

REFLECTIONS ON A DUKE CHRONICLE

A Thanksgiving Sermon

Preached in Duke University Chapel

by

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Sunday morning, November 19, 1967, 11:00 o'clock

Scripture lesson: Selected verses from Hebrews 11 and 12

This is Thanksgiving Sunday in the University Chapel, and it is in order for us to count our blessings. As we look at our heritage, we recognize threads in the fabric of our institution for which we are not grateful, threads we wish were not there. But we also find a substantial part of our heritage to be good. What are the events and trends in the history of our university which make Duke strong and meaningful today? What are the threads in our fabric for which we should be thankful today?

This sermon will be one man's attempt to answer that question on Thanksgiving Sunday, only three weeks before Founders' Day. Immediately, however, it is essential that I recognize two handicaps. The first is time. In a 25-minute sermon, a speaker can spend all of his time merely listing the good things which have happened in Duke's past, leaving no time to reflect upon them; or he can select a few of the highlights and reflect upon them briefly.

There is precedent for the latter. Our student newspaper, which calls itself a Chronicle, makes no attempt to list all the happenings of the campus, but does report in some detail on a carefully selected group of events, and then in addition offers editorial reflections on those events. This is similar to what I shall attempt.

The second handicap I face is the fact that my chronicle of significant happenings may not be the same as yours. Any chronicling of events is necessarily subjective. If you were composing a Duke Chronicle, what would you list? What dates and events would you highlight?

Some would mention 1892, the year our institution moved from the town of Trinity to the city of Durham. Others would list the year 1937, when Richard Nixon graduated from our Law School. Think of the possibilities: John F. Kennedy spoke in Page Auditorium on December 2, 1959. Also in 1959 Carolina beat us in football, 50-0. I wish now to turn to the description of a few very select events in the history of that institution of higher learning which is presently called Duke University

1856

In the year 1856, our institution was known as Normal College-- though it was not known to be "Normal" for very long-- and its President was Braxton Craven. Although the school had been in existence for almost twenty years by joint action of Quakers and Methodists, it was not until 1856 that any formal affiliation was established between the college and a church. By that year Quaker support of the college had pretty nearly faded out and Methodist support and interest had increased.

President Craven approached the North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Church with a plan, whereby the college would educate future Methodist ministers, and in return the Methodist Conference would appoint an advisory committee to the college and would supply funds.

It is interesting to note that, although the institution was begun by Quakers and Methodists, and it owed its survival through many years to funds contributed by the Methodist Church, Methodism never did try to own or control the college; and now that the college has become a university and Methodism still contributes between one and two hundred thousand dollars each year to Duke, there still is no ownership or control by the church of this private university. Moreover, it often has been true that the top administrative officers of the institution were not personally members of the Methodist Church. John F. Crowell who, after Braxton Craven, was President of the college for 23 crucial years, was not a Methodist. The next time you have a 1967 bulletin of Duke University in your hands, look at the listing of the current sixteen top administrative officers of Duke. Twelve of the sixteen are members of non-Methodist Churches.

While it undoubtedly is true of some colleges and universities elsewhere that church bodies which supported them also owned them and sought to control what would be taught and who would teach, this has not been true of Duke. In North Carolina Methodism, we have seen a church which has supported Duke financially to some extent but which has left the control of the university effectively in the hands of the private board of trustees who own it.

At this point I think it would be helpful to see what has happened at Duke in the context of higher education generally in this country. Far from Duke being an exceptional instance of church involvement in higher education, we tend to forget that it was actually typical of the earlier period of American life.

The Honorable Pat M. Neff, formerly President of Baylor University, has done research on this subject and he reported that, "In America, for one hundred and fifty years, church organizations provided all the institutions of higher learning. ...From the scholastic halls of these church-constructed colleges came the leaders of thought and the champions of liberty who made this Republic possible." President Neff said that Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton were graduates of church colleges. George Washington thought enough of church colleges that in his will he left \$50,000 to help build one. Sixteen of the first eighteen Presidents of the

United States who were college graduates came out of church colleges. All but eight of the fifty-five men who signed the Declaration of Independence were educated in church colleges. Most of the men who wrote the Constitution were educated by the colleges which the church founded. The church colleges trained the architects of this great nation. Those colleges were the scaffolding by which our ancestors built the structure of the United States.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, as sons and daughters of Duke, we can afford to give thanks for the colleges begun and supported by the church.

1903

The second event I list in my chronicle of thanks happened the night of December 1, 1903. John S. Bassett, who taught History at Trinity College, was also Editor of the scholarly journal, The South Atlantic Quarterly, which was linked to the college in the eye of the public. In the October edition that year, Editor Bassett wrote what would now be regarded as a very mild editorial entitled, "Stirring Up the Fire of Race Antipathy." There was one sentence in the editorial which, --as the saying goes -- threw the fat in the fire.

After confessing that the Editor, himself, had some racial bias in his own feelings, he went on to add this statement of opinion: "Now (Booker T.) Washington is a great and good man, a Christian statesman, and take him all in all the greatest man, save General Lee, born in the South in a hundred years."

Well, I don't know what you think about that opinion, but it is a matter of voluminous record what many citizens in this region thought about it. Almost instantly howls went up across the state, calling for the dismissal of the 36 year-old Professor Bassett. Led by the stirring editorials of Josephus Daniels in the Raleigh News and Observer, the state's press as a whole was heavily against Bassett and loudly for his expulsion.

At the time this happened academic freedom may have been secured in a few colleges and universities in America, but there had been many expulsions in the country as a whole. Whenever a professor spoke out against entrenched attitudes, the question, "Could he be right?" was generally by-passed for another question, "How soon can we get rid of him?"

And so there were cries--loud cries!--of resentment, calls--loud calls!--for Bassett's dismissal, and there were angry threats of what would happen to President Kilgo if he kept Bassett; and there were dire predictions of loss of money, loss of students, etc., if he were not fired. But President Kilgo was a man of courage, and the college trustees had grown somewhat accustomed to attacks on Trinity, so that there was more calm on the campus than might otherwise have been expected.

When the trustees met on December 1, they had Bassett's resignation in their pockets, and they had the resignation of every other faculty member if they accepted Bassett's--with the exception of one

faculty member who was away and couldn't be reached. (Imagine! only one faculty member away! In retrospect, this item may be viewed as the most novel aspect of the entire Bassett affair.!))

Deliberating far into the night, and even into the wee hours of December 2, the trustees refused to accept Bassett's resignation, and they hammered out a statement which included these sentences:

"We, the Board of Trustees of Trinity College, duly conscious of the charge committed to us, and moved by a single desire to promote those high purposes which the college is set to cherish, have at all times exercised our best care in the tasks belonging to our office. We have before us the offer of Dr. John S. Bassett to resign his professorship of history... Both faculty and students, with equal unanimity, have manifested their desire that this Board decline to accept Professor Bassett's offer..., and for the following reasons... we do decline to accept it:

"1. Any form of coercion of thought is contrary to one of the constitutional aims of Trinity College, which is 'to cherish a sincere spirit of tolerance.'

"2. We are particularly unwilling to lend ourselves to any tendency to destroy or limit academic liberty, a tendency which has, within recent years, manifested itself in some conspicuous instances, and which has created a feeling of uneasiness for the welfare of American colleges. Whatever encourages such a tendency endangers the growth of higher education by intimidating intellectual activity and causing high-minded men to look with suspicion upon this noble profession. We cannot lend countenance to the degrading notion that professors in American colleges have not an equal liberty of thought and speech with all other Americans.

"3. We believe that society in the end will find a surer benefit by exercising patience than it can secure by yielding to its resentments. The search for truth should be unhampered and in an atmosphere that is free. ... A reasonable freedom of opinion is to a college the very breath of life; and any official throttling of the private judgment of its teachers would destroy their influence, and place upon the college an enduring stigma...

"5. Trinity College is affiliated with a great church whose spirit and doctrines are tolerant and generous, and a due regard for the teachings and traditions of this Christian society requires us to exercise our judgment in harmony with its spirit and doctrines.

"Viewing the matter in the light of these wider interests, and finding that there is no complaint against Professor Bassett's moral character, his scholarly fitness, his energy, his competency as a teacher, or his command of the confidence of his classes, we are sure that duty requires us to decline the offer of his resignation. Great as is our hope in this college, high and noble as are the services which under God we believe that it is fit to render, it were better that Trinity should suffer than that it should enter upon a policy of coercion and intolerance."

This is the man for whom Bassett House, on East Campus, is named. In case any of you co-eds who live in it thought your house

was named for a long-eared dog, you should know it was named instead for a long-tenured professor!

Of course the Trinity Trustees recognized that night, as all intelligent persons must recognize today, that like most other benefits, academic freedom is not an unmixed blessing. Even as a salary increase brings with it an inevitable tax increase, so the unfettered freedom to speak one's mind without fear of any reprisal brings with it some unfavorable consequences. I suppose we shouldn't expect it to be otherwise, really.

Sometimes in the name of academic freedom and behind the protection of academic freedom, professors, chaplains, and others will expound folly and will give free rein to sensationalism. Sometimes a professor who has not gained a national reputation by brilliant research and great teaching will attempt to obtain one by the short-cut of making a bitter attack on his school's administration, trustees, or benefactors. Knowing full-well that his job and salary are as secure as Ft. Knox, he will charge to the attack. Realizing that he will be denied "the pleasures of martyrdom," he fervently hopes that at least a few will think him to be a hero if he clobbers the "big, bad administration" and all those "man-eating sharks" on the Board of Trustees.

However, the Trinity Trustees that December night said this: "Liberty may sometimes lead to folly; yet it is better that some (folly) should be tolerated than that all should think and speak under the deadening influence of repression...while it is idle to deny that the free expression of wrong opinions sometimes works harm, our country and our race stand for the view that the evils of intolerance and suppression are infinitely worse than those of folly."

And so we at Duke can number among our blessings, for which to be thankful, the famous Bassett Affair and the guarantee of academic freedom which it brought.

1932

The third and final event on my Duke chronicle this morning is the completion of the building of the University Chapel in 1932. Although the house in which we worship at this moment was the very first one conceived by Mr. Duke and President Few, it was the last one to be completed in the original group of buildings. From time to time there was even uncertainty that it would actually be constructed.

Mr. Duke believed that the central building in the university should be a great church, or chapel. Moreover, he took pains to give thought to its location. It is important that we understand exactly what this meant and means. At this point, Mr. Duke and President Few were not thinking of the academic teaching of religion in the classroom, though they certainly favored that, and there is abundant evidence to show it. What they provided for was a great sanctuary in which the university could regularly and officially come together in an act of the worship of Almighty God, according

to the Christian tradition but without denominational barriers or hindrances. Ever since the beginning, the Sunday services in the University Chapel have represented the University officially, as officially as anything else the University does or can do.

The Chapel stands for worship, it means commitment, it symbolizes taking a stand for Jesus Christ, not merely learning about Him. We are here to adore Him, not simply study Him. When the Chapel Choir sings, "Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth!" this is not performed merely to reflect what one of our cultural traditions has believed; rather it is a vital affirmation of faith! And the people, not as an audience, but as a congregation, stand to witness to the conviction that "He shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah!"

Now to say that Sunday Chapel worship is an official act of the University is not to say that every individual in the University must go through the motions of it, whatever he personally believes. The university does a lot of things officially which do not presume unanimous response. Yesterday afternoon Duke University was officially in athletic combat with the University of North Carolina, but I have an idea that at least a few professors were out raking leaves or hunting geese during the game, and not a few students were doing term papers or listening to their Hi-Fi sets.

All Christian worship at Duke University is as voluntary as it is official, and I am acquainted with no Christian at Duke who would have it otherwise. But on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I list on my Duke chronicle the date of 1932, when the University Chapel was completed and permanent provision was made for a great service of Christian worship for the entire campus, without regard for sectarian restrictions.

I will not make this sermon longer by mentioning anything else, though of course we have other important blessings for which to be thankful. I want today to emphasize these three: First, that the church brought our institution into being and then left it free to chart its own course, with friendly church support; second, that our private Board of Trustees saw fit to secure academic freedom here; and third, that we understand ourselves as part of what God is attempting to do in the world through Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank Thee that Thou hast surrounded us by so great a cloud of witnesses from our heritage, and we pray Thee to give us grace to lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, that we may run with perseverance the race which is set before us, looking to Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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