

1863: A Church and Nation Divided

*Historical message delivered by Christine Comiskey at the
First Congregational Church of Georgetown, June 30, 2013*

CHRIS:

Today, I invite you to take a step back in time to 1863. During this turbulent time, as our country lay deeply divided by the Civil War, a divide was deepening in our own congregation between supporters and opponents of our controversial minister. I'd like to introduce you to a church member from our past, who will tell you about what life was like in Georgetown and our church 150 years ago today. Meet Lizzie Nelson.

(Chris ducks behind the pulpit, puts on a Civil War era bonnet and emerges in the persona of Lizzie Nelson)

LIZZIE:

Good morning. I have been invited to inform you of the state of affairs in our church and town as they stand today, June 30, 1863. Our little town is now 25 years old, with a population of approximately 2,000 residents. Most of the men in town work as farmers, or in the fast growing shoe industry. Many do both. The railroad came to town thirteen years ago, making travel and the shipping of goods so much faster and easier. Those locomotives are dirty, noisy, smelly things, but it is a small price to pay for the modern convenience.

Our congregation worships, as it has for almost one hundred years now, at the South Church, at the corner of Elm and Main Streets. A few years ago, it became necessary to hire a colleague pastor to assist our elderly minister, Reverend Isaac Braman. Imagine our excitement when Reverend Charles Beecher came to town as a candidate for the position. He is of THE famous Beecher family! He is the brother of the renowned orator, Henry Ward Beecher, and of author Harriet Beecher Stowe. Eleven years ago, Mrs. Stowe's book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published. I hardly know anyone who hasn't read it. It certainly got a lot more people thinking about the evils of slavery and helped fuel the fires of the abolitionist movement. Reverend Beecher did become our Colleague Pastor and a year later, following the death of Reverend Braman, he became our senior pastor. That year, 1858, we had an astounding 58 new members join the church!

Unfortunately, not everyone in the congregation was in favor of Reverend Beecher being our pastor. Some folks just don't like things to change. Reverend Braman was our Senior Pastor for 61 years. Reverend Beecher is VERY different from Reverend Braman. I personally enjoy his sermons and find them to be inspirational and thought-provoking. Some, however, felt his views, including the abolition of slavery, were a bit too radical. You see, there are those in the congregation, particularly in the shoe industry, who profited substantially from their trade with the southern states, and feared the effect abolition might have on those profits.

Mr. Beecher's problems with the congregation began in December of 1860. Mr. Beecher opposed a proclamation by President Buchanan in response to escalating problems with the South and urged the congregation to do the same. A set of resolutions was presented and voted on, among them: *That the President of the United States is in treacherous conspiracy with rebels to overthrow the government.* Those are very strong words. The proposed resolutions were accepted by the congregation by a narrow margin, and those opposed, mostly Buchanan supporters, were angry. The resolutions were published in the newspaper, as was a protest by the church members opposing them.

Things settled down a bit in our church for a little while after that, although some continued to grumble and complain about Mr. Beecher's sermons. However, problems between the North and South continued to escalate and on April 12, 1861, Fort Sumpter was attacked by rebel forces, plunging our country into War. Nobody expected it to last this long, but here we are in the third year of this terrible conflict. My husband, Solomon, enlisted last August. I remember the day that his Regiment left on the train. They all looked so handsome in their uniforms, yet so sad as they said good-bye to tearful family and friends. I couldn't help but wonder how many might be saying good-bye for the last time. Since that day his regiment has been moved from place to place without being involved in any fighting, something I had no issue with, but which Solomon regretted, fearing he might not have the opportunity to "distinguish himself" in battle. Well, last month, his Regiment was moved to Louisiana, to a place called Port Hudson on the Mississippi River. They have laid siege to the Confederate fort there, and have been fighting sporadically with the rebels since that time. I worry so about him. Disease is a terrible problem down there, and many of his men are sick and dying. In the past three months, Georgetown has lost 6 soldiers, all of them from Solomon's regiment, and all of them from disease. Georgetown has now lost 22 men to this terrible war. It's a small town; I knew most of those men. I do what I can to help their grieving families, all the while hoping and praying that I never find myself on the receiving end of such sympathetic support. It seems nearly everyone in town is mourning some soldier lost in the War.

As the war continues to divide our nation into Union and Confederate States, problems in our church have been escalating between supporters and opponents of Reverend Beecher. The following letter was written two weeks ago, addressed to Reverend Beecher and presented to the church:

The undersigned members of the Congregational Church in Georgetown beg leave to submit to your consideration the following statements and request.

It seems to us that several doctrines preached by our pastor are not in accordance with the "faith once delivered to the saints" and held, generally, by the churches of New England.

The first points on which we have special difficulty are the doctrine of pre-existence of the human soul, of the atonement, and of the state of souls after death. We are pained to be driven to the conclusion that on all these subjects the teachings of our pastor are either not according to sound doctrine, or are very obscure and confused and we have failed to comprehend their meaning.

There is an unhappy division in the church. Many of its Members feel that they are not instructed and benefited by the preaching which they hear, and it is our conviction that the interests of religion in the Society are suffering much from the condition in which we find ourselves thus placed. The dissatisfaction, we believe, is increasing, and unless something effectual is speedily done for our relief, we have reason to fear that the interests of our church and society will suffer irreparable injury. In view of these distressing facts, we most respectfully request yourself and those who sympathize with you to unite with us in calling a mutual Ecclesiastical Council to investigate our affairs and give such opinions and advice as their wisdom shall dictate.

The letter was signed by 27 male members of the church, most of them too old to be off fighting for the Union. Though they wisely didn't use the word in the letter, what they are accusing him of is heresy.

Mr. Beecher has freely consented to their request, confident that his preaching will stand up to the scrutiny of an Ecclesiastical Council. A church meeting is to be held in three days time to make the arrangements.

These are very troubling times. I have prayed more in these past few years than I have ever before in my life. I pray that this terrible war ends soon and peace is restored in our war-torn

country. I pray that this Ecclesiastical Council will help settle our differences and restore the peace in our church. And I pray, oh how I pray, that God will keep my husband safe and healthy, and return him soon to his loving family.

And that is how things stand as of today, June 30th, 1863. I have never been more afraid of what the future has in store. God help us.

(Ducks behind pulpit again, removes bonnet)

CHRIS:

Those were indeed very troubling times for our church and Nation. We all know the outcome of the Civil War, but what did the future hold for Lizzie and our congregation?

The very next day, July 1, Union and Confederate troops began a bloody three day battle in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

July 3. The church voted to hold an Ecclesiastical Council on July 15th. That same day, in Gettysburg, another young Georgetown man was killed in battle, and four others wounded. Among the wounded was Frederick Beecher, the 22-year-old son of Reverend Charles and Sarah Beecher.

Shortly before the Ecclesiastical Council was to begin, the Beechers received word that Frederick had been severely wounded. Sarah Beecher made the risky trip to Pennsylvania to retrieve her son.

July 15 & 16: The Ecclesiastical Council. For two days, Charles Beecher fought for his beliefs, while heavy on his mind was his son, fighting for his life.

Much to the dismay of Reverend Beecher and his supporters, the Council sided with the petitioners, and recommended that the church immediately terminate their pastoral relation with Reverend Beecher. The church refused to accept the decision of the Council, and accused them of overstepping their authority.

The issue dragged on for months as arguments and appeals continued. Reverend Beecher was expelled from the Essex North Association and offered to resign, but the church did not accept his resignation. As a result, our church was shunned by the other churches of the Association.

On January 14, 1864, at the Annual meeting of the church, 85 members opposed to Reverend Beecher's ministry requested to be dismissed from the First Congregational Church of Georgetown to form a new church in town. They became organized as the Orthodox Memorial Church on January 29, 1864.

With the departure of Reverend Beecher's opponents, peace was once again restored to the congregation. This resulted in another surge in new membership, with 35 more people joining in 1864.

In May of 1865, the last of the confederate forces surrendered, and peace was restored to our nation. Our old Revere bell joined countless others throughout the Union in ringing from dawn till dusk in joyous celebration.

And what, you may ask, happened to the people involved in this local drama?

Frederick Beecher did eventually recover from his wounds. Although disabled and walking with a cane, he remained in the Army after the war. Sadly, he was killed in a battle with the Indians in Colorado Territory in 1868.

Charles and Sarah Beecher moved to Florida in 1869. Charles submitted his resignation, but so devoted were the people of his congregation that he was only granted a leave of absence. He was still our Senior Pastor when this church was built in 1874, and remained so until 1881. Charles and Sarah eventually returned to Georgetown, where they lived out their final years at the home of their daughter, Mary. And yes, he preached in this church from this very pulpit.

And what about the Nelsons? Well, Lizzie would be hearing some good news very soon. Following the Union victory at Vicksburg on July 4th, 1863, the Confederates at Port Hudson surrendered on July 8, putting the mighty Mississippi River under Union control. Days later, the men of the 50th Regiment, Company K, including Solomon Nelson, began their journey home, arriving on August 11. Solomon and Lizzie lived the rest of their lives here in Georgetown and were highly respected and well-loved citizens actively involved in our church and community.

On Memorial Day of 1874, Captain Solomon Nelson and his G.A.R. comrades were on hand for the dedication of our Civil War Monument honoring the 51 Georgetown men who died in service to their country, 16 of them from Solomon's 50th Regiment, Company K.

In 1908, with the Beechers and nearly everyone else involved in the controversy now resting in their graves, the Orthodox Memorial Church and the First Congregational Church were reunited as one.

Today, as our nation is becoming more and more divided along political lines, and State's Rights are again a hot topic, may we heed well the lessons of our past, and never again allow our differences to divide us as they did 150 years ago.