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Grace Episcopal Church, Bath, ME
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175 Years of Grace

The very first time I came to Grace Church—it was the Sunday before Misty started, as a sort of spy, I guess—I noticed there was a banner hanging on the wall that said “Grace Episcopal, Bath, Maine, 1849.” I did a quick math job in my head: 2024 minus 1849 equals...175. In the ensuing weeks, I asked a number of parishioners: “Are there any big plans for the 175th?” Responses ranged from blank stares, to “I didn’t even know it was the 175th anniversary,” to a few blunt “no’s.” So I decided to take it upon myself to advocate with the rector that there *should* be some sort of grand celebration to mark the 175 anniversary of the organization of Grace Church. If you were one of the “blunt no’s,” my apologies!

My remarks this morning fall into two sections: a sketch of the early days of Grace, and a suggestion for our prayer and meditation as we look forward to the “big day” in August. My main source of information about Grace’s beginnings is *Grace Church through the Years*, written in 1983 by Marion Jaques Smith on the occasion of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of this “new” Grace Church building. Her booklet, as well as a treasure trove of other documents on the history of Grace, can be found in a pink file folder that our parish administrator Julia knows how to locate.

A few years prior to the formal organization of the Parish of Grace Church, a group of six families who referred to themselves as “The Episcopal Society of the City of Bath” began meeting at the home of Elizabeth Jeffers Field Nichols and her husband, James Nichols. They lived at 857 Washington Street, which is the green house near the Baptist Church (currently owned by the daughter and son-in-law of our parishioner Tina). By all accounts it was Elizabeth much more than her husband who was the “ball of energy” holding the Society together and propelling it forward. Think of her as the Nancy Kinner (our current senior warden) of her day!

In an interesting twist of fate (if that’s the right thing to call it), Elizabeth Nichols, a little less than two decades later—on March 1st, 1868—left her body during an evening prayer service at Grace Church. The next day, the *Daily Sentinel and Times*, a Bath newspaper, noted her passing as follows:

We very much regret to hear last evening of the sudden death of Mrs. James H. Nichols of this city. She was seized with an attack of what is supposed to be paralysis, at the Episcopal Church, and expired before she could be carried to

her home. She was a lady of very active benevolence, and highly esteemed in the community. A large circle of friends will mourn her loss.

Also among the six founding families were the Smiths, Judge Jacob and his wife Ann. They would become famous for at least three things, as we will momentarily see.

As the Society grew beyond the original six families and could no longer fit in the Nichols' home, services began to be held first at the Methodist Church, then at a place called the Music Hall or Band Hall, where a brass band held its practices, located on the corner of Washington and Centre Streets, and then at the Corinthian Hall, which was a dancing hall on Washington Street opposite the library park. (It's interesting that a music hall and a dancing hall were found to be more suitable than a Methodist Church!) These services were under the guidance of the Diocese of Maine's first bishop, George Burgess, and two priests: very briefly Thomas Fales, the first rector of St. Paul's in Brunswick, who did "double duty," and then Frederic Gardiner, who would subsequently become the first rector of Grace.

At this next, crucial part of the history, I'll quote from *Grace Church through the Years* to make sure I get the facts right:

The Congregation had grown to such a point that it was obviously necessary to establish a parish and build a church.

A Justice of the Peace was requested by the Episcopal Society of the City of Bath to call a meeting at the [Corinthian] hall on August 16, 1849 to organize the Parish of Grace Church. At that time a Constitution and By-Laws were adopted. Judge Jacob Smith was elected Senior Warden and Edward C. Hyde, Accounting Warden.

You'll recall I said earlier that Judge Jacob and Ann Smith, one of those original six families, would become famous for at least three reasons. One is that the Judge was elected the first Senior Warden of Grace Church. Second, their son Joseph would go on to become a general (you'd think, coming from Bath, an admiral might be more likely...). And third, and by far most important, in 1851 the Smiths built a home that today is the residence of our parishioners Ira and Jeff!

To finish our story of the early history of Grace: about ten months after that organizational meeting, Frederic Gardiner, who had been serving the congregation, was chosen as the first rector. With the help of vestry member J. T. Wilder, a lot was purchased on the corner of Oak and Middle Streets and building began. The first service to be conducted in the newly constructed church was on Christmas Eve, 1852,

and a few weeks later, on January 19th, 1853, Bishop Burgess consecrated the building.

Not bad for something that began as a handful of families meeting in the home of Elizabeth and James Nichols. I can't resist concluding this historical sketch by pointing out that their daughter, Elizabeth Field Nichols, married Edward Jessup, who served as rector at Grace from 1855 to 1859. And their son, Charles Jessup (grandson of Elizabeth and James Nichols) also became an Episcopal priest. Quite a legacy!

Now for a suggestion for our prayer and meditation, as we anticipate our 175th anniversary. It comes from the Book of Common Prayer, in the form of the Collect for the Anniversary of the Dedication of a Church, Collect #12 on the top of p. 204. I invite you to read it along with me. Let us pray:

O Almighty God, to whose glory we celebrate the dedication of this house of prayer. We give thee thanks for the fellowship of those who have worshiped in this place, and we pray that all who seek thee here may find thee, and be filled with thy joy and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“We give thee thanks for the fellowship of those who *have worshiped* in this place” (referring to the *past*: the founders of the congregation and those who came after them), “and we pray that all who seek thee here may find thee, and be filled with thy joy and peace” (referring to the *present*). In just a few moments, we'll be reciting the Apostles' Creed, one line of which states “I believe in...the communion of saints.” In Christian doctrine, the meaning of the communion of saints is that “the whole family of God, the living and the dead,” is indissolubly “bound together in Christ” (BCP Catechism, p. 862).

So Elizabeth Nichols and Nancy Kinner, Jacob and Ann Smith and Ira and Jeff, Bishop George Burgess and Bishop Thomas Brown, the Reverend Frederic Gardiner and the Reverend Misty Kiwak Jacobs, all of US who are here now, and all of US who have gone from here before, are indissolubly bound together, in Christ.

If it appeals to you, if you wish, you might incorporate this prayer into your own prayer and meditation, on a regular basis, between now and our anniversary celebration in August. The old-fashioned Rite I language is most apt, as it's the prayer language that was used by our forebears. Reflect on the prayer again and again, day by day, as open-mindedly and open-heartedly as you can, and try to be attentive to how Our Lord might be inspiring you, in *this* place, at *this* time. May we each find what we are seeking. And may we be filled with joy and peace. Amen.