

WHAT'S THE POINT?
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
MARCH 11-2007-THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
A SERVICE OF DEDICATION FOR THE NEW STEEPLE
THE OLD TESTAMENT LECTION FOR LENT III-ISAIAH 55
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When a lawyer asked Jesus what was the most important commandment, Jesus responded, “Love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself,” and ever since the Church has considered “The Great Commandment” to be a blueprint for authentic human existence. The Church lives in two dimensions: the horizontal—love your neighbor—and the vertical—love God. Conveniently, the central symbol of our faith visually renders just those two dimensions—it has a strong vertical post, pointing us up towards God, and a broad horizontal beam, pointing us sideways toward the neighbor. We should never emphasize the one at the expense of the other. If the Church becomes just another social institution—Greenwich Country Club South—or just a prayer group—so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly good—it has forgotten something important. I’ve said this before: the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of authentic human existence are tied inextricably together: without the post, the beam falls to the earth, and without the beam, the post is just a boring stick. That cross, you see, is a sermon in wood.

Conveniently, the central symbol of our faith limns the two indispensable dimensions of authentic Christian existence. *Intentionally*, church architecture frequently, commonly, traditionally, recapitulates that same cruciform shape, that same cross-shaped pattern, and

therefore that same bi-directional movement of our faith—the vertical and the horizontal. And that’s why we spent \$300,000 for a 155-foot steeple most of which is not fit for human occupancy. For the first time since 1955, our church’s architecture expresses the cruciform pattern, the two dimensions of our faith. It goes out, and it goes up. Our church is now a sermon in stone. It always was, of course. But now even more. As of now, our church both sprawls and soars, as every church should, in both its architecture and its ministry. We will sprawl horizontally and soar vertically. This is a sermon about a steeple, and if that seems too trivial a topic for a Christian sermon, bear with me a moment.

Steeple, themselves very pointy structures, seem, ironically, to be pointless, right? I mean, why all that wasted space you can neither worship, meet, educate, or office in? Most of you saw it when it was lying on its side on the truck—it’s just steel beams; you can’t habitat in there. One of our steepleless First Presbyterian Church kids visited his grandmother’s church for the first time, Noroton Presbyterian Church, his first close encounter with a tall and prominent steeple, and he was very impressed, and asked his grandmother, “Grandma, what’s the point?” I think he was probably asking what the tall pointy thing was called, but perhaps it was a question of weightier symbolic import, so that’s how I’ll take it. Stee-

ples: what's the point? Well, as it turns out, steeples are just like sermons—they have three points; how convenient for the linear preacher. Steeples have a practical point, an aesthetic point, and a theological point.

Steeple have a practical point, or at least that was true through much of history. Steeples go back to about the year 600 A. D., when, then as now, a town's church was the largest, most enduring, most important, and most prominent structure in the community, but then, in the Middle Ages, unlike now, every town—in the British Isles and in Europe, for example—needed to watch out for hostile invaders, marauding Vikings perhaps. So on one end of the church, the most prominent and durable structure in town, they built a tower modeled on the lookout tower of a walled fortress, in order to anticipate danger and prepare adequate defenses against invasion. If at this vantage point in history steeples seem like such peaceful, harmless things, they originally had a military purpose.

So that was the rather menacing origin of steeples, but over the years, steeples got higher and higher, and I'll tell you why. Every church needed a church bell, because churches were not only a town's military lookout, but its original time-keepers as well. Church bells tolled the hour. People especially needed to know when it was 10:00 on Sunday morning. Alarm clocks, wristwatches, and cellphones hadn't been invented yet, you see, so people needed to know when to come to church, especially when Daylight Savings Time started.

We should have rung our bell this morning, but we don't have one. Yet. Well, where do you put a church bell? At the highest point in town, of course—atop the lookout tower on the church, where the bell would peal out far and wide across the countryside.

Someone once pointed out that for long centuries of human existence, before the invention of gunpowder and steam engines, for example, a church bell was the loudest sound a human being would ever hear in his lifetime. The only thing that might have come close was the blacksmith's hammer and anvil. It was a very peaceful and calming notion to me, and I got envious. This was in the days before La Guardia, Harley Davidson, Aerosmith, the Sound Beach Fire Station, I-95, and leaf blowers. So atop their towers churches built shelters for their bells, often encased behind louvres. Our steeple, like most, has three sections: a stone base at the bottom, a louvred belltower in the middle, and a lantern at the top. Notice that when you go outside in a moment—three sections: a stone base, a louvred belltower, and a windowed lantern at the top. If we have enough money at the end of this project, we'll put a carillon in our louvred bell tower to make sure you don't oversleep when Daylight Savings Time begins.

Over the years steeples got higher still. As I've just suggested, churches began to place lighthouses atop the bell tower, a shelter with windows for the fire of a lantern so that the light could shine forth. Along the seacoast, steeples became lighthouses, quite literally, navigation aids for sailors at sea, keeping them from shipwrecking on the rocks. The steeple of Second Congregational Church down the road is an important navigational landmark for sailors on Long Island Sound, one of the highest points between New York and Boston, and now our church will be a familiar navigation aid too, both literally and figuratively. It will be a light and landmark to guide your way, both literally and figuratively. Ours is 50 feet shorter than Second's, but let that pass.

So steeples are lighthouses. Think about it: where would America be were it not for the lantern in the steeple of Old North Church Boston, where Paul Revere had the sexton show two lanterns instead of one to warn the colonists that the British were approaching Lexington and Concord by sea and not by land? Maybe we'd still be bowing to Queen Elizabeth, perish the thought. Our steeple is almost identical to Boston's Old North Church: a stone base, a louvred belltower, and a windowed lantern. We will shine the light.

Steeple got higher still. Every church needed a lookout tower, every lookout tower needed a bell, every belltower needed a lantern on top, and every lantern needed a roof to keep the rain out, and since the steeple tower was so thin and pointy like a pencil, the roof needed to be pointy too. The only shape that will do for a thin and pointy structure like a church tower is an elongated ellipse, or an oval, a round cap-like thing, and when you stretch an ellipse or an oval longer and longer and thinner and thinner, it tapers to a point and starts to look like a dunce cap or an upside-down ice-cream cone.

The church people liked the stretched-out, pointy shape, and what's more, these elongated cones were harder than heck to build, especially when all you had to build with were stones, so the stone-masons began to rise to the challenge. They stretched the cone higher and higher and pointier and pointier, because it was hard to do, it was a challenge, and they were showing off. Let the stone-masons show off, I say. What better place to show off your superior craftsmanship than on a building chiseled and hammered to the glory of God. Where else you gonna show off? On the roof of the Shop Rite or the gas station?

You see how form follows function. Historically, steeples had a practical point. We don't use them for those practical purposes anymore, but churches keep building steeples even in the 21st century because of their aesthetic and theological points. Steeples have an aesthetic point, which is just a fancy way of saying that they are beautiful, they are visually interesting, and we really couldn't do without their beauty. Our cities and towns would be almost insufferably boring without them.

Most other buildings in our American towns and cities, you see, either sprawl or soar. They are built either on a horizontal or a vertical plane. They sprawl, like Greenwich Hospital and the aforementioned Shop-Rite, and the church office building at 76 Progress Drive in Stamford—long, broad, and low to the ground—or they soar, like the Empire State Building or the Chrysler Building, which is nothing but a steeple without a church, right, a sacred shrine to the automobile hubcap.

But with steeples, churches both sprawl and soar. This makes them visually interesting, this makes them beautiful to look at, there's more going on than in most other buildings. Churches are visually provocative; you can't instantly absorb the meaning of their shape as you can with the grocery store and the gas station. In this perhaps they obliquely suggest something of the mystery of God. There is something baroque, complicated, and ungraspable about God. How many times have you heard it already in the last three days: "Wow, now that is an extremely positive addition to the skyline of our town!"? How many times will you hear it in the next 50 years?

So steeples have a practical point and an aesthetic point. Most importantly, they have a theological point. What's the point? The

point is the point. Heaven is the point. At the top of horizontally-oriented, commercially-obsessed Greenwich Avenue, we are pointing straight up to God. “Ho!” says the prophet Isaiah to his disheartened kinfolk living as conquered slaves in Babylon far from home, “Ho!” “Stop!” “Look!” “Behold!” “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Ho, you penniless, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine without money and milk without price. Ho, you clueless clods of capitalism, why do you spend money for that which is not bread? Ho, you misled monkeys of materialism, why do you labor for that which does not satisfy? Why do you keep trying to fill spiritual emptiness with material trinkets? Why do you keep trying to meet a gnawing hunger for heaven with the vain baubles of earth? Tiffany’s won’t fill you up, a Porsche is not what you need, Ralph Lauren won’t cut it, Manolo Blahnik either, beautiful and dear as it all is. Go ahead and get a complete makeover with Botox or facelift, but it’s the inside that needs the makeover. That’s what’s really falling apart. “Seek the Lord while he may be found,” says the prophet, “call upon God while God is near.” With this steeple we are saying that there is a vertical dimension to human existence that human beings neglect to their eternal peril.

Look at our neighbors, God love ‘em. They’ve been so patient and kind during our irritating construction; they haven’t complained for one minute. And besides that, they do a great job. Especially the beauty salon across the street with its comely clientele. And the bank, which lent us \$5 million, God bless ‘em. They attend very well to the horizontal dimension of human existence: a bank, a beauty salon, several real estate offices, one of the richest guys in the world across the street, investment firms at Pickwick Plaza. They do

a great job, but do you think the neighborhood needs something pointing at the sky?

That steeple says that there’s a god-shaped blank in every one of us that nothing but God can fill. Why do you spend your money for that which does not satisfy and your labor for that which cannot fill you up? As someone put it, “‘Tis only God can be had for the asking.”¹ We have the one thing you most need, and here’s the strange thing: it’s free; it doesn’t cost a thing. “‘Tis only God can be had for the asking.”

“As the rain comes down from heaven and waters the earth, and gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word never return to me empty,” says the Lord. My word shall accomplish my purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” The rains come down, and the seed sprouts up. The word comes down, and the word flourishes back up, this beautiful vertical traffic between God and humanity, between heaven and earth.

So let’s sprawl and soar, literally and figuratively, reaching out to the neighbor and up towards God. As someone aptly put it, “A church is not just a building we worship *in*; a church is a building we worship *with*.”² To God be the glory, now and for the next 200 years.

¹Henry Sloane Coffin, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, eds. George A. Buttrick, et. al.(Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), vol. V, p. 644.

²Edwin Lutyens, quoted by Colin Cunningham, *Stones of Witness* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999, p. 17.