

Sermon 175th Celebration at Old Blandford Church
Ephesians 4:17-32, Matthew 9:1-8
October 2, 2106
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We know that a young Churchill Gibson started his new ministry in Petersburg as a Deacon in October of 1841, 175 years ago this month. Maybe it was on October 2. Maybe he read and preached on the same Bible lessons we heard earlier from Ephesians and Matthew.

The altar book we read from containing the scripture readings – and the one we will use later for some of the Communion prayers – is the same one he used during his ministry at Grace Church. It has his handwriting in it in pencil, most notably where, in a prayer for the President of the United States, he scratched out “United States” and penciled in “Confederacy.”

We are so grateful that Webster and his wife and mother are here today and for his words about the Gibson family. Let me say a few words about the scripture lessons as they may inform and edify our parish family.

The story in Matthew’s gospel is more familiar to us in Mark’s and Luke’s gospels. They both add the further detail of the paralyzed man being lowered through the roof to get him into Jesus’ presence.

It seems to me that this story is essentially all about the work or mission of the faith community. At least two and as many as four people were needed to bring the man to Jesus. Maybe they came from a far distance at great effort and sacrifice for the sake of their friend or family member. Either way, the man couldn’t get to Jesus by himself because he was incapable of walking.

For 175 years now a faith community has gathered first at one of several Grace Church locations, then in Christ Church and now at Christ and Grace Church. Has our mission ever changed?

Like the stretcher bearers, we are to bring people to Jesus. We want others to know and experience Jesus’ love, forgiveness and healing in a way that will change their lives. No one of us can do that alone. It requires a community of faith.

As the gathered community of faith we pray for one another. We can all be short on faith at times. We need the faith of others to get us through those rough patches we all experience from time to time. Bringing their friend to Jesus is certainly a form of deliberate and tenacious intercession. St. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians that we are “members one of another,” and we should be “kind to one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another...”

A few years ago the following true story was told in *Prevention* magazine. It was titled "Prayer Can Save Your Life."

Georgette Peterson had been through three chemotherapy treatments for an inoperable cancerous growth on her spine, and she was being pressed to try a new approach: drilling three holes in her skull, then attaching a halo device that allowed for direct, pinpoint radiation. She was tense but confident.

However, two days after her scan, at the M.D. Andersen Medical Center in Austin, Texas, her radiologist's office called to cancel the procedure. The growth was simply gone.

Fifteen hundred miles away, a small group of Quakers were nearly as elated as Georgette. The group had attended a weekend retreat in the Pennsylvania countryside the day before Georgette's scan, and one person in the group had asked them all to pray for her. "It was an amazing experience," said Quaker retreat leader Marcelle Martin. Gathering around a fireplace in silent worship, the group had prayed, and, as Quakers describe it, held Georgette "in the light of Christ." Some ninety minutes later, a huge wind rushed around the stone and wood building they were in, throwing a whirlwind of fall leaves against the windows. "It ended our prayer," admits Martin. "Afterward, we just kind of looked at each other, and said, 'What was that?'"

At about the same time, as near as anyone can tell, Georgette was moving through her house in Texas, putting things away. "I was walking down the hallway into the game room," she recalls, "and this feeling washed over me, and I began to cry." The crying continued for a couple of minutes. She had no idea why. Later she found out that "the group in Pennsylvania had beamed their prayer directly to me. So you might say that instead of having stereotactic radiation, I had what my friend Doug called stereotactic prayer!"

How many people has Jesus healed with the help of our prayers at Christ and Grace? Way too many to name.

As a faith community, we literally bring people to Jesus through our own witness and as we invite them to come to church. We help people experience God's healing through our prayers. And we help any and all people in need through our outreach. Did you notice that in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul's rationale for people to perform honest labor is so "that he may give to him that needeth?"

The man who is now healed and forgiven his sins is able to walk. Jesus would be pleased if he, in turn, were part of another stretcher bearer crew bringing other sick people to Jesus for healing. We are forgiven, healed and empowered by Jesus and the Holy Spirit for service to others in need.

For 175 years, then, this faith community has had one mission: Bringing people to Jesus; praying together for wholeness and healing; and serving the needy. May that mission continue for at least another 175 years. AMEN.