

Going Green at St Paul's

26 June 2011

Brothers and sisters. This Sunday exactly two years ago I first led worship here as your new pastor. Personally, this Lord's day is important for that reason alone. But beyond the personal, the vote we will take after worship today makes this a far more important, even historic Sunday here at St Paul's. I confess to a stealth agenda. I have not said much about it, but I came here in 2009 with my sights set on those two acres at the top of the hill. In my first year, I asked Brett Miller to find the tax records of our five acres of church property. The records clearly showed our three developed acres down here and two at the top of the hill that were sold to the church for \$1 in March 1965. Signing the papers for this gift of land were Beulah Timm, Doris Loew, Ralph and Susan Meyer, Walter Meyer and Ruthmary Parmeter. There is no written record that I have been able to find that designated a purpose for the land, though the unwritten assumption has been that it was for the future expansion of the cemetery. When it became clear to me that this gift of land to the church was an untapped resource, without any immediate purpose, my imagination began to run wild.

My first vision was very selfish and personal. I envisioned a parsonage there, tucked back in the corner of the property, using only a small portion of land that still could be cemetery expansion one day. A house for the pastor would benefit me in the short run, of course, but it would also benefit you in the long run, assuring that future pastors would be more obliged to live near the church. Even after Cindy and I found the log cabin on Hogsback to rent, I imagined such a possibility in the future, but it gradually became clear that this would not happen during my time here. I realized that this pipedream would remain on the shelf, unsmoked, at least during my tenure. I mentioned the parsonage on the hill idea to just a few of you in the congregation, and never publically, but I do so now because perhaps, someday, it might be appropriate and do-able. I hope to prove to you over the course of whatever years that God's

grace gives us together just how essential it is to a congregation like this that the pastor lives close by and is involved in the lives of the people in and beyond the congregation, showing up at community events: school sports, plays, concerts, graduations, parades, ballpark fundraisers, and so forth. The location of the unused land here offers all the advantages to living next to the church, without the usual disadvantages, like people stopping at all hours to get a key or report that someone left a light on or a door open. The hilltop offers both privacy and easy access to the church.

A second vision was to establish the hilltop land as a green cemetery. This is still a possibility down the road as well. The green cemetery movement is growing but still young in this country. There are two green cemeteries already in the Milwaukee area. Green cemeteries differ from the traditional in several ways. They are not maintained as manicured lawns like the links of a golf course, but developed as natural prairies and woodlands with walking paths and benches for quiet meditation. Graves are sold but usually without markers on each individual grave. There is often a common marker or plaque which lists the names and locations of burials. There are no toxic embalming fluids allowed, but the idea is that human remains really do return to the earth (as we always say they will during the committal – “dust to dust, ashes to ashes”); coffins are simpler and much less expensive (often a plain pine box), and no vaults are necessary. Everything in a green cemetery is meant to be natural and requiring as little maintenance as possible, thus reducing the expense of mowing and burning fossil fuels. I have spoken with a Waukesha funeral director who is a proponent of green burial and has done several in recent years. Bodies may be cremated or embalmed with all natural materials. As I say, using this space of ours on the top of the hill for green burial continues to be an option for our future. As people become more sensitive to the human-driven devastation of the planet, I believe green cemeteries will grow in popularity. What a ministry it would be for us to offer two types of space for the remains and cremains of loved ones: traditional and green.

The third vision is what we will vote on half an hour from now. It began with a Wisconsin Council of Churches interfaith “greening the church” conference I attended in the fall of 2009 in Stevens Point. We talked there about the need to establish green teams in our churches and synagogues, mosques and temples. I came away from that conference even more convinced that our hilltop parcel of land was the perfect place for a power-generating windmill. Nearly a year later, I read that our sister church in Port Washington had installed solar panels on their roof. I called their pastor, and he put me in touch with Cathy Jones, a member of that church and now also an employee of Arch Electric. Arch did the solar installation on their church a year ago and has authored the proposal before us today. The deepening of our relationship began with Cathy and Steve from Arch coming here and getting a thorough tour of the history, mission, insides and grounds of our church. We hiked up the hill and I shared with them my vision of a windmill. They said that windmills do better on flatlands, and that hilltops like ours create disturbance that make problems for windmill generators. But solar, now that was another thing! What if the panels for solar power were installed here on the south facing half of these two acres? It was an ideal spot for solar panels, with shade from trees only along the distant south fenceline. I had not thought much about solar, since I did not believe that you would ever go for putting panels on the historic church roof, and I didn't much like the idea either. But up here on the field? Cathy and Steve and I right away knew this was an idea worth pursuing. This was last fall. The rest is history which many of you now know.

There was a chance that we could get a grant application in to Focus on Energy before year's end, the deadline. It was no obligation, a grant that if it were to be awarded to us, would be received only when we had actually started a project. When it looked like the grant was a go, I discussed it with the council. When we did receive the grant from Focus on Energy, the council and Arch Electric began talking together. We decided that the next steps would include seeking a We Energies grant, deadline for which was April, and if that were successful, we would seek approval from

the town of Erin and finally, with all those ducks in a row, the congregation of St Paul's.

We have some endorsements which I would like to share with you before the meeting. I spoke with Beulah's daughter Sandy who spoke with other members of their family, and this is what they said:

Jim and Jacquie Branchford, two of our green members, wished they could be with us today for the vote but could not. They asked about casting absentee ballots, but our by-laws make no provision for that. So they just wanted you all to know of their support.

I know these words have little to do with today's scripture, and this is not the usual sermon, but there is a strong connection between our faith and what we are proposing. Last Sunday we read the first Genesis account of creation, how God made the heavens and the earth over six days and rested the seventh. We heard how we are, as the song says, God's work of art, all of us, human beings made in the image of God, but also plants and animals and earth, sea and sky. We are all part of God's great, wondrous work of art. God has put us here to take care of one another and the planet. The earth and its resources demand responsible attention, reverence and tender loving care. We are stewards of the earth, and it is up to us to see that these gifts from God are available, unspoiled, to future generations as well.

I believe that solar power is part of the world's energy future. We can't keep burning coal and oil the way we have been doing. The sun and wind are great untapped resources, and the future will be in each of us, as individuals, churches and other organizations with buildings finding ways to go "off the grid" and harvest renewable energy rather than feed huge corporations whose lust for profit trumps all else, and most especially and tragically, tender care for the earth and sea and sky. Our solar proposal is scheduled to pay for itself after fifteen years, and depending on costs of future electricity, it could happen before that. The grants we received are true and timely blessings. We got one of the very last We energies grants to be give to not-for-profit organizations, and the Focus on Energy grants in the future are among the many good things to be lost in the

reduced state budget. We are "in under the wire" with regard to these two grants which essentially cut in half the years required to pay off the project. The grants, already won, make what we propose do-able.

The other thing about this solar project is that it is a silent witness and example for others. We have the opportunity to once again pioneer as did the Loews and others who were founding members and gave the first gift of land for church and cemetery. We have the opportunity to pioneer in energy savings and take the lead in the responsible use of green technology, for our sake, for the sake of those around us, and for the sake of our dear old but endangered Mother Earth.

Like the prophet Jeremiah said, when peace comes to pass, we will know for sure that the prophet's words were true. Only time will tell if we are doing the right thing, but I believe that the signs point to a greener, solar future for St Paul's and all of our households. I urge you to vote today with the pioneers from the past and the prophets of the future.