



BARRIER BREAKERS – The Pilgrimage

St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Asheville, NC

Almighty God, who in the place of Judas chose your faithful servant Matthias to be numbered among the Twelve: Grant that your Church, being delivered from false apostles, may always be guided and governed by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

-From the Book of Common Prayer

Standing on the front steps of St. Matthias Episcopal Church, one can see over the city of Asheville, far out into the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains. If one were to have stood in that same spot on April 6, 1865, looking out over the ridge they would have heard the firing of cannons, seen the smoke rising over the mountaintops. The Civil War would be won just three days later.

The aftermath of the Civil War was a period of uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion for many. With a large group of newly freed slaves seeking a church home, the leadership of Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Asheville quickly got to work establishing a new Episcopal congregation with the support of Bishop Atkinson. Quite surprisingly, the two men spearheading the church planting were both former supporters of slavery—The Rev. Jarvis Buxton, the rector of Trinity Episcopal and General James Green Martin, a former Confederate General and Trinity member.

Nevertheless, these two men got to work in establishing a congregation within the walls of Trinity Church, where every week members of the black community gathered to be drilled in church teachings and traditions. This congregation-within-a-congregation was known as the “Freedman’s Church,” and operated on Sunday afternoons after the Sunday morning services. Quite quickly the congregation began to seek a space of their own, and in 1871, Trinity Chapel was built as the new church home in the heart of the black community. Upon its consecration, Trinity Chapel became the first historically black Episcopal Church in all of Western North Carolina.

The consecration of Trinity Chapel was a significant step for the newly-freed slaves, who now had a measure of autonomy over their own worship space. The modest, 2-story frame building was built on the hillside of present-day St. Matthias church, and allowed space for the creation of a day school on the first floor. The school was the first of its kind in Asheville, and gave formal education lessons to both children and adults in the black community. In an 1874 parochial report, it was reported that the school had up to 131 pupils in the day school and 175 in the Sunday School.

At first, services at Trinity Chapel were held by Rev. Buxton of Trinity, but he soon joined with Bishop Atkinson to find a black priest to help lead the parish. Bishop Atkinson had a strong commitment to raising up black priests and was determined to admit this new black parish into full union with the diocese at Diocesan Convention. Unfortunately, he was met with unrelenting prejudice from many in the diocese, and when the Standing Committee refused to pass the papers of a colored candidate for holy orders, the bishop decided to look outside the south, inviting two "Yankee" priests from the north to the diocese. One of these priests was the Rev. Samuel V. Berry of New York. In 1870, Rev. Berry was appointed to serve not only as the priest-in-charge of Trinity Chapel, but also the headmaster of the school, making him the first priest of color in diocesan history.

Alleluia, alleluia, we are going to see the King!

In 1887 Trinity Chapel called a new rector, the Rev. Henry S. McDuffy. Rev. McDuffy had a strong passion for the people of Trinity Chapel, and during his tenure, membership grew so large the congregation began to need a new church building. Construction on this new building began in 1894, and with the laying of the cornerstone, the bishop gave Trinity Chapel a name of its own, St. Matthias Episcopal Church.

The St. Matthias building was contracted and built by James Vester Miller. Miller was born into slavery, but upon his release post-Civil War quickly became one of the most notable and respected brick artisans and contractors in Asheville, working on a number of buildings around the city, from the Mt. Zion Baptist Church to the Municipal Building. St. Matthias' is truly an architectural gem, with a striking Gothic-style sanctuary, beautiful stained glass windows and a lot of exquisite woodwork crafted by other black artisans, many of whom also worked on the Biltmore Estate. Even to this day, the parish remains one of the largest in the diocese. This is truly remarkable when we look at the history of the black church in the south, especially when we note that this was the first church building the members of St. Matthias truly could call their own.

*I am lowly as a child,
But I know from this day forward
That my name will be remembered,
For all will call me blessed.*

*And holy is your name
Through all generations!
Everlasting is your mercy
To the people you have chosen,
And holy is your name.*

With the building completed, the worshipping community of St. Matthias held their first service on Easter Day in 1896, thus beginning a centuries long community of worship and fellowship. The community continued to grow throughout the 20th century, eventually naming the Rev. J.T. Kennedy as rector in 1915, who would eventually go on to serve as the first Archdeacon for Colored Work in the Missionary District of Asheville, now known as the

Diocese of Western North Carolina. With invigorated leadership and an excited congregation, the St. Matthias community continued to grow on top of the hill.

Mrs. Barbara Durant Jones is a cradle Episcopalian who has been a member of St. Matthias for her whole life. Though her family briefly moved away from Asheville during her childhood, Ms. Barbara recalls St. Matthias being a place that was a core part of her visits back home to see her grandmother, and a place that continues to be a core part of her life now. She and her husband, Mr. David Jones Jr, have now called St. Matthias home together for over 70 years and have both served as Senior Warden of the church, a love for St. Matthias that is clear in all of their actions.

"I attended church as a child, but my father's job took us away from the Asheville area and so we went to Boston for his job and then we went to Atlanta. And I was raised mostly, what I remember is about Atlanta and coming to Asheville in the summer, every summer, because my grandparents were members in this church and they were very active, especially my grandmother, she sung in the choir, she was president of, they called it the women's auxiliary then. We attended the church every summer with my grandparents. My grandmother sang in the choir and we would sit next to her and they would dress us up! You know we would have to wear the little beanies then cause you know every woman had to come in the church with their head covered, I'm kinda glad to see that gone! But it was a fun place to grow up, we had a lot of activity for the young people.

I remember a lot of the older members, the ones that built the parish house over here was Mr. Fred Woodford and he was married to one of the first public health nurses here, black. And then there was Thad Miller, who was not related to Dr. Miller's family, but he was married to Rev. Kennedy's daughter and together they built the parsonage.

I came to church with her, I would come to church with her, and this was quite a church it was different from where I grew up! I came here and it was a completely different thing from anything I'd ever experienced. There was not a lot of begging for money, there was such order in the church, everybody seemed to have a place and everybody was accepted. It was an unusual congregation, all of the professional people belonged here at St. Matthias it appeared. And the day I walked in I was accepted. I am the second oldest living Episcopalian here at St. Matthias, there's just one person ahead of me and she's 99! I'll be 87 my birthday! So I've seen a lot, I saw the kids that she's talking about, I saw all the ladies in their white dresses up here in the thing, and I remember the mothers of the church and how they kept things in order and kept us in order, Lord have mercy they kept us in order!"

In the 1950s, the Rev. Monroe DeVan was called to lead the congregation of St. Matthias. His time at the parish was notable, perhaps in part due to his dedication to community involvement. Rev. DeVan could constantly be found out in the community, getting to know people in the black community surrounding St. Matthias, whether they were a parishioner or not. Prior to his involvement in the community, St. Matthias had developed a bit of a reputation among the black community as being home to a bit of a bourgeois congregation, and many community members in the surrounding areas instead opted to go to other nearby churches with more economically diverse congregations. Rev. DeVan's commitment

to getting to know not just the St. Matthias community but the black community as a whole acted as a form of informal evangelism, and before long, St. Matthias became home to a much more socially and economically diverse congregation, an identity that continues to this day.

This dedication to connecting with the community continued throughout the later 20th century. From car washes to church picnics, backyard barbeques to movie nights, the church was at the center of life for many in the black communities of Asheville. The church was always full of people, always hosting events, always filled with music and joy. St. Matthias' was known for its racially diverse congregation, its Stone Soul Picnics in Chunn's Cove, its annual Reynolds-Miller Chorale Christmas concert, its Sunday afternoon concerts and most of all its continued dedication to the people of the community who called it home.

Quentin and Regina Miller have been longtime members of St. Matthias, Quentin since childhood and Regina joining him upon their marriage in 1984. In fact, Quentin is the great grandson of the aforementioned James Vester Miller, the builder of St. Matthias. In conversation with the Millers, they recall memories of parish events and gatherings, but most of all, share their love for the people of St. Matthias and the ways in which their family history is quite literally woven into the fabric of the church.

"My father was the organist, he grew up in the church. It was, the pews were full. The neighborhood at the time, this was before urban renewal so to speak. The neighborhood children came and we had a preacher named Father Divine and he was quite instrumental in having a lot of the neighborhood children here. We had a lot of acolytes, we had acolyte practices on Saturday. A lot of activities, we used to be able to go to retreats at In The Oaks, they had a pool. The priest was white but we had one or two black priests I think!

I was raised Baptist right here in town. Met Quentin, they were church-going people so started going to church with them on Sundays, and when we got married, a lot of people know this, my mother asked my grandmother, "Where will they go to church?" and my grandmother said, "She's going with her husband." But that's how I got here and when I did it was Barbara Jones, Ella Williams, Quentin's mother Rose, Laura Horn, Lola Thomas, and Florence Valentine, they swooped in on me from the first day and sorta taught me what it would be to be an Episcopalian. Now we're talking about many years ago when you carried up communion you wore gloves, you had the little thing on your head, you kneeled, but all of them instilled what I feel like I still carry today, it's friendship. Whoever comes in that door, greet them with a smile, make them feel welcome, and I still carry that.

As a black Episcopalian it's difficult. Your friends don't understand, they think you're Catholic, they think you go through a lot of motions that are not necessary, but once you get into the faith you understand that it's based upon honesty and truthfulness.

I look at it that we're on common ground, I really do, I look at it as common ground, color has nothing to do with it.

But I feel that everyone that comes in that door, whether they receive it the way I do, but you came in for the same thing and that's the Word of the Lord. So for forty five minutes to an hour and a half I'm with family.

We're all brothers in Christ.

But I love being here, Quentin loves being here and everyone in here I look at as family. And that, that's a good thing, that's a really good thing. And I love when we have a traffic jam at peace. Sometimes when they start that music we're like wait we need 2-3 more minutes! Wait a minute!

Growing up in the Civil Rights era, what they say, they said Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. I can look around and see that it's not segregated here. I can see the dream."

By the 1990s, St. Matthias was experiencing a phenomenon not unfamiliar to many churches at the time as attendance dwindled. The empty pews led to dwindling finances, and by the late 90s, discussions were had about closing St. Matthias' doors, saying goodbye to the congregation who had been worshiping faithfully for over 100 years. David Jones was the Senior Warden of the parish at the time and recalls the grief these discussions had on the community, but what ultimately brought the parish back to life.

"So I was here when all of the kids were running and playing. I was here when things were going well and we were doing real well, and then we began to fade out by death and moving away and it got tough. I was Senior Warden then and it was difficult for us to even pay the light bill and, but we would reach into our pockets and pay the light bill and keep things going. Things continued to get tough until we got down to where there were 13 people left in the congregation. The vestry then, the 13 people, the few people that were left said that it was time to close the doors of St. Matthias, that we can't make it. And I was in charge of public housing here and redevelopment and I was sitting in my office when a bright light came in and the Lord said to me "David, I'm giving you a task, you are to see to it that the doors of St. Matthias are not closed." And I said "Well, who you talking to Lord? You can't be talking to me. Because there are people who are qualified to do that, you got the wrong guy!" And he said, "You buddy, you're the one." And I said, "Well I don't know what to do to keep the doors of St. Matthias open," and he said, "I'll tell you what to do!" And he did. He had me sit down and draw out a plan and list out all the members of St. Matthias that were not coming to church and those that were still coming and he said, "I want you to go to each of them and talk to each of them about continuing at St. Matthias under a new leadership and arrangement" and that's what I did, I went and talked with every member and told them that God had told me to get together with the congregation.. There was a list of about 6 of us that got together and we solved all of the problems, I mean we solved the problems.

So all of that went well and we began to grow again. Father Jim said that we were doing all the things but we needed to reach deeper, that we needed to go deeper and we didn't know what he meant. But he said we've got to, we accept everybody who walks into the church,

they're accepted, but we gotta to really mean it and be a church that was open to everybody because this was our church, it was the black peoples church, all the people here were black people and we needed everybody. But we had one person come and do the organ, His name was Ron Lamb and he decided that he wanted to join the church, so he joined the church and was the first white person to join the church.

Things are going well for us now at St. Matthias. We're probably the most integrated Sunday morning that you'll see in the church. The big thing that happened is that we said also, when white people came in we said, "We don't want you to come in and turn black, you come and you bring your gifts, you come and you bring your gifts and you enter them in as you are and you're accepted." And we got to be that way here at St Matthias. We accept everyone just as they are, whatever they are, we don't care.

Cause God gave us all gifts, all different gifts, and that's what makes the organization beautiful is because everyone comes and brings their offerings, whatever they are."

In 1999, the Rev. Jim Abbott became rector of St. Matthias, a position he would hold for 12 years. Music became a large part of the parish identity during this time, as the now-integrated community embraced music from both European and African American traditions and regularly joined together for concerts in the church building, bringing life and music into the space after many challenging years. The St. Matthias community continued to be an active part of the diocese, playing a significant role in the establishment of the Diocesan Commission to Dismantle Racism and raising up the Rev. Deacon Glenda McDowell from their congregation, who would become the second vocational deacon of color—and the first female deacon of color—to serve the Diocese of Western North Carolina.

In 2022, St. Matthias placed a historical marker outside the chapel on the hill, commemorating the many years of history and stories that took place with St. Matthias at the center. From noting St. Matthias' continued legacy of leadership in education to its place as an architectural wonder of Western North Carolina, the plaque gives agency to the names and faces of St. Matthias, acknowledgement that at the core of St. Matthias' story are the people of the church who have called it home for over 150 years.

For many, the church on the hill feels like it has forever been a part of the view: as much a part of the landscape as the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains. St. Matthias is not only a key piece of the story of the Episcopal Church in Western North Carolina, but a piece of Western North Carolina in and of itself, shaping the larger story of WNC with the stories of those original members of Trinity Chapel, the stories of those who helped build the parish hall or sang in the choir or the stories of those who simply came on Sunday mornings to listen and be a part of community. Those voices are the St. Matthias story and serve as a reminder to this day to listen to those around us, to seek intentional community, and to see God's beauty in each and every person.