

# The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

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## A History to Celebrate

The Book of Proverbs 9:1-11  
The Epistle to the Romans 10:5-17

The 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time and June 5/6, 2010  
The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

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The Wisdom of God is the deep physics and metaphysics by which the cosmos is created; and the Wisdom of God is the common sense prudence required to get around in the world; and in the Book of Proverbs the Wisdom of God is personified as a woman, a beautiful, wise and generous woman.

Last week, reading from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Proverbs, we learned of God's delight in Wisdom and of Wisdom's delight in the world of human habitation, and now, in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter, Wisdom spreads a table of delights for everyone—all people—to feast upon.

Just as Wisdom called people last week—"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live"—so once again, Wisdom calls to us: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." It is an invitation to a feast.

The wisdom poet explains Wisdom's careful preparations: "She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine." With apologies to vegetarians among us, that description probably sounded better in twenty-four centuries ago than it does today. The poet's point is that Wisdom's preparation is painstaking and generous and complete: the feast is lavish and the wine has been spiced with the best flavors. Wisdom has spared no trouble, no expense. Others might throw something together, but Wisdom invites us to the very best.

The question is: how do we receive the invitation? Wisdom invites us, you and me: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." Do we hear wisdom calling? In the midst of all the foolishness the world offers to distract us, how can we hear Wisdom's invitation?

That is the problem that vexed Paul as he wrote to the Romans. God has accomplished our salvation through Jesus Christ, but what if no one knows about it? What difference does the things God does make if we don't know about them? Paul remembers the Scripture that reads, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But then he registers objections:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless

they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

“How are they to hear?” That is the question that the Presbytery of East Hanover took up when they met at Smithfield on April 5, 1860. At that meeting they received a “petition from the citizens of Williamsburg and Williamsburg vicinity on the York River... to organize a church at Bigler’s [Mill].”<sup>1</sup> (Bigler’s Mill is now part of Camp Peary.)

Ninety five years before, on June 17, 1765, a group of Presbyterian tradesmen had petitioned the York County Court “to make use of a House in the City of Williamsburg, situate on a part of a Lott belonging to Mr. George Davenport as a place of Public Worship of God according to the Practise of Protestant Dissenters of the Presbyterian denomination.” They were given permission to open a Presbyterian Meeting House. You may know that the church in downtown Alexandria, Virginia is still called Old Presbyterian Meeting House. Presbyterians could not have a “church” in Colonial Virginia because Colonial Virginia had an established church, The Church of England, but under the Act of Toleration some freedom of worship was also established, and Williamsburg Presbyterians took advantage of that to have a meeting house as a place for worship.

It was ninety five years from that date of the petition in 1765 to the report to the Presbytery that “The committee appointed to organize a church at Bigler’s on the York River, called the Williamsburg & York River Church, reported that they had performed that duty on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June. The report was received and adopted.” We don’t know what happened in those ninety five years between the permission to open a meeting house and the organization of the church. *Williamsburg Presbyterian Church has a lot of history lost.*

*Williamsburg Presbyterian Church has a lot of history to remember.* What was it that happened so that “The committee appointed to organize a church... reported that they had performed that duty on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June” in 1860? We can be certain they had not built a building. They may not have even elected a Session. What they almost certainly did was have a worship service. Someone preached, others heard. Sometimes newly begun churches at that time were called “preaching stations.” A schedule would be posted, not unlike at a train station or a bus station, and at the appointed hour a preacher would show up and whoever would listen would show up too. That is how it happens, that is how church begins, Paul tells us: “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Word began to get around that people were invited to a grand feast furnished by the Wisdom of God. “Come, eat of my bread, she calls out, “and drink of the wine I have mixed.”

June of 1860 was not exactly an ideal time to be starting a church—or maybe given the terrible conflicts at hand it was exactly what was needed. Within less than a year Virginia had seceded from the union and the Civil War had begun. Records of the Presbytery of New Hanover don’t have anything to say about who supplied the pulpit of the new Williamsburg & York River Church. Ministers were scarce and many served as chaplains in the Confederate Army, but the church endured through the war and in September of 1865, four months after the end of the war, the Presbytery listed the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the sermon I am indebted to Wilford Kale and his unpublished manuscript “Williamsburg Presbyterian Church: A Beginning,” 2010.

“Wmsburg & York River” on the role of churches. No minister was listed, and as a matter of fact the first installed pastor would not arrive until almost twenty years later, in 1884.

John Gray Anderson was the first pastor. The church grew to forty members and curiously built two buildings: one at Magruder on the York River and the other here in Williamsburg on the corner where Prince George Street meets the Palace Green.

In 1930 the development of Colonial Williamsburg caused Williamsburg Presbyterian Church to sell the Palace Green property and move to this location on Richmond Road. About fifty five years later.... Oh, I hope I'm not boring you with all this history. I do so appreciate the wonderful work Wilford Kale has done on our history. We have a lot of history lost, but we have a lot of history to remember, and today we have a lot of history to celebrate.

As I was saying, about fifty five years after the church moved to this location Neil Stevenson came to serve as Pastor. The church was growing and contemplating moving again. Williamsburg Presbyterian Church needed more room. There was only the lot where the sanctuary stood and no room to grow. Church growth consultants would happily have told Williamsburg Presbyterian Church that the smart decision would be to move out into the county where we could have had acres of parking and softball fields thrown in. In order to play the numbers game, that was the obvious thing to do, the practical thing to do.

Instead Williamsburg Presbyterian Church confirmed its historic calling in the city of Williamsburg and its growing relationship with The College of William and Mary by negotiating to purchase the two additional lots between its sanctuary and Williamsburg Baptist Church to build a spacious fellowship hall with a floor of classrooms above it. Today we're celebrating that portion of our history as we recognize The Session has named the fellowship hall Stevenson Hall to honor Neil McGill Stevenson who was pastor when it was built.

*We have a lot of history lost, and we have a lot of history to remember, and we have a lot of history to celebrate.*

*Williamsburg Presbyterian Church has a lot of history to look forward to. We rejoice in our historic relationship with The College of William and Mary, and we love the students, faculty and administrators who make this their house of worship. We rejoice in the students who leave us each year to go to seminary and to go into full time Christian service.*

Located in the heart of Williamsburg we welcome the most fascinating people coming to worship from all over the world. People hear Wisdom's call, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed," and they come here to hear God's truth.

As we look to the history that is before us. Our Session recently committed to a Long Range Plan including "Worship that glorifies God, transforming and renewing us in a deepening faith." Someone might reasonably object that's nothing new. They certainly would be right. That is what the church has been doing for twenty centuries, and the synagogue centuries before that. That is what Williamsburg Presbyterian Church has been doing for one hundred and fifty years. We never are finished, never done, never completed. Worship and nurture are a challenge each week, each year, each century.

God's glory endures and so also our glorification of God continues. Praise endures. Rejoicing goes on and on. In the Book of Revelation's vision of the end, there is

no church building. “I saw no temple in the city,” John says (Rev. 21:22), but the people’s praise continues and the feast of God’s love never come to an end.

We’re going to keep worshipping until we get in right, because that is what God calls the church to be and do: to proclaim God’s Word, to announce Wisdom’s invitation and to welcome you to the table of God’s generosity and grace.

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