which stood behind the chapel and provided classroom and meeting space. (The original Parish house was built before the turn of the century by Mary Skelton's grandfather, Richard Skelton.) When the debt was retired, this Debt Retirement Committee, still chaired by Roger Hull (who would later chair the executive committee of the 1957 Billy Graham Crusade in New York City and also become a board member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association), expanded to 35 members and was renamed the Church Planning Committee. After a thorough assessment of the needs of the church and community, this committee convinced the members of NPC to form a "Rise Up and Build" Campaign which would be the first of many campaigns that would raise the \$350,000 needed to build this sanctuary as well as the \$100,00 needed to furnish it with pews, lights, the organ and the public address system.

Some of you here today may remember these committees. What you may also remember is that not only did this group build the sanctuary, but they also, in 1955, purchased land on Nickerson Lane to build a manse for their minister, Dr. Horton. That residence is now home to Pastors Connie and David Jordon-Haas and their daughters. The expansion continued in the 1960s with the planning and building of a \$400,000 addition for Christian Education with space for the choirs. Then finally, in 1966, the SHAC youth center was added.

It is important to remember that not only was this a time of rapid numerical growth in our country (aptly termed the "Baby Boom") but this was also a time of radical societal change in our culture. In 1957 the US Flag had only 48 stars representing the then 48 states in the union. Alaska and Hawaii would be added in 1959. In 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus and the bus boycotts of Montgomery began. In 1957 the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik I. Sputnik II quickly followed, launching the first dog into space. The space race as well as the Cold War began. Progress continued as Dwight Eisenhower, having witnessed the efficiency of the German autobahn during World War II, determined the US would need more efficient roadways in the event of a nuclear strike and initiated construction of the federal highway system. During the 1950s and 60s, Interstate 95 was added to Darien's landscape, accelerating the already rapid growth of the suburbs.

Tom Brokaw has called the generation that we celebrate here today "the Greatest Generation." They courageously won a war against oppression and then determinedly focused on the building of their families and careers as well as strengthening America as they built the schools, colleges, hospitals and churches that have blessed and benefited my

generation. To this generation, to you here today, if no one has ever stopped to say this, allow me to say "thank you". Thank you for all the sacrifices you made for these significant contributions. Thank you for your faithfulness to God's prompting which on this one corner alone - beginning with the original plot of land where the chapel stood, adding the gift of the Hodges family to include the land east to the corner of Noroton Avenue and the white manse on Noroton Ave., adding the purchase of a parcel to the west called the White house (between the chapel and the Weed house) to house the sexton and adding, fifty years ago, our current nursery school - resulted in the consolidation of these beautiful eight acres. Thank you for following God's prompting to make the right moves at the right time so that we may now enjoy worship and service to our world on this corner. This generation was like the person mentioned in an old proverb. A great man is one who selflessly plants an acorn so that future generations may enjoy the shade from an oak tree. By faith and sheer determination this golden generation planted many seeds that bless us even today. Most of them don't want attention. They even shun the credit. However, their foresight and faithfulness and determination are admirable and deserve our profound appreciation.

You may never have thought about this, but a church like ours cannot be built by people who are on the move; by those who refuse to sink roots down deep and stay in one place for any length of time. Modern Darien has always been home to people who stay only a few years as they make a career stop in New York City. As a pastor I am grateful for the sort of cross-pollination that occurs as people move to different churches, taking and sharing what they have received and learned. This helps the kingdom of God flourish and grow. But a local church will only grow when local people make a long-term commitment to that growth. The partnership of a long-term ministry, like that of Dr. Pete Horton or Rev. Ed Danks, and lay people willing to be committee members, choir members, Sunday School teachers, youth volunteers and church officers, is what allows a church to grow beyond the ordinary and become an extraordinary place. We owe a great debt of gratitude to our own "great cloud of witnesses". They have been a part of this fellowship for over fifty years, serving daily behind the scenes.

The Londonderry Presbyterian Church in New Hampshire, where Deb and I last served, was just a bit older than our chapel here. It was the third house of worship for that congregation, built in 1837 during Andrew Jackson's tenure as our seventh President. It was a typical white clapboard, wood frame church with a bell steeple and it was situated across from the village green. I was told that when George Bush Sr. was running for President and made an appearance on that town green, the Secret Service commandeered the steeple to keep watch of the Vice President.

The building was constructed using huge timbers with carved mortised joints secured by wooden pegs. Those beams and joints are still visible from the steeple stairway. It is a marvel to behold those aged, sturdy beams that have stood strong for one hundred and sixty years! During the 1990s, when the decision was made to add a balcony, a steel beam was used to replace an old cedar timber. During this renovation, quite proud of this structure that had stood the test of time, I said to the structural engineer, "They really knew how to build them back then." "Not really," he replied. "Plenty of these old churches and barns built this way fell down. You just happen to have one of the better ones that stood the test of time."

We have a fellowship in this church that has stood the test of time. Something is well constructed about Noroton Presbyterian Church that allows us to continue to be one of the strongest Presbyterian Churches in all of New England, with a national reputation and a global outreach. I would submit to you this day that those members who have been a significant part of our church for more than fifty years are part of the secret of our health and strength! They are like those framing timbers of my last church, giving strength to the plans and purposes of this church. Wood can be used to make picture frames that we hang on the walls when we move into a home and then take with us when we move out, or wood can be turned into framing lumber that, once hammered into place, will stand for ten, twenty, one hundred or even one hundred and fifty years and more. The difference in durability is determined by the plans of the carpenter in whose hands the wood is held. Our longest members are the timbers that have held this church together. When we add all the years of membership listed on the back of the bulletin today, we have 3,211 years represented! That is a lot of Christmases and Easters, a lot of sermons and stewardship campaigns, a lot of songs of praise and many shared prayers. That is many years of belonging to one Christian church. This sort of stability has helped the whole church stand strong together.

In a time when everyone was on the move, this golden generation "stayed put" and became the backbone of our church and community. It is no surprise that we find among our seniors honored today, those who still serve as ushers, who still sing in the choir, who still lead the Noroton circle, and serve as wedding coordinators, who still serve as members of the finance team, who have been regular contributors, elders, deacons, and volunteers. This should come as no surprise. At eight-one, Ben Franklin was still negotiating the compromises of the US Constitution. At eighty-two, Winston Churchill published the four volume "History of the English Speaking People". At ninety Pablo Picasso still drew and at one hundred, Grandma Moses was still painting. It should come as no surprise that many of our golden seniors show no sign of slowing down. They are, in fact, living out the words of Douglas MacArthur, the great World War II General of the Pacific campaign, when, with the wisdom of a senior sage, he said,

...years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up interest wrinkles the soul...You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt, as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear: as young as your hope, as old as your despair. In the central place of every heart there is a recording chamber; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer,

and courage, so long you are young. When...your heart is covered with the snows of pessimism and the ice of cynicism, then and then only then are you grown old – and then indeed, as the ballad says, you just fade away.

Fortunately for us, many of this generation appear to be a long way from "fading away."

We do have to admit that the world has changed around us. I was talking to my tailor Gartrell from Fabricare, across from the Noroton Heights train station. I told him that he was now famous because the newspaper had written about his twenty years at that one location.

"I've been around a lot longer than that," he told me. "I was down on the Post road before coming up here. I used to ride my bike through this town when I was young." (I calculate that to be over forty years ago.)

"Then you have seen changes in this town, haven't you? It used to be more like a close knit village and now it is full of people who don't know each other", I said.

"You got that right," he said with certainty and a touch of sadness for what has been lost from those gone by days.

This isn't the same town it once was. This isn't the same nation or the same world. Yet, we still need Christ and His church. Families still need faith at their cores – Faith not just for baptisms and confirmations and weddings and memorial services, but faith for mission trips and for the discovery of spiritual gifts and for the finding of friends in small groups, faith for praying for our toddlers and teens and for the prayers for our aging parents. We still need endurance to run the race of faith that God has set before us. We need to adapt our ministry and our buildings to our changing times and in doing so we would do well to look to this "greatest generation" for our inspiration. When the time came to do what was needed to better serve this town with this church, they answered the call and served their generation and ours as well.

On December 14, 1947, Dr. Pete Horton preached a sermon in our chapel titled, "the Lord Hath Chosen Thee To Build." I read it this week in a book that one of our members, Mrs. Jean Improta, left in my study for me. It is a sermon that some of the members here today may well remember. Young Dr. Horton preached about the needs for an expansion to the church and then ended his sermon with these words, which I shall use in closing today.

We're not building a church for God. God is building the church using us as agents of His will. In that task He calls each one of us to shun the darker side of fear and dismay, and cleave to the sunnier side of strength and courage. For when God calls men to a task He gives them strength sufficient for the day. That strength Christ found as he faced the cross and turned its terror into triumph. Who follows in his train?

Who follows? We are to follow. Who do we follow? Christ and that great cloud of witnesses who have always stood before us – that quiet, steady, faithful, steadfast generation, who never called attention to themselves, who have done their duties, said their prayers, kept their faith and managed to be members of one fellowship here for 50, 60 even 75 years. We praise God for each and every one of you and we pray that whatever blessings God gave to you as you faithfully served Him here, may he deposit in equal measure to us and to the generations to follow as we do likewise. Amen.