

Day 16 Devotion

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”

Ecclesiastes 12:13

“The essential thing ‘in heaven and in earth’ is, apparently (to repeat it once more), that there should be long obedience in the same direction, there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Upon arriving at First Statesboro, I received a copy of Virginia Russell’s book *A Century of Presbyterianism in Bulloch County*. My second favorite section (the first being a report to the March 1896 Presbytery meeting that lists “Special Outpouring of the Holy Ghost? None.”) is a series of selections from Session minutes May 1967 - February 1968.

Russell reminds us of a story familiar to many of our churches from that time. Racial integration in worship was a topic in Sunday Schools, church boards, usher guilds, and clergy across the country. FPC Statesboro was no different. At the September 1960 and then again at the July 1964 Session meetings, the instruction was laid out to ushers to inform Black people that “no provision as yet had been made for seating them.” All this was taking place during the planning and building of our current facility which served as a very easy crutch of being a stressful topic in an already stressful time.

But - with what reads like the resounding support of the youth of the congregation - two elders made it their steady mission to overturn these actions. With decency, order, and a deeply felt sense of the long obedience in the same direction, Elders Jack Broucek and Fielding Russell came to Session every four months with a motion. At the May 1967 meeting, Russell made a motion, Broucek a second, forcing a conversation. The motion was tabled and Russell introduced it again September 1967. The motion died for want of a second. But then in February 1968, Broucek “read a letter from the Synod with information from General Assembly, on church’s excluding persons from worship on grounds of race, color, or class.” Russell moved to recall the September tabled motion and it passed, 6-2. March 1968, the diaconate brought a draft to change the motion to include “the seating of anyone who came to the church for worship regardless of race, color, or class.”

I confess that my urgency for change rarely meets the patience needed for the long obedience of justice labor in the church. There are sins of complacency that still hold us back but I’d contend that sins of a lack of sticktoitiveness are as detrimental. In this season of Lent, may we remember that Jesus comes to us again and again with perseverance and persistence and thus, asks us to remain the course, too.

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Suppose we did our work / like the snow, quietly, quietly. / leaving nothing out. —Wendell Berry

PROMPT: What is the history of your church’s integration conversations from 1960-1968?