

The Best Possessions  
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Rev. James Gregg served the First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs from 1881 until 1909. He delivered his farewell sermon 100 years ago this year, on June 6, 1909. On this, our annual historical Sunday, I want to read some excerpts from his sermon, and suggest some connections between the church at the time of Rev. Gregg and our own time.

He chose as the scripture reading that Sunday the passages from Philippians read by our liturgist today. “Of all the people to whom St. Paul preached,” Gregg preached, “he seems to have been especially fond of the people at Philippi.” Rev. Gregg began his sermon with these tender words for his congregation:

*The best possessions that a person can have in this world are not silver and gold, houses and lands, stocks and bonds, but people. No material wealth can yield such comfort and happiness as father and mother, wife and children, friends of long standing and, in general, folks with whom and for whom you have done something. People are so infinitely and variously delightful when you love them and work with them and for them.*

Clearly, Gregg loved the people he served and he learned a lot in serving them. To me, the following line from his sermon is particularly beautiful: “It is a blessed law of God... that the more you exert yourself in behalf of others, make sacrifices and endure suffering for them, the more you love them...” What a statement, that what makes a person lovable is the lover’s ability to serve the beloved. I love someone not because they conform to what pleases me. I love someone because I have labored on their behalf, have made sacrifices. It reminds me of the children’s song: “Love is something if you give it away... you end up having more.”

In his *Farewell Sermon* of 1909, Gregg recalls the state of Colorado Springs when he arrived 27 years earlier:

*When I came, this town had hardly one-sixth of its present population. On the west side of Cascade Avenue, what is now Cutler Hall, then the sole building belonging to Colorado College, was the only building between the Antlers and the race track, near the present Rock Island cut. There were about a dozen houses north of the College Reservation. On Colorado Avenue there was not a single building between the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad and Colorado City. There was no way for persons who did not own a carriage to get about town except to walk or to hire a conveyance from the livery stable. There were few houses that had a cellar or a furnace. The Denver & Rio Grande was the only railroad coming into town, and that was narrow-gauge. There were no telephones and no bicycles. The population of the town was much more shifting and transient than it is today. I was the fourth minister the church had had in less than eight years.*

And we think we've been in a period of transition! Present-day shifts in population compare to those of Gregg's day. Perhaps they were more dramatic then. It is interesting to note that in Gregg's sermon, he does not once mention that during his pastorate the present sanctuary was built, in 1888, and the Founders' Room building, in 1906. Perhaps this was that to which he was humbly eluding when he said, "I suppose it is true that if in the future, some other pastorate lasts longer than mine, no other minister will ever be likely to cover in his ministry so much of the plastic and formative period of the community as has been given me to enjoy."

The sermon exhibits Rev. Gregg's charming humor in a number of places. Reflecting upon his arrival in 1881, he tells this story: "When I expressed my wish to be installed, one of the prominent members, Father Bristol, objected on the ground that it might make it hard to get rid of me; a reasonable fear quite justified by the event." Such an event next Sunday will make it hard to get rid of Rev. Jacque Franklin.

Like our church today, which has in its fellowship more than 25 ordained ministers, First Congregational Church during Gregg's pastorate had a learned and vocal congregation, including several clergy. Describing his experience of preaching to this church, Gregg said, "I think you will bear witness that I have tried to speak plainly and fearlessly from this pulpit the truth as it has been given me to see the truth. But I can say also that I have spoken the truth in love. It is a wonderful thing to tell, but in all these twenty-seven years no one has ever called me to account for anything I have said," (times have changed in that regard!) "except that once a venerable retired minister took me to ride and suggested tenderly and sweetly that some of my theological views were too liberal."

So, if your pastors and you as a congregation are accused of being too liberal, remember that you come by it honestly. It reminds me of the jab made by State Senator Dave Shultheis several years ago when Dr. James White and I defended the right of same gender couples to marry. Shultheis called us "pseudo clergy" and "members of a fringe group of Christians." I am grateful to Dave Seyfert, President of the congregation at the time, who wrote a letter to the editor defending us by pointing out the obvious: "Those pseudo clergy are graduates of Yale and Harvard. That fringe group of Christians are the congregation who helped found the city, Colorado College, and who worship in the oldest church building in the city continuously occupied by the same congregation."

This church has been a place of vital ministry for 134 years. While most histories of the church in general and this church in particular focus on the tenures of male ministers - making it truly a "his-story," the life of a church relies equally upon its "her-story." Giving credit where it was due, Rev. Gregg shared these words:

*In the life and work of our church during the pastorate now coming to an end, the work of the women has been singularly strong and efficient and varied. Their contributions of money and efforts to foreign missions, home missions, our local missions, the building and care of our church edifice and the social life of our church have been notably large... It is a rare company of women over*

*whose splendid efficiency we have had continual occasion to rejoice. Most pertinently and earnestly do I address to this church as a whole this morning the exhortation of St. Paul to the church which he so loved at Philippi, "I beseech you, help these women, for they have labored with me in the gospel."*

In his history of Colorado College, Robert Loevy observes how extraordinary it was for a co-ed college to have been founded on the frontier. While it may have been extraordinary for the broader society at the time, it was not extraordinary for the Congregationalist founders, who had founded several co-ed colleges, such as Oberlin in 1833. This church was, from its founding, a place of intellectual openness, liberal theology, and forward thinking.

Near the close of James Gregg's farewell sermon, he shares words that are still relevant today, calling us as a congregation to embody the inclusive spirit of Christ himself. These powerful words open up a horizon toward which we are continuing to strive even today. They represent a sort of unofficial purpose statement for our life as a congregation. If I were pressed to think of a passage, apart from scripture, that we might memorize as those who worship regularly here at 20 E. Saint Vrain, it would be these.

*You are First Congregational Church of Colorado Springs. Always remain such. Aim to keep this church ever representative, not of any particular geographical section of the city or of any particular interests in the community but broadly of the city as a whole, including sympathetically in your fellowship all classes and conditions of the people rich and poor, high and low, the learned and the unlearned. Do not allow this church ever to become in anywise an exclusive and therefore unchristian society, but keep it always as inclusive of all persons as is the grace of God made manifest in Jesus Christ.*

*Cherish ever, as a church, the missionary spirit, locally, state-wise and in the foreign field. This church has been in this regard the banner Congregational church between the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast. In this grace see that it abounds yet more and more.*

Gregg was proud of this church, calling it “a people so large-minded, so wholly free from a spirit of contentiousness, so rich in sympathy and in all good works.”

Those who have nurtured us in the faith, that great cloud of witnesses, those who have gifted us this holy place to meet God and one another, those who have beckoned us to come and serve Christ in this outpost of God’s kingdom, have left us a spirit of fellowship and service. It clings to the rafters, the pews, the faces, and the voices around us. This is the calling we have inherited - to learn how to love each other, even as Christ has loved us. And we’re on solid footing, even as we erect scaffolding and endure dust to restore our beloved building. We’re on solid footing, even as we contemplate how generous stewardship will enable us to fulfill our role of being a place of Christian inclusivity.

Near the end of his sermon, Gregg quotes Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” We hear you, Rev. Gregg. Your voice and the voices of your congregation echo still. May we tune our listening to your prayer, which you prayed for them: “For God is my witness how I long after you all in the tender mercies of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and all discernment; that ye may approve the things that are excellent; holding forth the word of life, that I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ that I did not labor in vain.” Amen.