

Poem

Scott Kinder-Pyle

Crossroads Presbyterian Church, Royersford, Pennsylvania

Introduction

When my wife, Sheryl, and I moved to the Philadelphia region, we became aware of many urban congregations who could not adjust to the demographic shifts in their neighborhoods (usually from Anglo-American to African-American). Because of these failures, many once-thriving ministries, with sanctuary seating for eight hundred, dwindled down to a scrawny remnant of elderly folks meeting in the fellowship hall. While we had been called to start a “new” congregation in the suburbs, the resources that paid our salaries came, in large part, from the sale of various church buildings. We felt terrible about this situation, but felt even worse when the Associate Executive for Finance asked us if we could use some furniture and supplies from the old Market Square Church in Germantown, which had been officially closed in December of 1995.

Reluctantly, we agreed to make the trip to Germantown and to borrow a pick-up truck in order to strip the church of all its oak tables, chairs, baptismal fonts, communion tables, and a few pew benches. It would take about three hours, and great deal of heavy, cumbersome lifting, to complete the job. Navigating through mildewed corridors, and around raccoon feces, we eventually got everything we came for. Then, as I took one last look around, I noticed a plaque, hung about ten feet off the ground, on a crumbling wall. It was the memorial of a little girl who had been baptized in the church, but who had died in 1910 as a result of falling through the iced-over Schuylkill River. Apparently no one could reach that high to remove the plaque from that one-hundred-year old fellowship hall. No. Not one.

The Plaque of the Girl Who Drowned
and when Jesus also had been baptized... Luke 3:21

I didn't notice the fissure,
the frigid artery snaking its way
into the heart of the Schuylkill.

I didn't notice until the fragments
of ice reached up like
arthritic fingers, until

ruined buildings walked
once more over my plummeting
frame in the mist.

So that's my plaque on the wall,
affixed to the fractured fellowship hall

of the Market Square Church.

In 1910 no Presbyterian would believe
I was dead. Just resting my head,
they said, beneath the lens of a dim mirror,

just drifting to sleep, or perhaps waking
on some solid shore,
an artifact of Germantown lore.

I didn't notice the fissure,
the few feet shifting above the fault line
into the rush of Sabbath throng.

Was I right
to test the thickness
of this baptism
bond?

Who will
wrap me
in warm, white
linen cloth here?

Today the river rarely freezes over.
But the monolith of my memorial
moves; it undulates and sways and

shimmers in a sacred shaft of sunlight.
No one will walk above me again,
on the transparent plain. And
no one will plunge through as I did.