

THE ST. MATTHEW'S STORY

A sermon preached on Sunday, February 28, 2016, the Third Sunday in Lent
by the Rector, The Reverend Terence L. Elsberry.

I

I have a story to tell you today. It's the St. Matthew's story. And because you and I are part of the St. Matthew's family, it's our story - yours and mine. It's an important story. In the light of what's happening in today's world, I'd say it's a crucial story.

Our church was officially established as a Church of England parish in Bedford in 1693. The governor, newly arrived from England, determined one minister for the whole of northern Westchester County. What a life that poor guy must have had: living in Rye but riding horseback to Bedford, North Castle (now Mount Kisco), White Plains, Scarsdale and Mamaroneck. I cannot even imagine.

Plus, the history tells us, the people in Bedford were a "stubborn and stiff-necked people," and pretty rowdy to boot. (Not sure what rowdy meant in this case; just as well not to know!) We've certainly improved with time. But maybe there's something to be said for the stubborn part - the positive aspect of stubbornness. You had to be a little stubborn to come here from England in a tiny, disease-ridden ship, and clear this land for farming. Every time I see our stone walls, I picture those hearty settlers, breaking their backs if not their spirits, making farmland out of this rocky soil.

Generations came and went and we still had neither our own local minister nor our own church building. In 1759, help finally came in the form of a wonderful old man by the name of St. George Talbot.

I guess if your first name is Saint, you have a lot to live up to. And he more than did. He spent the last 50 years of his long life promoting the Anglican Church in America. He was 97 years old when he gave money to help us build our first church named, appropriately, St. George's. It stood just down 117 from the hospital in Mount Kisco, on the way to Conte's Fish Market. The building is long gone, but you can still see the churchyard.

The first Anglicans built a new life here. Now their descendants fought a war for freedom and the building of a new nation.

It wasn't easy being Anglicans. The clergy had sworn allegiance to the king as part of their ordination vows. Fifty-one percent of priests from all over the colonies left, either for Canada or to return to England. Many of those who stayed were hated and rebuked as part of the old established order. Bedford village was burned, burned by Colonel Tarleton, which has always caused me to wonder why we named a street after him.

Life after the war wasn't easy, either.

A lot of rebuilding was needed - rebuilding of lives, rebuilding of property. And since we'd fought a war to break from England, we couldn't very well go on being the Church of England! So we changed our name to Episcopal (which means bishop in the Greek the New Testament was originally written in) and we carried on.

John Jay - first Chief Justice of the United States, signer of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of New York - retired two miles up the road on Route 22. He took one look at old St. George's and declared we needed a new house of worship. He was right. He loaned the church the money to buy the original 40 acres and build the church. Meanwhile, we were able to pay him back when we'd gone through the courts to get a final bequest left us from old St. George Talbot. The lawyer on the action was former Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. It happened not long before he was killed in a duel by Aaron Burr. (Hamilton is currently being popularized in the hip-hop Broadway show. Seeing it, I got so energized I preached my first rap sermon.)

Despite the bequest, we still needed more to finish the new building. A fund drive was called and parishioners, most of whom had been financially devastated by the war, reached deep into their pockets to build our little brick church for their gathering together in worship. I can only imagine that few people on that day of dedication, looking back through the difficult times they had - by God's mercy - come through since 1694, took God or His help for granted. And neither should we.

The new church was dedicated by Bishop Moore in 1810. It was a lot smaller than it is today. Instead of three windows on each side, there were two. Go outside and look, especially on the Cantitoe side, and you can clearly see the lines of the first building. The tower was originally flat, with a cutout, crenellated top like a medieval castle.

These early builders were strong, can-do people, like their forebears who settled this inhospitable land, like the ones who fought a bloody war for freedom. These federalists fought for the bequest money that was theirs by law. They gave the rest to complete the building.

II

The next age had its challenges, too. Ante-bellum St. Matthew's was torn with controversy over the abolition movement. Some parishioners were pro, some con.

The longest-serving rector in our history, Lea Luquer, (who served 53 years!) was called right at the end of the Civil War. Our nation still had a lot of healing to do.

Dr. Luquer presided over many physical changes to our little church.

A bell was given, and - later - a second one with a better tone, and hung in the new belfry erected on top of the tower and topped by the steeple. We'd grown in numbers. The south wall on both sides of the vestibule was pushed out to build more seats in the right and left corners, two more doors were added to flank the original middle door, and the beautiful new porticoed front porch was added. One day the organ fell off the balcony and crashed into the pews below. Fortunately, nobody was sitting there. Time for a new organ - one of many through the years.

Dr. Luquer was much loved. You can see his portrait hanging over the fire place in the Vestry Room. The thing we remember him most for today is his creation of the Christmas Eve Manger Service, which we still hold almost exactly as he designed it. 150 years later, we still tell the story. We still light the Christmas tree. We still carry our candles, symbolizing the light of Christ, out into the darkness of the world to show the world that nothing can put out our light. In our time of rapid-fire change, it's nice to know some things don't change.

In 1923, we called another much-loved rector, Arthur Ketchum, who stayed for 35 years. His portrait hangs at the far end of the Vestry Room. Never married, he said, "St. Matthew's is my family." He was called the Poet preacher for the lovely poetry he wrote. Along with a deep spirituality and sensitivity to the needs of people, Mr. Ketchum also possessed a flair for architecture. In his time, the Vestry Room was added, the Chapel of the Holy Spirit was redone by architect Kerr Rainsford, whose father was rector of St. George's in Manhattan.

The interior of the church was also transformed. In Dr. Luquer's time, the church had been "Victorianized" - painted a dark brown, stained glass windows put in place of the original clear glass. Mr. Ketchum had the stained glass removed, a new altar and altar rail installed, the walls painted the original white, and the interior returned to its original plain and simple and absolutely lovely Federal style we cherish today.

Times were not altogether easy then, either. The Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Second World War, rapid change of all kinds took place in Mr. Ketchum's time. Yet we stayed true to our Anglican roots, we faithfully worshipped God in our beloved church building, and we kept on taking the light of Christ out into the world.

By 1963, when Arthur Hargate arrived as rector, people came to church. That's what Sunday mornings were for: going to church. If all our members today were here every Sunday, we'd have to add on in every direction. That's what we did under Arthur Hargate: we added on. Actually, we pushed the north wall back 19 feet, to provide 110 more seats. Renowned architect Mott Schmidt did a masterful job; you can't tell it ever happened. We also added four new church school rooms in the basement.

After I came here as rector in 1994, we re-did the walls in the church, which were sagging and crumbling, re-set the pew doors to make them straight again, reconfigured the sacristy and added the church kitchen.

Today we are again faced with pressing physical challenges to our beloved St. Matthew's. The church foundation is, after all these years of service, giving way. We need a new roof and an all new electrical and heating/air conditioning system. The Rectory, built in 1811, a year after the church, needs refurbishing.

In every time of need, through all these many years dating back to 1694, the people of St. Matthew's (even before we were called St. Matthew's), have met the challenges of what it means to be Christians in trying times.

St. George Talbot saw the need for a local church building. John Jay saw the need for a NEW building after the ravages of war. Lea Luquer, Arthur Ketchum, Arthur Hargate and their vestries and parishioners have done what was needed to meet every challenge they've faced - spiritual challenges; challenges thrust upon them by difficulties and change in the world around them; the physical challenges of growing congregations and an

aging building. Every time, they've done what was necessary to keep St. Matthew's strong - both spiritually and physically.

III

I've been your rector for over 21 years. In those years, we've achieved remarkable gains - both spiritually and by meeting the physical challenges of our, happily, heavily-used physical plant. We've gone through some things the world has thrown at us in these years - 9/11, the economic crash of 2008-9, the rise of terrorism, the technological explosion, the rise of random shootings all over America, the political polarization.

Still we've continued to do what we do here at St. Matthew's. We gather in this place to worship God from a Book of Common Prayer not all that different from the one used in 1810 when Bishop Potter consecrated our building, or the one used in our first church, St. George's. We say the same creed. We give our children the same spiritual foundation for living that little Anglicans have been getting here generation after generation after generation. We come and shed our tears in sad times. We raise our voices in hymns of joy in happy times. We move through the church year reminding us that we have two foundations, we the people of St. Matthew's. We have the physical foundation of our beloved old church, set on Bedford rock. And we have the foundation of foundations - Jesus Christ, our lord, our Savior, our dearest friend.

Now the physical foundation desperately needs shoring up. It needs your help and it needs mine to maintain the strength it must have to support generations of worshippers to come.

I am, therefore, announcing "A New Foundation for Our Next Generation," a capital campaign to achieve the completion of our necessary physical goals. Our goal is \$2.5 million dollars. In the so-called "silent phase" of our campaign we already have commitments totally \$1.7 million. Now your vestry and I are asking those of our St. Matthew's family who have not made commitments to provide the remainder.

As in every generation, it will take all of us to ensure a strong future for our church. We can do it. I know we can. We always have. It's who we are. We're still carrying our candles out into the world. The St. Matthew's story is one story that never ends.