

Handed On  
Deuteronomy 6:1 – 12, 20 – 25; 1 Corinthians 11:2, 17 – 26  
Sunday, November 3, 2019

A couple of months ago, we had just finished worship, and I was standing over at the door greeting people. Lee and Barbara McConnell came up, and they said, “Do you know anything about the person whose name is engraved on the baptismal font?” In case you haven’t seen it, it says, “Clayton French Earle, 1894–1897.” Well, I *didn’t* know anything about it other than that; the font was given in memory of a child who was two or three years old. About an hour later, I got an email from Barbara. She had gone home and done a Google search for Clayton French Earle and found a picture of his grave at Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia. It said on his gravestone, “Clayton French Earle, son of Catherine and George Earle.” We could see on this website that Clayton was born in Germantown on March 10, 1894 and died (also in Germantown) on October 15, 1897 (so he was 3). And in the late 1800s, Germantown was a bit of a hike from Devon, so we weren’t sure what the connection was to St. John’s.

So we knew a little bit more, but we still had a lot of questions. Barbara then reached out to John Senior, our resident historian, and said, “Do you know anything about this family or how the baptismal font came to be dedicated?” And John actually *did!* He wrote back, “The Earle family lived for a time in a large stone house on Berkley Road, across from the church (where the new houses are now). Eva Noll notes in her 1983 history of the church that on December 11, 1900, ‘Mrs. George Earle gave the font in memory of her late child.’ The Earle’s lived in Devon from the mid-1880s until 1899, when they moved to a much larger estate in the Newtown Square area. Their son, George Earle III (Clayton’s older brother), later became the Governor of Pennsylvania.” John said that since the family left Devon before we became St. John’s Presbyterian Church in 1903, they were probably involved with the Devon Chapel sometime between its inception in 1893 and the date that the font was given in 1900. Three of the Earle’s

children died at a very young age, and they are all buried at Laurel Hill Cemetery, while the rest of the family is buried at Church of the Redeemer in Bryn Mawr.

I did a little more digging and found that George Earle (Clayton's father) was actually a *really big deal* in Philadelphia business and politics. He was a lawyer and businessman, involved in banks and railroads, and he ran for mayor of Philadelphia in 1911 (he won the primary but lost the general election). He married Catherine French on December 12, 1881, two years after he graduated from Harvard. He had been working at an attorney's office for \$2.50 a week, and once he started making \$5 a week, they got married.

So there is a story behind our baptismal font that we really don't even know. And it made me start thinking, "What *other* stories are there that we don't know about this church?" I walked all around this building and the Carriage House one day, looking at the dedication plaques. This stained-glass window depicting the annunciation of Jesus' birth says, "To the glory of God and in loving memory of Ethel Valentine Wilt." Who is that? The church history that Eva Noll wrote says that "in 1925...Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Wilt presented a beautiful stained-glass window in memory of their only daughter, Ethel." But I couldn't find any more information than that. There's a plaque on the back wall by the other stained-glass window that says, "In memory of James S. and Pearl H. Stuart." There's another plaque next to it that says, "In loving memory of Elmer C. and Flora A. Baur," but it's directly above the controls for the ceiling fans, so I have no idea *what* is given in memory of them.

There are two brass panels on the doors that lead into the sanctuary. They are worn, but one of them says, "In memory of John 3:16," and the other says, "In memory of Matthew 28:19" by Charles J. Bustard and Georgia S. Bustard. Who are *they*, and why did they give the *doors*?

There is a plaque on this little podium in the back that says, “In memory of John Barber.” Why was that given in memory of him? The conference room down the hall is “dedicated to the loving memory of Andrew H. Kean, 1955.” I spend a lot of time in that room, but I know nothing about Andrew Kean. In the room where the photocopier is, there’s a plaque on the wall that says, “The Walter and Erma Clemens Church Library, 1967.” Ridgley’s office is dedicated in loving memory of William G. Benton, Marilyn’s husband. The nursery was dedicated to Kay Pritchard in 1998, “for 52 years of loving service,” but the plaque has fallen off the door and is sitting on the window sill in the back.

The Carriage House is dedicated “in honor of the Rev. Dr. Victor Wilson, with gratitude for 20 years of ministry at St. John’s, from 1992 to 2012.” And the big room in the Carriage House is “dedicated to the glory of God and is named in honor of the Rev. Ernest L. McMillan, beloved and faithful pastor, friend, spiritual shepherd, and exemplar of the fruits of the Spirit to the St. John’s family from 1960 to 1990.” The framed stained-glass window in the Carriage House was given by Ralph and Marie Cantafio in memory of their daughter Gemma. The big table in that same room is made out of the doors of St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church in St. Paul’s, NC, where Victor Wilson’s wife Jane’s parents and grandparents were married.

*All these stories* that maybe some of us know *something* about, but others are being lost to time. And I’ll be honest with you, I used to think that this stuff didn’t matter; that the church is about *today* and how we’re reaching people with the love of Jesus Christ *now*, not what happened 50 or 100 years ago. Churches can too easily become *prisoners* to their *history* and get *stuck* there, preventing them from doing what needs to be done *now*.

But I've recently come to see the importance of this. I was working on a paper for a doctoral class where I had to talk a little bit about the church's history. And the more I learned about it, the more I saw how our *history* helps us *understand* who we are *today*. You may have seen these brochures that we put together recently that highlight four key aspects of the life of our church – worship, fellowship, Christian education, and mission. A few years ago, when the Elders were working on updating our mission statement, we identified these are the four core values of our church. Worship, fellowship, Christian education, and mission – *that* is what St. John's is about.

Well, as I learned more about the *history* of the church, I saw these four things. In April of 1892, a group of ten men from Devon got together to start a Sunday School in the home of J. Lewis Twaddell on Valley Forge Road. They were known as the Devon Sabbath School. We *started* as a Sunday School. Christian education is at the *foundation* of who we are.

A year later we became the Devon Chapel, and a few years later, we called a pastor and became the Devon Church. In 1903 we became a Presbyterian Church and changed our name to St. John's. In those early years, the members showed a great concern for the local community. Many Italian immigrants had arrived in the area, working as gardeners on the large estates and as workers in the local quarries. Until those Italian immigrants were able to acquire their own church in Strafford, St. John's let them use our building for worship on Saturday nights. (We recognized the importance of *worship*, not just for *ourselves*, but for *others*.) The women of the church organized a Women's Society in 1903, specifically to help with the Italian community. They visited families and handed out Bibles and tracts. The church also reached out to workers on the railroad and boys playing baseball on Sundays. *Mission*, engaging the community around us, has been a part of who we are since our very beginning.

There is a sense in which we don't just *decide today* who we are and what we're going to be about. There are certain things that are imprinted in our very DNA as a church. Things that we have been about since our inception – worship, fellowship, Christian education, and mission. *This* is who we are, and *this* is why we're here. And when we look back at our history, we see these things stamped on the life of our church at every turn. It's like William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." This is our story. It shows who we are and what is important to us. But if we don't *know* these stories, or if we *forget* them, then we lose sight of *who we are* and *what we are about* as a church.

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This is what Moses is saying to the people of Israel in our reading from Deuteronomy. He is giving them the law that God is commanding them to follow, and he says, "As you prepare to enter into the land that God is giving you, do not forget where you came from. Do not forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. Teach these stories and these laws to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house. Keep them *present* in your life, so that when your children come to you and say, 'What does this *mean*, and why do we *do* this?' you will be able to *tell* them and draw them in to the living story of God."

Moses is handing on to them this story of faith, and he is calling them to hand it on to their children. And this story has been handed on across the millennia, until it has been handed on to *us*. It's like Moses says to the people, "You are about to enter into a land with fine, large cities that *you did not build*, houses filled with all sorts of goods that *you did not fill*, hewn cisterns that *you did not hew*, vineyards and olive groves that *you did not plant*." We are the recipients of a faith that *we did not create*. It has a long history before us. We sing hymns and pray prayers

that *we did not write*. We worship in a building that *we did not build*. A *church* has been handed on to us that *we did not plant*. We have been given a faith by our parents and grandparents and Sunday School teachers and pastors. And *we* are called to care for it in such a way that it can continue to *live*, and *others* can be drawn in to the living story of God.

It's like Paul says to the Corinthians, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." He starts off this section by saying, "I *commend* you because you maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. You're *remembering* and *doing* these things that I have taught you." But then he says, "In the following instructions, I *do not* commend you, because you're doing these things that are *not* in keeping with what I taught you." He is specifically talking about communion, and he says to them, "You have forgotten who you are and what you're about and why you celebrate this meal. It's not so you can eat your fill and get drunk on the wine, while other members of the church go hungry. When you celebrate this meal the way Christ taught his disciples, and the way they taught me, and the way I taught you, then you will be *remembering Christ* and living in *his story*."

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Next Sunday is Consecration Sunday, when we make our promises for how we will support the life of the church in the coming year. And so this is the Sunday when we always do the stewardship sermon, right? We talk about stewardship the week before we make these promises, so that we can have time to reflect on what it means and on what God is calling us to do. And people usually think about stewardship as being about *money*. That's how a lot of churches talk about stewardship. When they say *stewardship*, they really mean *money*.

But we don't just talk about stewardship one Sunday a year. We talk about it *every* Sunday, because stewardship is *not* just about money. It's about *everything we do* with *everything we*

*have*; how we care for *all* the things that God has given to us and entrusted us with – yes, our money, but also our time and our abilities and this planet and its resources and our relationships and the forgiveness and love that God has given to us, how do we care for them and share them with others? Stewardship is about everything we do with everything that we have been given, even the *church*. Because we did not *create* this. It has been given to us, *entrusted* to our care. We are called by God to be *stewards*, caretakers of the *church* and the *faith* that has been *handed on* to us by those who came *before* us, so that *we* can hand it on to *others*. So that *others* can know the goodness and love as God as *we* have come to know it. We have to take our history and our traditions and our stories and *remember* them, while also giving them fresh new expressions, so that God can continue to minister to the community and the people around us *through* us.

What will this church look like 20 years from now? Those are the decisions that we are making *today*. As we prepare to consecrate our gifts to God next Sunday, our question *cannot* simply be, “How will this benefit me right now? (How can I build up this church so that I can get what I need out of it?)” We have to ask, “How can I take what I have received from the Lord and hand it on to others?” Our time, our talents, our money; the love and forgiveness that we have been given; our church and our faith; all the blessings that we have known – how will we share them in such a way that others can be drawn in to the living story of God? How is God calling us to *do that*?