

Church and Community

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” – Jeremiah 29:7

It is altogether fitting, I believe, that we should have among our honored guests this morning both the mayor and the superintendent of the Richmond Heights schools, because the city whose centennial we are marking this morning began in a dispute over school funding. In fact, that’s how all three of the suburbs celebrating their centennials this year came into being. Here’s the way it happened.

In 1828, Euclid Township, which covered most of the area now occupied by Cleveland’s eastern suburbs, divided itself into eleven rural school districts. Districts number six and nine centered around the area of Richmond Road between Chardon Road and Highland Road because there were two one-room schoolhouses there providing education for the children whose families were clustered around the intersections of Richmond and Chardon roads in the northeast and Richmond and Highland roads in the southwest; the latter intersection was known as Claribel Corners because a woman named Clara Bell lived in a house on the corner where the Done Right Auto Repair shop stands now.

Taxes were levied to support the pupils in the entire township, and in February of 1917, the Euclid Township Board of Education put a bond issue before voters to replace a number of the worn out one-room schoolhouses that were scattered across the district with a set of new, consolidated school buildings that would be centrally located.

As every resident, school superintendent, and mayor knows, whenever you ask people for money, they usually want to hang onto it, and the folks clustered in the area of Mayfield and Richmond roads discovered that if they incorporated themselves as a village around their schoolhouse, they could legally control the funding for their new little school district.

And so, on Aug. 7, 1917, the Village of Euclidville – now known as Lyndhurst – came into existence, followed in short order by the Village of South Euclid, which was incorporated by vote of its residents on Oct. 13th, followed again in short order by the Village of Claribel, which voted itself into existence on Nov. 27th, and which voted to rename itself the following year as Richmond Heights.

So that’s where we came from. Our forebears here wanted their tax dollars to be used in their local schools, and the only way for that to happen was for them to create a new, local school district, and the only way for that to happen was for there to be a legal entity entitled to have its own school district. Thus Lyndhurst, South Euclid, and Richmond Heights.

It’s not exactly the story of the Pilgrims, is it? It would be nice to imagine brave and

hearty settlers fleeing persecution from some cruel and despotic regime – perhaps in downtown Cleveland – to set up a purified commonwealth of the righteous remnant out here in the howling wilderness.

But history is usually less dramatic than that, and rarely are its players as cleanly divided into the white hats and black hats of a movie western. The world isn't just a place of marshals and outlaws and innocent bystanders hoping not to get shot up along with the saloon. We all have a role to play in the time and place in which God has placed us, and depending on your perspective, that role may be righteous, or it may be villainous. Usually, it's a mixture of both.

I think that's something of what the prophet Jeremiah was trying to say to the Israelites who had been taken into captivity in Babylon six hundred years before the birth of Jesus. He wrote them a letter, dictated, he believed and they came to believe, by God, in which Jeremiah advised them to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." In other words, Jeremiah was saying, we're all in this together.

I hope that's the understanding our city administration has of our community, including our churches, because that's certainly our understanding here at Faith. We know that our fortunes as a congregation are inextricably bound up with the welfare of our community. Sure, it would be nice to be a booming, youthful congregation in a community whose population is shrinking and graying, but that's not the way it works for everyone who's not an exception, and we're not exceptional in that sense. We're part of the rule. We're part of the trend that's been playing itself out in the Rust Belt for half a century, and no one knows when that trend will turn. And so the question for us becomes what do we do in the meantime?

Some folks, of course, make like the Beverly Hillbillies and head out. There certainly are flourishing communities not far from here – the places where families with young children are moving. We know that as well as anyone. Our Sunday School had to go into suspension year before last because we simply didn't have enough children for even a one-room schoolhouse. We tried this and we tried that. We had a gifted and dedicated Christian educator who did her best, but in the end, we couldn't overcome the trend of smaller and older and poorer that is carrying along our community. We know full well the truth of Jeremiah's words, and so we seek the welfare of our community and we pray for it and we work for it, knowing that in its welfare we will find our welfare.

And so we rejoice that the residents of Richmond Heights made a brave and civic-minded decision about our school district in the most recent election. I'm not talking politics here, I'm talking history and religion. That decision wasn't without controversy, of course – when is a tax increase not without controversy? – but a majority of our residents voted to try – to try to provide a quality education for our children, to try to integrate our schools and our community more closely, to try to use our tax dollars more efficiently by combining resources for both our children and our adults. Behind that effort and every effort to try lies hope, that most potent of human emotions, and hope is always a cause for rejoicing. We will continue to pray for our community as this new chapter in its life unfolds, praying especially for our leaders, that they will have the wisdom and courage to show to the people of Richmond Heights that their trust in their leaders has not been misplaced.

A couple of months ago, I was deeply honored to receive word from Superintendent Willis that Faith Church was being recognized for our support of our local school system. The

award happens to have my name on it, but it belongs to this church. At the awards dinner on a beautiful evening at the airport a few weeks ago, I was delighted to learn that Carol Shammo, Kathy Gambatese, and Marilyn Wilson, all members of this congregation, were also honored for their support of our schools. And Pastors Shrader and Marino and the people of Christian Assembly were also honored at that event for their longstanding support of our schools. Our churches support our schools because we know that in our schools' welfare is our community's welfare, and in our community's welfare we find our welfare.

So here's your invitation to help your community by helping your community's schools by joining us for the next session of the high school's Culinary Club which is going to be down the hall in our kitchen and social hall at 3:00 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 7th. The fifteen or so young people will be baking and decorating gingerbread houses, and whether you like gingerbread or not – and I happen not to – come anyway and show these young people that you care about them. Years from now, these students may not remember a single one of the dishes they made in the Culinary Club, but they most definitely will remember the support they received from their teachers and families and from the community who showed up to cheer them on in their efforts with pots and pans.

I've conducted enough funerals to know that what children remember most and loved best about their parent was not that the parent got it right every time, but that the parent stepped up and showed up when that child needed an adult's presence, and every single one of us in this room has the power to shape a young person's life for the better simply through our ministry of presence. So come join us and make a difference in a young person's life and in our community.

So, yes, in this church we do pray for our city, as Jeremiah told us to do, and we also work to try to make Richmond Heights a place that people want to call home. We pray and we work, as Scripture tells us to do, because we know that in this city's welfare we find our welfare, because we're all in this together.