

STANDING FIRM

Sermon by the Rev. Richard S. McDermott
 October 26, 2003 – First Presbyterian Church
 Fort Collins, Colorado

PLEASE READ:
 Matthew 7:13-20
 Philippians 3:17-4:1

Some of you know that we own the dilapidated building immediately to the north of our sanctuary here, that we are hoping soon to gain permission from the city to eventually take it down and to build a modern and useful structure to house space for the various ministries of our church which are in need of additional space, including offices, bell rehearsal space, youth, college and young adult ministry space, etc. That will be Phase II in a few years. What the majority of you do not know, is that this building, which has served us and the community well during its useful life, has a name that each of us should know about, a name that I hope will stay with whatever structure might replace it. It is called Wishart Hall, and it is named for the bold Scottish preacher, George Wishart, who lived from 1513 to 1546, a mere 33 years. One of my predecessors here, Dr. Jim Baird, wrote a book about Wishart called Thunder Over Scotland. Wishart was converted to the ideas of the Reformation in the early 1530's, ideas like the supreme authority of the Scriptures, salvation by grace through faith, and the sole efficacy of the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wishart was condemned as a heretic by the Catholic authorities in 1538. He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ courageously throughout Scotland, at great risk to his own life. In 1544 he was joined by a young bodyguard who carried a two-handed sword at his preaching events, and especially during Wishart's preaching tour of Lothian in Scotland. This young bodyguard was proud to publicly identify himself with George Wishart, and later wrote about it in his book called, History of the Reformation in Scotland. The young bodyguard's name was none other than John Knox.

In 1545, the danger to Wishart's liberty and life from the civil and church authorities increased. Knox was anxious to continue with him, but Wishart replied, "Nay, return to your pupils, and God bless you. One is sufficient for a sacrifice." Wishart's premonition was fulfilled when he was apprehended by Catholic loyalists in January of 1546 and taken to Edinburgh Castle. He was again condemned as a heretic, and was later taken to St. Andrews, where on March 1, 1546, George Wishart was burned at the stake. His chief accuser and enemy, Cardinal Archbishop David Beaton, watched the event from a window in the Castle of St. Andrews. About 3 months later, on May 29, the Castle of St. Andrews was invaded by friends of Wishart. They broke into the Cardinal's room, rebuked him for his role in Wishart's execution and stabbed him to death. For more than a year, this group of men which later became known as the Castilians, remained in occupation of the Castle. Two of them were fathers of Knox's pupils, and at Easter of 1547, the boys and John Knox came to St. Andrews where they thought it would be safer. Knox continued to teach on the Gospel according to John, and those who heard his teaching eventually convinced him that the Lord was calling him to the preaching ministry.

Only a few months later, however, in July 1547, the Scottish royalty conspired with the French navy to lay siege to the castle, and they prevailed, setting terms for the

surrender of Knox and many others. But the surrender terms were ignored by the French, and all were taken prisoner. Some of the Castilians were imprisoned in France, but Knox and many others were made slaves to row in the galley ships of the French fleet. For nineteen months John Knox labored as a galley slave, and his health deteriorated to a point from which he would never completely recover. In the summer of 1548, the galleys returned to Scotland, and someone asked Knox if he could recognize the spires of St. Andrews. The sickly and emaciated captive replied, "I know it well. I see the steeple of that place where God first opened my mouth in public to His glory; and I am fully persuaded, how weak soever I now appear, that I shall not depart this life, till that my tongue shall glorify His godly name in that same place." Later, of course, this statement would be fulfilled, when Knox would return to work diligently in the Reformation in Scotland. He would later have opportunity to study with John Calvin in Geneva, and spent some four years total living and studying there. John Knox would later preach to hundreds and even thousands of people, including royalty, and many high officials, but he was never without many enemies who wished him ill or even dead. Knox was the primary author of the Scots Confession, written in 1563, now part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions, and the opening lines of which we will recite together at the conclusion of my sermon. Suffice it to say that the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition was forged from theological truths that had extensive and profound consequences in the world of the sixteenth century and beyond. It was the courage of people like Wishart and Knox, that have enabled us to worship here today as a part of that honorable, but not perfect, tradition.

In great contrast to the perseverance and courage of men like Knox and Wishart, we are part of a culture that is described well by Paul in Ephesians 4. Our culture is like a group of children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, and by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But Paul urges us there to speak the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. Or as Paul says in our passage from Philippians today, we are to stand firm in the Lord, knowing that our citizenship is not simply on earth. Indeed, our true citizenship is from heaven, and our ultimate loyalty is to our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. We have a great and honorable tradition, but we do not worship our tradition. We worship the Lord of the tradition.

Reading about Wishart and Knox reminds me of the story about a young pastor, who came upon an old lamp in his yard, and as he picked it up out came a genie, who was obviously disturbed to be awakened. "Okay," he said, "tell me your one wish and make it quick so I can get back to sleep." The pastor was excited. "I've always dreamed of this happening," he said. "Stay right here. I'll be back in a minute." Soon he returned with a map of the Middle East, unfolded it, and showed it to the genie. "My one wish is that peace and harmony will come to this whole area, from Turkey to Egypt, from Israel to Iraq and Iran," the pastor said. "Are you crazy?" the genie exclaimed. "Give me a break. I'm an old genie, the Middle East has been in strife and at war for thousands of years. I just can't do it!" The pastor thought for a while and then said, "Okay, I'll make another request. I wish that my church would be a place where everyone could live in peace, where everyone would love and respect one another, and there would no longer be

any bickering, petty feuding, and quarreling about unimportant things.” The genie pondered the request and then said, “Do you mind if I take another look at that map?”

There are days, when the pettiness of the church seems more intractable than the conflicts of the Middle East. And I have just described a period in history when preaching the truth of the gospel in love could cost you your very life. Wishart and Knox knew it. The truth is that today we don’t have time and we can no longer afford to deal with the pettiness and internal squabbling of a comfortable church. We must speak the truth in love to an increasingly hostile and even evil culture, and rescue those who are being swallowed up in it. Our battle is not against flesh and blood but against evil principalities and powers in the spiritual realm that are making themselves known in various ways. You may have your doubts about this but consider what Christians face here in the United States, today.

I am a great supporter of our public schools, and John Knox was among those who helped to begin public education in Scotland. But the following stories sadden me deeply. In a public school in St. Louis, a teacher spotted fourth-grader Raymond Raines, bowing his head in prayer before lunch. The teacher stormed to Raymond’s table, ordered him to stop immediately and sent him to the principal’s office. The principal informed the young malefactor that praying was not allowed in school. But Raymond stood firm. When Raymond was again caught praying before meals on three separate occasions, he was segregated from other students, ridiculed in front of his classmates, and finally sentenced to a week’s detention. Let me share two more of dozens I can tell you. At Lynn Lucas Middle School outside of Houston, two sisters who were carrying Bibles, were stopped by a teacher and prevented from bringing that vile material into a classroom. They were stopped at the classroom door and then marched to the principal’s office. The sisters’ mother was called and warned that the school intended to report her to Child Protective Services. When the mother arrived, the teacher threw the Bibles in the wastebasket, shouting, “This is garbage!” And at that same school, administrators snatched three students’ books with covers displaying the Ten Commandments, ripped the covers off, threw them in the garbage and, and told the students that the Ten Commandments constituted “hate speech.” I’m not making this up!

It might be instructive to quote James Madison, who was a chief author of our U.S. Constitution in the late 1700’s. He wrote, “We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.”

Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” He goes on to say that we should beware of false prophets and teachers that are like wolves that come to us in sheep’s clothing. And he tells us to check out their actions, or their fruits. Good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit. And the bad trees are eventually cut down

and thrown into the fire. Standing firm against the false teachers is never easy. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and there are few that find it.

Paul urges the Philippians to imitate him and others who live by faith in Jesus Christ. And he warns them of many who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. And this is how he describes them. He writes, “Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” He goes on to express his love for them and he urges them to stand firm in the Lord, for when they live by his grace, they are Paul’s joy and Paul’s crown.

Friends, are we like those children who are tossed to and fro, and blown about by every wind of doctrine, every new teaching, every petty complaint about the church or about people, by people’s scheming and craftiness in deceit? Has the culture or the latest fashion grabbed us and swept us along so that we have lost our way, lost our focus on Christ and on sacrifice and on sharing him with others? I know for many of us it has, because of the way we treat each other, the way we use our resources and the way we live our lives. The question is, have we learned to stand firm in the Lord, to hold on to Christ above all else, and to remember that our citizenship is in heaven? Jesus calls us to the higher calling, the narrow gate and the hard road. Are you ready to answer?

LET US PRAY: