

FOUNDERS' DAY: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

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Deuteronomy 6:6-12; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 13:44-48, 51-53

In March of 2012, shortly after I came here as pastor, Carolina was facing Kansas in the NCAA tournament. This put Tarheels' coach Roy Williams in a pinch since he previously coached at Kansas, leaving after 15 winning seasons to come home to North Carolina. Now, nearly a decade later, Jayhawks' fans were still miffed and looking for revenge.

The day before the big game, a reporter asked Williams, "So which is your favorite team? Kansas or North Carolina?"

Williams chewed on that a moment and then said, "For 15 years, Kansas was my favorite basketball program of all time, and my second favorite was North Carolina. But now my favorite basketball program of all time is North Carolina, and my second is Kansas." I remember thinking, "Now *that* is a savvy answer."

Coach Williams' answer was of more than passing interest to me because at the time, I had just left a 15-year run of my own at First Baptist, Macon, Georgia, to come home to North Carolina (the *place*, not the *ball team!* . . . *Go Deacons!*). I wasn't "looking to move," as they say in the clergy trade, and the call to Knollwood took me by surprise. But once Bambi and I

arrived, we fell in love with this church at dizzying speed, so much so that I was chagrined at how easily I left my old flame behind!

But here as well, I was helped by Coach Williams' story. Because he recalled UNC's president telling him at the time of his recruitment it was "not immoral to love two schools." I decided I was blessed to have deeply loved two churches. But Knollwood was and is my favorite church "of all time" and the good people of the First Baptist Church of Macon, Georgia, my second favorite.

So what makes Knollwood so easy to love? Here I feel like Julie Andrews about to burst forth in song while dancing atop the grassy Alps: "Here are a few of my favorite things!" This congregation is full of some of the smartest, savviest people I know. And yet they're not stuck on themselves; they are full of grace and gladness, joy and mirth.

Further, they are Tarheels and Deacons, Republicans and Democrats, freedom-loving Baptists and erstwhile Episcopalians, all gathering for a wild and wooly experience of being a church where just about the only thing they all absolutely have in common, is *Jesus!*

And yet from that warm, radiant center comes a passion for living the faith instead of talking it to death. A large percentage of Knollwood members work in service professions such as teaching, nursing, or counseling, or approach their work as an attorney or business owner as an opportunity to serve. Many chair and serve on the boards of the many non-profits in Winston-Salem and donate countless volunteer hours to neighborhood and community groups. Then in their spare time, they go operate on under-served patients in the Dominican Republic or take a week of vacation to work alongside rural health care promoters in Nicaragua. And all this is before they even show up at church to sing in the choir, welcome and usher our guests, or teach Sunday School.

As for crafting a deeply personal faith, most Knollwoodians have little patience for trite, predictable answers. They wrestle with the scriptures and the stories of our faith with the same

rigor and honesty they bring to anything that really matters. Eager for new insights into the old, old story, they're more apt to read Marcus Borg than John Calvin or Richard Rohr instead of Augustine. Like Governor Bradford of the Pilgrims, setting sail for a brave, new world, they believe "God still has new truths to break forth from (God's) word."

But the thing about Knollwood that most inspires and astounds me is this congregation's incredibly gracious, generous spirit. If we put out a call for furniture to outfit a home for refugees, or groceries for Crisis Control, or even milk jugs for Vacation Bible School, pretty soon we have to tell people to stop bringing the stuff because we're got no place left to store it!

And if genuinely welcoming those wounded and excluded by others, even the church, is a mark of God's kingdom--be they single moms, persons of same-sex orientation, or refugees on the run--then Knollwood is what the Celts called a "thin place" where heaven and earth rub shoulders.

Granted, we're don't get everything right. But when we err, we tend to err on the side of grace because, in the gospels, that's what we see Jesus doing, again and again.

As you can tell, I'm something of a Knollwood groupie. I really do love and believe in this church. Indeed, I have found the more you learn about Knollwood, the more you live into her life and witness, the more you're apt to love her. That, at any rate, has been my experience.

And the best part is, being missional, gracious, thoughtful, and free is who Knollwood has been from the beginning. Knollwood has always been a different kind of Baptist church. As Dr. Jack used to say, "In the beginning, we were known as the 'dancing Baptists' because at the time--in the late 50s--Knollwoodians danced, even at *church*, at a time when dancing was still forbidden at the nearby Baptist bastion, Wake Forest University!

And as the years unfolded, Knollwood usually came down on the right side of history in grappling with hard issues of the day: integration, women in ministry, an open baptismal policy, leaving the Southern Baptist Convention to become Cooperative Baptists, participating in

interfaith partnerships, and adopting a welcoming statement that made it clear we really are welcoming to all.

To me, this proud and storied past gives us solid ground on which to face the future, so much so--as a friend recently reminded me--if we're not careful, we can sound like snobs. He told me in reflecting on the gospel lesson for a recent Sunday, the Parable of the Tax Collector and Sinner, the text said, "The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men' (Luke 18:11). Then he added, "I found myself chuckling at the paraphrase, "The Knollwoodian, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other *Baptists!*'"

Still, we are right to be grateful, if not snobbish, about our past. Because as Jesus said, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." What is old are those kingdom values imprinted on Knollwood's spiritual DNA: being Jesus-centric, inviting, graceful, free, interfaith, liturgical, and missional, even as our new mission statement gives voice to what Dr. Jack called long ago "the spirit of Jesus": "Learning to love and live like Jesus with head, heart, and hands."

What is old is our commitment to a Christ-centered, cross-centric love. As that cross hanging so prominently in our sanctuary powerfully proclaims, we don't strive to be welcoming to all, especially those different from ourselves, because that is the polite or progressive thing to do; we strive to be welcoming to all, especially the stranger, the alien, and even our enemies, because that's the *Jesus*-thing to do, that's the character of the love we see revealed in him! As Paul pointedly told the smug, slick Corinthians, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). I pray God that might ever be true of me and true of you.

When I first came to Knollwood, I found this massive central pulpit terribly off-putting. It put me too far from the congregation and left me feeling like I was sitting in the cockpit of a 747 looking down at the tarmac. So I took to preaching from one of the lecterns as had become the custom during the interim.

Then one Sunday after church, Dr. Jack, our founding pastor, took me aside. Incidentally, he loathed that title, “founding pastor,” because Dr. Jack always said *he* didn’t found Knollwood: God did.

Anyway, Dr. Jack took me aside and said he was about to break one of his cardinal rules: never give the new preacher advice. Then with his characteristic gentleness and good humor, he proceeded to explain how the architecture of this sanctuary was carefully crafted to make a statement. Namely, that all the angles in the room draw the eye toward that cross and the prominent pulpit beneath it because that cross--and the divine love shed upon it--is at the center of this congregation’s life and witness. And there’s nothing the world, beckoning beyond those windows, needs more than a hefty dose of a God-soaked, Jesus-branded love.

Then Dr. Jack told me we would never discuss the matter again. And if I chose to preach from the lectern, he would support my decision.

So for a while, I wrestled with what to do. To me, the question wasn’t just about architecture, but about something far more fundamental: namely, did I, did we, have a gospel big enough to fill so imposing a space? I decided we did. I decided to the best of my ability, “I would know nothing among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” So I mounted that colossal pulpit, preached my heart out, and in time discovered, it felt like home.

The something old is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the news of God’s costly, shattering love in Jesus Christ for all the world. And the something new are all the ways we are seeking to express and embody that good news to a new generation. The ancient work of the Hebrews to “teach their children well” goes on: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). As Chrissy Hardy, our Children’s Ministry Associate, told us last week while introducing a new resource bag for children to use in worship, learning to worship is a skill. And it is not a skill easily mastered when competing against the instant gratification of a smartphone screen, but one vitally important to learn if we and our children are to hone an ear for the word of God. That’s why I’m so grateful for our children’s worship leaders, Sunday School teachers, choir leaders, ministers, parents, and others who day by day and week after week, dedicate themselves to this sacred task.

The something new is all the innovative ministries springing up in the life of our congregation: the ministry of welcoming and supporting refugees; one of those families will be our guests of honor at the upcoming brunch. The ministry of teaching English and literacy to immigrant families so their children can thrive at our partner school, Bolton Elementary. The ministry of building interracial and interfaith relationships as we build Habitat Houses together like the one that will be dedicated at 3 o’clock this afternoon. And all the new partnerships and ministries of recreation and wellness, artistic expression, and community engagement poised to launch soon in our new Wellness and Community Center, our church’s 60th birthday present to those we are called to serve.

Yes, of all the churches I’ve been blessed to love and serve, Knollwood is my favorite, because she taught me a lot more about following Jesus than I ever taught her. So I am deeply grateful to those with the vision and commitment to start this church, and to others with the grace and chutzpah to keep it thriving through the years.

Now it falls to us to be the gospel's ambassadors, and Knollwood's ambassadors, in our place and time. As in Jesus' name, and in Jesus' spirit, we strive to hope and dare and live: "For I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Gracious God, thank you for this compassionate, caring, courageous church we hold in trust. Now make us faithful disciples of Jesus and faithful stewards of Knollwood's life and witness during our little moment of time. In Jesus' name, we ask it. Amen.

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