

Celebration of 150 Years of Episcopalians in Valdosta

November 13, 2021

The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue

Episcopalians were present in Valdosta from its beginning and 150 years ago, two families that longed for an Episcopal Church here secured a lot and were at work on the church-building program, with an additional \$100 raised for missions. The next year, Bishop John Beckwith would visit the city to hold a service at the Presbyterian Church and confirm one person. But to be fair in how we tell the story, it was a good start to an effort that otherwise had an inauspicious beginning. For the fourteen years that followed, there was no building put on that land and most of the vicars would stay a matter of months with a year or so between them. Christ Church was a mission in need of outside support to keep going from 1871 until 1954.

In 1980, the Vestry and representatives of Christ Church, Valdosta, petitioned the Diocese of Georgia and the Rt. Rev. Paul Reeves to purchase ten acres of land on Bemiss Road for the development of a second Episcopal church. A group from Christ Church were inspired by the foresightedness of their Rector, Henry Louttit, to assist in founding this new congregation. The name came when Dr. Buddy Pitts and Bishop Paul Reeves were walking over the church site, talking about a church name. The property was originally a farm and as they approached the barn, then still standing on the site, Bishop Reeves said, “Why not call it St. BARNabas!”

On September 19, 1982 at the YMCA on Gornto Road the Rev. Bob Carter celebrated the first liturgy. The next year, the congregation moved to Seventh Day Adventist Church on Slater Street. In 1984, ground was broken for the church designed by architect Blake Ellis and before the year was out Bishop Harry Shipps dedicated the church building on Bemiss Road.

Just six years later, on Easter Eve 1990, before a congregation of over 800 persons and a 50-member choir and orchestra in the Church of the King in

Valdosta, Bishop Shipps, with four neighboring bishops, confirmed 222 baptized persons from the formerly Pentecostal congregation. In the year before, the Rev. Stan White, pastor, approached Bishop Shipps about the process required for he and his congregation to enter the Episcopal Church. Bishop Shipps encouraged the move and the canonical process was begun. He charged two nearby priests, the Rev. Jacoba Hurst of St. Anne's in Tifton and the Rev. Henry Louttit here at Christ Church with preparing the pastor for ordination to the diaconate and priesthood, and the congregation for confirmation. Having been ordained deacon earlier that year, the Rev. Stan White was ordained to the priesthood on June 9, 1991, his Grandmother White's birthday. She was an amazing Pentecostal preacher and pastor ahead of her time.

These are the bare essentials of the history of the Episcopal Church in Valdosta and the founding of its three congregation. But sketching out this history misses the real point of this celebration. For purpose of the church is not buildings and pastors. The church is the Body of Christ, sharing the love of God as found in Jesus with a lot and hurting world.

A critical question for any church is, "If this church were to close its doors, never to reopen, who would miss it?" If the answer is those who are attending now are the only ones who would miss it, then that congregation is merely a social club, because followers of Jesus will have a positive impact on those around them. And here in Valdosta, I have seen the committed lay people nourished in these three congregations making a difference in Lowndes County in your daily lives and together as congregations. If the Christmas Classic It's a Wonderful Life were about the Episcopal Church in Valdosta, we would see the ways this city and this county would have been hurting without the Gospel proclaimed in word and action by the people who have been Christ Church, St. Barnabas, and Christ the King.

The churches and the people they nourished and continue to feed spiritually in word and sacrament are critical. Our praying this evening using an Order of Worship for Evening is not accidental, but deeply connected to what we

are here to mark this night. We begin in darkness, read the scripture, and then light the candles. Our liturgy is marking exactly what our churches are to embody, bringing light to people in darkness.

Look, everywhere you and I go, we are surrounded by people are masking deep pain with prescription drugs, alcohol, gambling, and a host of self-defeating behaviors. Most people sometime between the age of 5 and 25 pick up emotional wounds. On Friday, I was talking with a Mom who had been struggling to support her 13 year old daughter, after a longtime friend had betrayed her and then said such hurtful, cruel words to her. So painful and yet without knowing the whole story, I know the friend who lashed out is also hurting. It is amazing anyone makes it through Middle School with their self-esteem intact and to do so takes the loving care of those around a child and teen.

Because we pick up wounds, then wounded people wound others with harm that will remain festering and seeping poison into their psyches unless they can find healing. For hurting people, the good news of Jesus is not about getting into heaven as much as getting out of the hell they are in now. If someone can't see themselves as God sees them and bases their sense of themselves on what they see in the eyes of others, there is no healing.

I know your leaders saw this need for healing that Jesus brings. Bishop Louttit told me of the wounds he picked up at church camp where the activities centered around sports. More the reader, the intellect than the sportsball player, he found himself made fun of at church camp of all places. This is why he helped create summer camp session at Honey Creek devoted to care of creation with another based around church music. He wanted kids with different gifts to see what God saw in them. In decades of leading summer camp sessions at Honey Creek as a bishop and priest, he always had this service, a service of light, beginning in a dark chapel on the edge of a tidal creek. During the liturgy a single candle would start the service, but by the end hundreds of candles brightly lit the chapel. It was mystical and it mattered. He wanted the teens to experience the light of Christ filling the

dark places in their lives as they saw themselves not in the eyes of others, but in the love that God has for them.

This is just the work carried forth in a new way at Grace Café as Valdosta State students experience that same light and love in a place dedicated to them as they go through their own journeys of discovery in college.

And while the story of the barn is funny, I know the Vicar, the Rev. Bob Carter would later tell me how St. Barnabas was the perfect name as Barnabas was the encourager who saw the potential in someone that others missed. We see this most clearly in what the Evangelist Luke describes as a “sharp disagreement” between Barnabas and his close colleague and friend, Paul. As the prepared for a new missionary journey, Barnabas was adamant that John Mark needed to be on the team. Paul was peeved at John Mark as he had, on a previous trip, deserted the team in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them further in the work. Paul did not want someone who had fallen short. Barnabas, however, wanted to extend grace and mercy. He had encouraged John Mark back into evangelism and he didn’t see how they could teach others about God’s grace if they could not give it to the friend and co-worker who had disappointed them. This has always been St. Barnabas, Valdosta, the church for those who would otherwise be lost and left out, an island of misfit toys I once heard Deacon Janet Robinson call it, offering the love of God unreservedly.

And although Stan White had been steeped from birth in the riches of the Pentecostal tradition, God gave him a vision of a different kind of church. Stan put it this way, “We have not worried so much about external style or external programs. Instead we have reconstructed our interval values to include things like compassion, inclusion, diversity, social justice, community, spirituality and spiritual practice, honor for science and reason, honor for other religious traditions, honor for doubters and those with questions, care for the environment, modest budgets and facilities, to be non-hierarchical and non-clerical and non-patriarchal thus honoring the dignity and wisdom of all people regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, financial means, or one’s politics.”

And Stan's vision was well beyond what we think when we say church. As he put it: "But let us go beyond, to a place where the whole universe is our Cathedral, where every day is Sunday, where every creature is the Word of God, where every human being is the Beloved, where every sunrise is the Original Flaring Forth. Let us go to the place where there can be no between."

This is the church in Valdosta as I know it and I have served alongside many of you in Happening and Cursillo and watched your faithfulness in serving others as serving Jesus. I see the difference God has made in your lives and the way you make a difference here in Lowndes County. While we are here to mark 150 years. It is not the history that excites our energies, but the love God has for a community as in need of the Gospel as ever.

This love of God is why we gather this evening.

This unearned, undeserved, unmerited grace of God that may be free, but is not cheap, is why we look to the future with hope.

And if our Lord carries another 150 years, this love of God as found in Jesus will be why generations yet to come will be thankful for Bible believing, prayer book praying Christians of Christ Church, St. Barnabas, and Christ the King who have experienced that Love and in our own imperfect ways put our faith into action and make that love real to others in Lowndes County. That is the vision God has for our churches, seeing the light in others and helping them to see it for themselves. We don't bring the light, but we can bring the insight that God loves each and every just as they are and wants better for us all. And that Gospel is worth marking, celebrating, and giving our lives to for generations to come.

Amen.