**ANNIVERSARY SPEECH**

**FOR**

**JERRY HARDEE**

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, Pastor and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and distinguished guests, thank you for allowing me these few moments to share some thoughts on this very special occasion. It is an honor to worship with all of you, the heart and soul and faithful community of the Clifton United Methodist Church. While we regularly come together in mutual support and worship, today is special. This congregation has reached an incredible milestone, our **ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY SEVENTH** anniversary, and that is a true cause for celebration….. not just because we all love a party… that's always fun… and will be there for us in due time, but an anniversary, especially one that is so astounding, gives us the perfect platform to pause and reflect while we honor our past and recommit to our purpose. The theme for today’s service and celebration is “Reliving the Cost of Following Christ” As our mission is found in Matthew 25: 35-36, we reaffirm the meaning of the passage that provides the foundation for our worship as Methodists… a base that supports whatever questions and responses we may have in our personal quest to be guided by God and to, in turn, share His word in support of others.

“**For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,**

**I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”**

For the past one hundred and eighty-seven years, this church and its congregants have lived by the wisdom of this passage. It has been a guidepost and a source of strength and solace and has been a steady bell weather giving us purpose and resolve to get through the worst of times while lighting the way to joy and salvation. Our path was paved by those who have worshiped with our ancestors, our great grandparents, our parents, and God willing, will continue to provide the light for our children and their children. The Clifton United Methodist Church has been a steadfast example that shows us that things last when we do what we're supposed to be doing. It's not easy… nor is finding true faith and commitment something that is convenient, but in our hearts we know that we get one chance to take a stand in this life, and it is through the trials and tests that we have endured and that continue to challenge us, our conscience and our faith…. both as individuals and as community, that give us the strength and the purpose to endure.

… And look where that commitment has gotten us! Back in 1830, life was different…. And that's an **understatement**. Imagine this, if you will… Our congregation predates the naming of our city by **seventeen** years. Reports have stated that the local population of the area at the time the church was formed was **THIRTY**….for the **entire** region that would become Atlanta. The number of people ballooned to almost twenty- six hundred by 1850 and I would bet our church membership grew as well. Clearly our early congregants were devoted and determined. As time progressed and as dirt roads and shanties made way for merchants and more substantial homes; as debate escalated to controversy and as petty crime gave way to the burning of Atlanta, this congregation endured… with the soul and the faith and the determination and commitment of a community that lived their lives by the truth of Matthew’s words. Many of us may not realize the legacy we have inherited while others take for granted the true purpose of what it means to be a part of this history. The only reason that any of us… you, or I or Pastor\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ are here is because of the faith and dedication of those who preceded us. We are here because they knew their struggles were a test… they knew there was a higher purpose to life. They knew there were lessons to be learned as each one paid the cost and ultimately received the blessings of following Christ.

Nelson Mandela has said, “Remember to celebrate the milestones as you prepare for the road ahead.” Throughout the remarkable history of the Clifton United Methodist Church there have been several milestones and each special event in time served as a marker to be used for measuring the progress of the congregation while reinforcing each person’s commitment to God. Just as Atlanta and its surrounding communities evolved and grew and dealt with the struggles and challenges unique to each era, over the years, so did our church, but while the faces and names may have changed, the congregants’ commitment to honor Matthew held true. Our forebears knew inherently that, as I said earlier, “When one does what one is supposed to do, namely serve God through doing Godly deeds,” we are all blessed.

By definition, an anniversary is, “The yearly recurrence of the date of a past event.” Its roots break down to loosely meaning “year” and “turn back.” If we were to look back on this day of commemoration, what would we see? What lessons would we learn? (**Name two or three defining moments in the church’s history and briefly explain the lessons in each incident**). Some of the defining moments that still serve to guide us are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

There is a word called “pentimento.” Although originally it was a term used in art meaning layers of shapes and forms in a painting, it reminds us that in everything we do and in every place we go, there are layers of history and events that went before us that left its mark. Whether invisible or apparent, we are all have our place in the pentimento of life and the history of this church. These examples illustrate that concept by the very point that we **remember**. We **discuss**. We recall the actions taken and use them as guides to form the bases of our education. Whether or not we can see those that came before us, in every moment we can feel their impact. We feel the presence of those that were oppressed and we feel the helping hands of those that guided us to freedom, who fed and taught and clothed us and showed us the way to a godly existence. There is so much to be learned from a legacy as rich as that of the Clifton United Methodist Church. Our congregation has moved since it's inception and has worshipped in different buildings but the one thing that stays constant is the spiritual structure of our worship. How has this Church done the remarkable? How has it lasted so long? What has the church done to create such dedicated disciples year after year, generation after generation? One point of view is that we've lasted because of the goodness and sincerity of our mission. Another school of thought might be that God has decided to keep us around “until we get it right…” so we’ll keep at our mission until **everyone** is clothed and fed, cared for and healthy, free and righteous…. In other words, **THAT** job is never done so we’ll be probably be around forever! (**If you want to make this as a little joke, say it with some emphasis and wait for the laugh**).

I think one thing we can safely say is that the early founders of the church were committed to doing **GOOD**. Like the Bible, the contributions and dedication of our founders have been passed down through generations, adapting to the times and needs of our people, yet always asking the question that stirs our souls, “What does the Lord require in order that He is served and good is done?” I think one thing that the Lord requires is **community**. It is no accident that we do not worship in isolation…. We function as a group, the purpose of which is to shine a light on all of the unique and beautiful facets each one of brings to church. Make no mistake, many times there are facets that are sharp- they can cut- they challenge, but that is why we face them as a unit…. Where one person may be lacking, another offers solace and resources. Where one might be slow, others may offer support to stay with the group. While we have heard the adage, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link,” we are dedicated to balance and to fortifying each individual link with the wisdom of faith and purpose. There is another well known line from a poem that teaches us, “I am part of all that I have met.” In this church, we teach each other and learn from each other as one united group. While not everyone may have the same resources to spare, everyone has the capacity to learn and grow from experience. As we look back, we learn from those richer **AND** less fortunate than we are.

Although we think of anniversaries as a time for parties and gifts, remember, it is also a time to reflect. It's time to look in the rear view mirror and see just how far we have…. or have not progressed. Reflecting on our progress and advances in community outreach and impact over almost **TWO CENTURIES** is, in itself, one of the greatest gifts we can ever hope to receive. Our legacy is a gift greater than gold and more precious than jewels. The gift of humanity is priceless and it is on occasions like this one that we take the time to honor those that paved the way, no matter the price **they** paid for our faith.

In preparing my thoughts for this day, I did some research on why churches last so long. Although I thought I was a fairly good researcher, do you know what I found when searched the topic? I found dozens of articles on what’s wrong with the church. Granted, I did a general search, but as I read the titles of the articles that appeared, I began to wonder if **THIS** is the price we pay for worship in modern times. I thought about sharing what I found, And inviting you to take a look and see what stands in the way of you…. Your friends…. Your sisters, brothers, children, neighbors…. Everyone that might not be here today, from **BEING HERE,** being **PRESENT,**  joining us, finding fulfillment and doing good. Now honestly speaking, I don't want to put any ideas in your head so I won’t list the negative points (**Wait for the laugh**)…. Let's just say this. Your relationship with God and the depth of your faith is completely personal. If there are people you know and love that are not here that may have issues, struggles and considerations as to why they don't join us, **NOT** being here is not the way to find resolution. The simple truth is that for many people, Clifton United Methodist Church is a place to find a home…. To explore…. To take the opportunity to do something for others, and that is something… no matter what time, no matter what year, that is critical in finding personal peace and salvation for each one of us. For a congregation to endure and teach and provide comfort and shelter for people for **ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY SEVEN YEARS**. is extraordinary, and while we can imagine the price for those that are not yet willing, the true price is having to live with a closed mind, a closed heart, and a needlessly limited experience of the presence of God within us and those around us.

Over the course of the history of this church community, a legacy has been built and it's ours to accept, nurture, and pass forward. We've inherited so much that has caused pain and suffering, it is our mandate to pass along positivity, compassion, and faith. A wise man once said, “…Success without a successor is a failure. True leaders don’t build buildings, they leave legacies. Jesus never built a building. Legacy shouldn't be in material things. Legacy lives on in **PEOPLE**.”

As we honor the events and people who paid the price and learned the lessons so that we can, in turn take on the mantle of faith in spreading God’s goodness, really think about what this all means. It means that we are a part of this history, a part of this church, and as servants of Christ, the Word we carry is so much greater than who we might pretend to be. The message we share today…. The encouragement we spread… the price we pay… is small tithing for the tremendous impact our beliefs and good will will have on the future.

While conditions in some aspects of life have improved over the past two centuries, it is clear that we still have a long way to go. As I said earlier, there's a reason we've been around this long, and that's God’s work must be done. I want to thank all of you that so kindly listened to me today. Thank you for sharing your time and most of all your hearts and minds. Following Christ isn't easy and it's not always “fun,” but it's the greatest guide to a fulfilled, purposeful life that I know of.

Thank you all!