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175th Anniversary of Rockland Congregational Church

“An Empowered Church” © by Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture Passages: Psalm 105:1-8; Matthew 5:13-16; Hebrews 11:1-12:1

(All of today’s verses are in the King James Version, which is what Samuel Fessenden would have used for his first sermon to the gathered Congregational church in 1838)

Psalm 105 gives praise to God for the past, the tradition of the faith of the Hebrew people, and also praise for God’s work and presence throughout time, even now. The Psalmist says:

Remember his marvellous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth; O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen. He is the LORD our God: his judgments are in all the earth. He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations.

We remember the marvelous works of the Lord among us, and the Lord remembers the Lord’s covenant with God’s people for ever. The act of faith, the act of worship, is an act of re-remembering, a bringing together again of those people, those actions and those memories which tell the story of the Lord’s work and the story of God’s people at work for God.

Gathering together on a day like today is no different than the remembering in which the Psalmist is participating. We have gathered together to celebrate our church’s 175 years serving God in the Rockland area. When Rockland Congregational Church was incorporated in 1945, the very first article of incorporation read:

“The purposes of said corporation are 1. to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing in the worship of God, and in making His will dominant in the lives of men, individually and collectively especially as that will is set forth in the life, teachings and death of Jesus Christ.”¹

Throughout her history, Rockland Congregational has sought to live into her purpose and vision as a pillar of Christian faith in the MidCoast. Devotedly Christian, unquestionably Congregationalist and distinctly community-focused, our church has been the Meeting House of the area. In Congregationalism, the activities of the church are intimately tied with the surrounding community, so much so that in Early America, the Congregational church was the meeting place for worship, town meetings, court hearings, community events and, of course, community meals. Rockland Congregational Church was no different.

The strength of any church is consistently empowered by the history she rests upon. Rockland Congregational was established in a turbulent time of American history. Against the backdrop of a major recession and the ascension of Martin Van Buren to the presidency, the Second Great Awakening roiled across

¹ *Records of the Rockland Congregational Church, Rockland, Maine 1835-1945*, transcribed and edited by Marlene A. Groves, CG. Picton Press, Rockport, ME. © 2002. pg 473.

the Eastern seaboard. New churches sprang up everywhere, motivated by an earlier Great Awakening sparked by America's greatest theologian, the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards. In Thomaston, the Congregationalists met with the Baptists for several years before the enterprising and very wealthy deacon, Iddo Kimball, bought out the Baptists share of the building. Soon after, Rockland Congregational Church called Sam C. Fessenden to be her 'religious teacher' and pastor. He accepted the position for \$525 annually². That works out to about \$14,000 a year in our day; but I am pretty certain one's money bought much more during a recession in 1838. He preached his first sermon for the gathered local church on this very weekend 175 years ago, when it was still the Second Congregational Society of Thomaston, before Rockland had been established as a town, which happened in 1848.

Throughout the past 175 years, this church has been a meeting place for all who have the need, a quiet but extremely active participant in the surrounding community providing services and help for those in need, and most of all, a beacon of hope and light for those who would worship within the walls of this place, whether it be down on Main Street for almost 150 years, or in this building dedicated on September 12, 1965.

I said a church is empowered by her history, and that is true if one is writing a history of human work in the world, but what truly empowers a church is the power of God, the work of Jesus Christ for us, and the persistence and presence of the Holy Spirit. This is what transforms just any building into a gathering place for those who would recognize and give to God all the glory of the works of the people within the walls of said building. With the strength of God, and when the people who have gathered together in God's name, the church, or more appropriately, the like-minded people who gather to follow Christ, becomes a community of faith and caring. If Rockland Congregational Church is anything, it is certainly this, thanks be to God.

In his resignation letter read from the pulpit on June 16, 1912, Rev. William Mousley put it this way:

*"The months which I have spent as your co-worker have passed all too soon, and the high esteem in which I first held you has been strengthened and has ripened into a deep love. I have found you a strong, sympathetic and appreciative people, interested in your church and loyal to your pastor. You have upheld my hands in the work of the Master as we have builded together upon the strong foundation of truth"*³

The '*strong foundation of truth*' you have built is true today, just as it was then. These things are still true, not in the walls of the church, but in your remembering, in your coming together as Rockland Congregational Church all these years.

Rev. Walter Rounds said in his pastoral letter for the annual report, in 1929:

"I cannot refrain from expressing to you the happiness and joy which these years have brought to me. I bear witness to your patience and kindness, to your loyalty and devotion toward me and my family. You have been slow in criticism and quick in response to suggestions for advance.

² *ibid.*, pg. 2.

³ *ibid.*, pg 331.

A generation of devoted members, who for years bore the burden of the Church's activities, is rapidly passing on, and it is a satisfaction to know that others are rising splendidly to places of leadership. During the past ten years the personnel of the Church has undergone great changes in the loss by death and removal of many faithful members, and by the incoming of many new people. We mourn our losses, but find joy in the new workers'⁴.

These words could have been written yesterday. And this is how a Church, how a gathering of believers in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, becomes the salt of the earth. This is how we become a light upon the hill and a beacon to those who are seeking, who are in need of hope and who are just in need. In these little ways, not big ways, though Rockland Congregational Church has done those as well, in little ways we become a deeper, more caring community.

We act in faith, empowered by what we know to be true of God, that we are God's people in whom his love is shown. And knowing ourselves to be loved by God we are always learning to love one another. Is not the essence of a Christian community simply this? Jesus says, in the Gospel of John:

Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. (Jn 15:8-12).

In learning to love, we learn to trust ever more deeply in what God has done, what Christ did do for us and what the Holy Spirit is doing in, with and through us this very day.

We act in faith and we are therefore empowered and inspired by our faith. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us that

faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Then, the author traces the faith of Adam and Eve's son, Abel, then Enoch, then Noah, then Abraham, through Joshua, the warriors of the history books, the faith of David, the faith of the Prophets. He shows they all believed in God's power and God's love, and even so, never saw the fulfillment of God's promises. It was their faith that empowered them, and it is in Christ that the fulfillment of the faith of all those who have gone before comes to fruition.

It is a beautiful and vast vision. For the past few weeks, we have been speaking about power - God's power and our power. The author of Hebrews is empowered by the vast past stretching out behind him, a glittering trail of faith and striving for an unseen, but promised future. But that past was not without its struggles.

⁴ *ibid.*, pg 396

Abel watched his brother die. Abraham had some serious family issues, and he passed those on to his son Isaac, who passed them down to Jacob. Noah was witness to the destruction of humankind. He did not deal with it well after the whole event. David murdered and was an adulterer.

Just recently, in the past couple of months, I had a powerful insight. We were visiting my parents in Tucson, Arizona. Yes, it was 75 and sunny while we were there, and no, I did not miss the cold and the dampness of this winter. Without sharing any details, suffice it to say that my family has had some interpersonal struggles in the past. I was sitting outside with my parents and it was good. Our relationship was good. It has been for a while and I was, and am, grateful for it. And I looked back through my life, and it was good. My childhood was good. My teen years and my early adult years, where many of those struggles took place, were good. And now, with my parents, it was good. I still remember those difficulties from the past, but that is precisely the point I want to make. Those difficulties were no longer my focus, and since they were no longer the focus, I made space to focus on something else and those good things from the past began to define my present relationship with my parents. My relationship with my parents, my view of the world, was no longer defined by certain events of the past. In my new perspective, different events from the past, good events, began to define the present and, hopefully, the future.

Scripture is, if anything, realistic about life and who we are as human beings. Those very human difficulties are important and speak to our need for God and Christ, but the difficulties are not definitive or even determinative. They do not define us or our relationships. What is definitive is God's love for us. Those difficulties - which Samuel Fessenden undoubtedly referred to as our sin and our fallen nature - are important but are, finally, not determinative of our future. What is determinative of our future is Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection - what has been done for us and what we believe about it. What makes us who we are is what Jesus Christ has done for us. And what defines us as Rockland Congregational Church are all the little good things throughout our history together which become mirrors of God's love for us and through us.

When we are thoughtful, remembering lovers of God and neighbor, which is finally all we are doing and learning here (whether it is 1838, 1924, 2000 or 2013) we are the church of God, the thoughtful, remembering followers of Jesus Christ. One of my favorite Christian models is a man named E. Stanley Jones, who was a missionary to India in the early 1900s. He says, reflecting on Hebrews 11:

“So Jesus touches our parched and barren lives, and lo, they sprout with life and vitality and hope”

and in saying this, I hear this sort of realistic reflection on what has gone before that Hebrews 11 speaks to. When Jesus Christ touches our lives, though, something happens on a deep and profound level. Not only does the past begin to change, as it did for me with my parents, but it also influences how we see the present and the future. Jones continues:

“A workman in a factory told of how before Christ came, he always wore out his shoes at the heels, but after Christ came, he wore them out at the toes! Guilt, frustrations, fears, inferiorities, hopelessness, had tipped life back - made him rock back on his heels on the defensive. But Christ, by cleansing the guilt, frustrations, fears, inferiorities, and

hopelessness, tipped life forward”⁵.

Jesus Christ empowers us to remember the past and to lean forward with anticipation into a future guided and blessed by the Holy Spirit. 175 years is a long time, but it is very short when the work of the Lord stands before us still. Our church, Rockland Congregational Church, looks back through her history like the author of Hebrews looks back through the history of faith to the beginning of our testament to God’s history with us in the world. What we focus on as a gathered people makes a difference in how we view our present and our future.

Hebrews 12:1 says:

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us”

So we trust in what the Lord has done for us, in those simple, good things, and we lean into a future which is empowered by a history of prayer, service, fellowship and worship, a history defined by a loving God, a present created by a great cloud of witnesses to Jesus’ gentle and loving power and a future we can continue to run with patience and hope and trust because of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Let us lean into that future together and continue to become servants of joy in a world of need, sharing Christ’s love with others and gathering to share God’s love with one another. Amen.

⁵ *Growing Spiritually*, by E. Stanley Jones. Parthenon Press, Nashville, TN. © 1953. pg 102.