There is a sense in which when I come here I come home. This is true for several reasons.

The first is a family reason. Robert Strawbridge was responsible for the conversion of Richard Owings. Richard Owings was the first American to serve Methodism as a local preacher. When I introduced Mrs. Warman, I called her “Annie O.” The “O” stands for Owings and she and Richard are parts of the same family.

The second reason I feel at home here is a matter of unrelenting partisanship. I was a Methodist Protestant. I regret the bitterness with which we Methodist Protestants pursued our quarrels with the Methodist Episcopal, but we did one thing right. We insisted on the rights of the laity. There is a sense in which Robert Strawbridge could be claimed for the Methodist Protestants, for he, too, lifted up the claims of the laity. That was one of the reasons Mr. Asbury referred to him as “that strange man, Mr. Strawbridge.”

The third reason I feel at home here is the most important. This is the place — not St. John’s in New York with Barbara Heck and her hatred of cards and Captain Webb of the shining sword and romantic eye patch — and not St. George’s in Philadelphia, mute relic of a father’s love for a misguided son — nor even Lovely Lane in Baltimore with its Christmas Conference — but it was in this place that the Church I have loved and served my life long was born. It was not simply that Strawbridge started first but rather that it was through the labors of Strawbridge that Methodism became indigenous to America. The societies in New York and Philadelphia were little more than extensions of the societies in England but the societies that rooted from this place were American. In 1784, when the people on the continent who called themselves “Methodists” numbered seventeen thousand, fifteen thousand of them were in societies founded through the efforts of Robert Strawbridge. Here is where American Methodism was born and I feel right at home.

I want to talk about four people: Robert and Elizabeth Strawbridge, John and Eleanor Evans.

Robert Strawbridge was not a farmer turned preacher. He was an
itinerant preacher. He came here to find a farm that his wife could manage so that he would be free to preach the Gospel far and wide. Elizabeth was the farmer. That was not so unusual.

When Jacob Albright became an itinerant preacher, he turned his tiling business over to his wife to manage while he went preaching. Manage it she did and very successfully.

My Grandmother Conaway was the daughter of a Methodist preacher and she married a Methodist preacher. The time came when she had moved so often she didn’t want ever to move again. So Granddad got a piece of property in Fairchance, Pennsylvania at the end of the trolley line. He built a home and next to it he built a store building with apartments overhead so that Grandmother could manage it and from the rents sustain the family so that he could go on being an itinerant preacher and never have to ask what the appointment paid. Most of his appointments were in West Virginia. He would take one of his three children with him and make the rounds of his circuit — sometimes three weeks, sometimes six weeks — and then he would return home — catch up on things — and take a different child with him as he made another round.

Granddad Conaway, Jacob Albright, Robert Strawbridge and all those like them felt that it was important that the Gospel be preached far and wide to all who would hear — and this was their calling, the work given them by God himself. They also recognized that women were strong, competent human beings capable of looking out for themselves and others and of sharing responsibility in a great work.

I would pay tribute to Elizabeth Strawbridge and to Eleanor Evans for what they did to make possible a great work.

Elizabeth was the farmer but there were some things she could not do herself and had to get them done by others. Robert was away — as he should have been — on a preaching mission. It was time to do the plowing. A good neighbor, John Evans, came to plow. At lunchtime, Elizabeth made her testimony to the grace and mercy of God. John Evans’ heart was stirred and troubled — plowed like a field ready for planting. That night he was converted and the good seed planted there produced fruit over long years.

John Evans led the first class in American Methodism. At first they met in the Strawbridge home and later moved to the John Evans’ house — to this house — to the house of Eleanor Evans. The farm was John’s. The house was Eleanor’s. They met in the Evans’ house for forty-one years. What a good man John Evans must have been to keep the love and respect and friendship of his neighbors over so long a period of time.

The “John Evans House” — indeed! What man ever opened his
home without the consent and approval of his wife? And kept it open and hospitable — welcoming — for forty-one years? That’s a lot of housekeeping. That’s a mountain of hospitality. Thank God for Eleanor Evans. Thank God for John and Eleanor who convenanted together till death did them part — and the angel of death was kind enough to wait until they both were more than ninety years of age and had had opportunity to impress their faith on more than one generation in this neighborhood.

If a bear dances, we think it remarkable. If a human dances, that’s commonplace. We make much of the fathers of the faith. We can tell you the names of all the men in that first society — and then the historian adds “and their wives.” Much of the work of our Church has been done by women so taken for granted that their names have not been recorded. I am thankful we can, at least, name Elizabeth Strawbridge and Eleanor Evans and honor them as Mothers of the faith.

The labors of Robert Strawbridge are not to be forgotten. Preaching is important. The world, our world, needs to hear the Gospel preached. But it takes more than preaching. It is only when the laity open hearts and homes to the living Word of God that communities are redeemed and find the world changed.

These three: Elizabeth Strawbridge, who witnessed to the plowman; John Evans, who shared his faith with his neighbors; Eleanor Evans, who opened her home to the society of struggling faith; these three symbolize the unnamed host of lay persons through whose lives God makes his Church effective in this world. As a preacher who would follow in the steps of Robert Strawbridge, let me say “Thank God for all the faithful laity of our United Methodist Church — and for all the preachers who carry the precious Word.”