

ANNUAL MEETING
of the
STRAWBRIDGE SHRINE ASSOCIATION

Saturday, October 4, 2014

An address by
Bishop Marcus Matthews

To all members, supporters and friends of The Strawbridge Shrine:

It is my pleasure to greet you on the occasion of the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Strawbridge Shrine Association. I was excited and honored when asked to bring greetings at such an important event because I am grateful for every opportunity to serve God and to serve our beloved church family, which has such a rich history.

I am grateful to the organizing committee, staff and all people connected with the Strawbridge Shrine for joining in this celebration of 250 years of preaching and exhortation.

As you might be aware the Bethel church is a successor to one that began in Robert Strawbridge's first Log Meeting House. Preaching began in that pulpit in 1764. And therefore I am honored to be speaking at this celebration.

Allow me to register my thanks to God for guiding women and men who have worked to preserve the history of Robert Strawbridge's ministry.

Robert is credited with establishing Methodist classes and preaching in the local community as well as many other places. However, it was Elizabeth Strawbridge, who was responsible for the first recorded American Methodist convert, John Evans.

So it was befitting that the Strawbridge Shrine Association was formed on June 18, 1937 to preserve the history of Robert Strawbridge's ministry. I would describe him as something of a rebel. He was inflexible when it came to the sacraments. We know from our readings that John Wesley provided solution "by the ordination of a group of Methodist preachers as deacons and elders, American Methodism, for the first time, had a regularly ordained clergy who were ecclesial empowered to administer the sacraments " (1784 CHRISTMAS Conferences), 52.

As Methodists, we have come this far by faith, leaning on God's gracious hands.

God has, throughout history, constantly challenged us as people of faith, to see things from the perspective of a Savior who makes all things possible. That is what Strawbridge did; he managed to keep Christ first. And because of this, we all now enjoy the blessings of standing on the shoulders of one whose tireless efforts helped to level the slope of the hills and mountains of injustice everywhere around us.

Allow me to talk for a few moments of the prophet Nehemiah in Nehemiah chapter 2 verses 17-18:

17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Nehemiah knew that the work of rebuilding would require more than just a vision. It requires help from everyone else.

Yes, he had the vision.

Yes, he had the authorization from the king.

But for Jerusalem to be rebuilt, Nehemiah needed help from others.

Rebuilding Jerusalem was a community dream. It would take the effort and work of others to realize the dream. He knew he had to include everyone.

Nehemiah tells the people about his vision from God and what the king had told him. He urges the people to see the trouble they were in. He reminded them that Jerusalem was in ruins. "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace," he tells them.

As long as Jerusalem was in ruins, the people of Israel would be in disgrace.

How did the people react?

The response from the people was overwhelming: They cried in unison, "Let's start rebuilding."

The people of Israel were eager to embrace the vision from Nehemiah and rebuild Jerusalem. They were excited at the prospect of rebuilding their beloved city and the temple. The Bible tells us they were committed to the common good.

What about us? What does all this mean to us?

Are we in need of rebuilding? What do we need to rebuild?

We must start by accepting that our churches in the United States are in ruin.

Statistics show that that most of mainline denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Church and indeed our own United Methodist Church are in decline in both membership and community involvement.

In fact, in 2008 the United Methodist Church decided to reduce the number of bishops in our area by one because we were losing members. That is why on July 1, 2010, four annual conferences in New York State united in a new conference. So the area from Hudson River to the Pennsylvania border has one bishop and one conference instead of two bishops and four conferences.

Our Jerusalem is in ruins.

It is not only in numbers. Churches are no longer the beacon of hope. People are not flocking to churches for comfort because churches have become so self-centered. Some churches have become like country clubs. So only certain people are allowed to join. Our churches are no longer providing the hope in society by standing up for justice. Our churches are no longer the spiritual centers of our communities because we have not opened our hearts to our neighbors. When was the last time you invited someone to church by word of the mouth or by your actions? Have we become Sunday-only Christians?

Our Jerusalem is in ruins.

Rebuilding is not easy because there are people who are going to oppose new dreams. Nehemiah and the people of Israel faced that opposition too. Not all welcomed the plan of rebuilding Jerusalem.

Not everyone was excited about the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Remember even Jesus was not accepted as a prophet in his own town. He was mocked and threatened with physical violence. But we must realize that rebuilding of Jerusalem was a plan from God.

Rebuilding of our churches is also from God. So, if people are not happy with our plans of rebuilding for God, we should be able to respond in the same way as Nehemiah did:

“The God of heaven is the one who will give us success and we his servants are going to start building.”

You see, if this is God’s plan, nobody can hinder it. The God of heaven is the one who will give us success and all we need to do is start building.

Rebuilding this church requires that we love all people we come into contact with. We will not rebuild our churches unless we learn to love.

Love believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

So what are we going to do? Are we going to admit that our churches are in ruins and we need to start rebuilding?

We can rebuild by opening our doors not only to people we can stand but to all of God's children.

We can rebuild by inviting people to fellowship with us.

We can rebuild by taking the church out to the people in the community instead of waiting for the people to come into our church.

We can rebuild by being a church that is not only active on Sunday but each day of the week.

We can rebuild by realizing that God's work is not only for one person but for all of us.

Let's start rebuilding so that we can show the glory of God in us.

Let's start rebuilding so that our churches can be havens of hope for the community.

Let's start rebuilding so that we can bring the salvation to lost souls in our community.

Let's start rebuilding even when we face oppositions.

Let's start rebuilding so that people can see the love of God in us.

Let's start rebuilding. And let's start today.

With thanksgiving to our God the provider, I am humbled to share with you in the joy of celebrating this momentous act of 250 years of faithful stewardship.

Once again congratulations on this milestone and I trust God will continue to enrich this ministry.

Thank you.