

“I Will Bless Your Name Forever and Ever”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
July 26, 2009 – the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
And Based on Sirach 44:1-15
By the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

This is the second in a series of sermons devoted to the history of this church. The first one talked about the stained glass windows in this sanctuary. Today, the focus is on the named rooms of the church: the Borton Room upstairs at the other end of the building, the northeast corner; the Gamble Room immediately behind me—it’s where we hold our coffee hours; the Dahlman Room downstairs beneath this sanctuary; and the Robinson Room, our large social hall, also downstairs. I’ll also be mentioning the Williamson Room, which we never hear about because it is now a nursery school room without a memorial plaque (it’s the room on this floor at the northeast corner of the building), and the Frances N. Dorer Room, which we do hear about because Phil Martin rescued it’s plaque from oblivion (it’s the large nursery school room immediately beneath the church office). I’ll also mention the perhaps non-existent Leighton Room, which could be the choir room, but who knows? Memorials that are not remembered disappear, perhaps forever.

But first, a few facts about the persons whose names adorn our rooms.

The first room to be named was the Frances N. Dorer Room, the large nursery school room on the lower level beneath the church office. Frances was Superintendent of the Beginner’s Department, which met in that room for many years. Her husband, Richard J. Dorer, was a prominent conservationist, and there is a hardwood forest named after him. You may recall their son visiting Grace-Trinity and talking about being in that large, vast room of his mother’s when he was a child, and how small it looked when he came back to speak with us. The room was dedicated in 1951, the year the church completed its one-story educational wing. Frances was so honored because she was a much beloved teacher and superintendent.

I do not know in what years the other rooms were named, so I’ll proceed with the top floor and work my way downward. The Borton Room was named after either Oscar I. Borton, a successful DeSoto / Plymouth auto dealer whose lot was on Lyndale and 52nd St.—or it was named after his wife, May Borton, who died suddenly in 1956. I’m guessing it’s the latter: it was May whom Oscar wished to memorialize. This would also coincide with the completion of the second story of the educational wing—that would be in 1959—so it seems plausible. May served on the school board for the Minneapolis public schools from July, 1951, to June 26, 1956, the date of her death. In a letter Robi Robinson

wrote to Florence Fahlbusch in 1985 concerning various memorials in the church, Robi said that “May was a warm friend of ours – Oscar also. Not very active in church as I remember, but supporters.”

The Gamble Room is named after Mary Lucas Gamble, 1860-1927, who was married to Stewart Gamble, a prominent drug store owner, and then drug and paint store owner, and then land and lumber company owner, and then president of the Goodrich & Gamble Manufacturing Company, “engaged in making druggists’ supplies.” I know far less about Mary, however, even though she did write histories of Grace Presbyterian Church for the years 1906, 1907, 1908, and 1917. But her histories were all about everyone else. Still, in them a warm, generous, hard-working woman comes through. For the year 1907 she wrote, “Talk about live committees and live organizations and strenuous times, and the rush and hurry and aggressiveness of the present age—we had a sample of all these that well-remembered summer of 1901,” which was the summer nineteen church members gathered to plot the move from the old site on 31st St. and Emerson to our present site, here at 28th St. and Humboldt. It’s interesting to read about her “strenuous times,” and “the rush and hurry and aggressiveness of the present age.” I thought we had a monopoly on those, and back then life moved at a slower pace!

The Williamson Room is the room now used by the nursery school at the other end of the building, on this floor, the northeast corner. It lacks a plaque saying as much, but we know this from a map now in the janitor’s room downstairs and from a reference Robi made in a history of the memorials of the church he wrote in 1955. “The stained glass windows which we have enjoyed for the past year,” he said, “were made possible when Mr. Charles B. Williamson left to the church a \$5,000 bequest. During his life, Mr. Williamson had given the carpet for the sanctuary and money for the interior finishing and furnishing of the Primary Room, which is a memorial to his wife, Mrs. Mabel E. Williamson. Both Mr. and Mrs. Williamson were active leaders in our church life from the date of their joining the church in October, 1926, until their deaths.” Their four stained glass windows, by the way, anchor the four corners of our sanctuary.

The Dahlman Room, which is the room downstairs you pass through on your way to the Robinson Room, was really a memorial to three Dahlmans: the ceiling lights were given in memory of Roy L. Dahlman, the husband and father, 1892-1959. The room itself, it seems, was given in memory of his wife, Angie Vyn Dahlman, 1891-1963. And their daughter, Annette Dahlman, is remembered with a plaque that appears on the altar in the room. It reads: “IN MEMORY / OF / ANNETTE DAHLMAN / WHO PASSED ON / INTO THE SPIRITUAL LIFE / SEPTEMBER 27, 1937 / AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN.” Robi, in his letter of 1985, wrote, “About the Dahlman Room—it was in memory of a daughter (Annette ?) and I think there is a plate on one end of the altar piece giving her name and dates—[and] Angie Dahlman, husband Roy, son Robert, a daughter Mary, and I think another daughter. Angie was active in the Women’s Assoc. Roy was the representative of a glove manufacturer.”

Finally, we come to the Robinson Room, named after the Rev. Morris C. Robinson, Grace Presbyterian Church's distinguished pastor from 1931 to 1967—thirty-six years of faithful ministry. Robi was a formidable figure, one in whose shadow, I swear, every minister since has had to live. He was the seventh minister to serve the church since its founding in 1894—a period of thirty-seven years. For the first sixteen years of his pastorate, he was the church's only minister. It wasn't until 1947 that an assistant minister was added. An associate pastor did not come along until 1964, when the Rev. Keith Roepke was installed. At the start of Robi's ministry, the membership was 475. By 1938, it was 658. By 1944, it was 930. It reached its peak in 1955 with 1,477 members. During his pastorate the church acquired a manse at 1511 W. 28th St. (1938). It reconfigured the sanctuary, acquiring new, "less comfortable, but straight" pews and a center aisle—that was in 1943. In 1950, the Drive-in-Church on Highway 7 west of the city, was begun. Services were held at 9:00 a.m. during the summer months. In 1955, the stained glass windows were installed. For the 25th anniversary of his ministry at Grace, the church gave to Robi and his wife, Jeanette, a three-and-a-half month trip to Europe and the Middle East, during which time he acquired, and later presented to the church as a gift, the church's nativity set that is on display each Advent and Christmas season. He also made arrangements for the church to purchase its splendid Whitechapel handbells. From July, 1943 to July, 1955, he was a member of the Minneapolis public school board, and from July, 1946 to July, 1949, he was its president. On June 7, 1954, he received an honorary LHD, Doctor of Humane Letters, from Macalester College.

A tough act to follow, let me tell you, which brings me to the "Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors" which is our lesson for the day. It's from Ecclesiasticus, or Sirach, as it is also known, chapter 44, verses 1-15. Sirach is the Greek name of the author of the book, Jesus ben Sira. It is one of the books of the Apocrypha, the books written between the two testaments and included in some Bibles but not others. You may recognize the words of this hymn. We use them each All Saints' Sunday to commemorate our saints who have died during the previous year ... which is something of a sleight-of-hand, I have to confess, for although it sounds like a high-minded tribute to "those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor," Sirach's real purpose in writing the hymn was to separate those mighty men who merely did great things from those who "were godly men whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten" (44:10). The merely great, Sirach believed, were too much influenced by the Hellenism of his day—by the rising tide of Greek culture, that is, that seemed to dominate every corner of the ancient world. Sirach saw this culture as a threat to Jewish survival. It was very attractive, there was no doubting that, but it also lacked any mention whatsoever of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. So he composed his "Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors" to counter this threat and to set his fellow Jews on the right path. And it was not enough, he said, to be merely great. You could speak prophetic oracles, lead the people by your counsel, compose musical

tunes, and be rich as well, living peacefully in your homes, but if you lacked piety—the fear of the Lord that was the beginning of wisdom—then your deeds would come to nothing. It was the righteous, those who feared the Lord and obeyed his commandments, whose bodies were buried in peace, and whose names lived on from generation to generation.

I believe that Sirach was right, that it is not enough to be merely great, but that piety ought to be the motivating force behind such deeds. Merely great deeds accomplish much, but the memory of them is difficult to maintain, for there is no way for the children of the great to own them. The next generation and the generations after them cannot hope to emulate what the Great Man or Woman did. And often enough, there is little reason for them to try, for all the glory rests with that man or woman. There is no honor, in other words, given to the true author of their deeds, God. It is God who gives us life, and all the resources we need to act with a noble purpose, one motivated by a Holy Spirit. Not to give credit to God, not to bless his Name forever and ever, is to usurp his authority. It is to seek our own glory at God's expense. And when we do that, our children suffer, for they have no means of being inspired themselves. They have only the insufferable example of their parents. God, however, does not call the next generation to repeat what we have done, but to hear afresh what his Spirit is saying, and then to act accordingly. Each generation in its way tells of the glory of God. Or not. The task of the truly great is to be obedient in their lifetime, yes, and to accomplish great things—this, too. But they must also transmit the value of their obedience to their children. Otherwise, there will not be a next generation that honors God, and perhaps not even one inspired and equipped to do great deeds.

We end with the Leighton Room, a room Robi could not remember whether it existed or not, but which should exist, because Mr. J. L. Leighton, a prominent contractor and business man existed, and he was a great man. The better question, I think, would be to ask whether Mr. Leighton feared the Lord, and did his children do likewise. If so, then our assembly gladly declares his wisdom, and our congregation proclaims his praise—and we'll even find a room for him with a plaque on it to say as much!

Amen!