

New Terms for New Times

This message is going to be very unlike most of my sermons. For one thing, - and I'll warn you about this right from the start – it is going to be incomplete. I'm going to throw some stuff at you (maybe it sounds better to say that "I'm going to share as best I can") some things that have been going through my head, and my spirit recently with the understanding that I really don't know, exactly, where this is leading. Yet.

In some ways this message is going to be a preview of a series that will begin (Lord willing) three weeks from today. I hope at that time to be able to 'flesh out' some of the thoughts that I'm going to share with you today; in the meantime I'm going to be reading more, praying and listening more, talking to many of you, as well as attending a conference with all our Program staff at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, KS... a church that has already been part of my spiritual journey in some significant ways.

In spite of the unfinished nature of this ... 'quest' ... for lack of a better word, I truly feel the need to share today what is going through my mind right now. Our annual Church Conference is in a few weeks, which is a yearly occasion for considering who we are and where we're going; the "Come and See" display is running right now in the Fellowship Hall. The timing seems right for a little looking ahead, with more to come.

There have been a few times in my life when I've sensed that a thought, or a direction in ministry that I was hearing, was clearly from God. I'm not talking about visions or voices (that has never happened to me), but just an inner 'pull' that I can tell is more than a passing fad or a 'one off' idea, but it's a 'paradigm shift'. If these sorts of things happened frequently, frankly, I would doubt their validity. But, in fact, they don't, so I pay attention.

My first prayer summit was one of those moments. And I knew – and I shared this with you about 10 years ago – my prayer life, and my understanding of how prayer fits into the ministry of a church would never be the same. I could tell that that this was going to radically change the way I approach ministry. And it has. There's still plenty more for me to learn there, but that *track* began that day, as I knew it would. There have been a few other times as well.

New Terms for New Times

Well, I have had a general feeling of unrest in recent months regarding my own leadership, and the bigger picture of where we're going as the First United Methodist Church of Moorestown. Which is interesting, because of all the healthy signs (or, signs of health) that are so apparent here. It wasn't anything like, "O my goodness, we're in decline... what can we do?" This is a healthy community.

If you want an example of what I'm talking about you simply have to walk over to the Fellowship Hall this morning and look at the "Come and See" displays. Not only is there exciting and successful ministry taking place, but Betsy Heinz told me that there are nine *new* ministries on display that have *begun* since the last "Come and See". Things are happening here. We've sent out more mission teams this year. Already other mission trips are being planned. Our Sunday School and Youth Ministries are being blessed – with numbers – but more importantly, in impact on lives.

First Light is hitting its stride as an outreach to our community...it's exciting!

Yes, money is an issue right now... and it looks like we're going to end the year with a deficit of almost \$20,000, something we can't keep up for long, (we're not the government) but I don't expect that we will. And, honestly, I know of churches with considerably smaller budgets than ours who would be very happy with a (- \$20,000) cash flow for this year. It's been a tough year for many people financially, and we understand that.

In spite of the economic struggles, there's been so much positive. Vacation Bible School set records for attendance, the attendance at our Soup and Study this semester – well, I don't know what it is, but I know it's really high. Maybe the most ever. People are coming to study, to be in community, to learn about their faith. Praise God! The response to my summer sermon series "Why I Believe" was kind of amazing to me, people were engaged – to say the least.

Do you know: people from outside our church – in our District and Conference – look to *us* for inspiration, to get a better idea of what they're supposed to be doing in their local churches, a

New Terms for New Times

responsibility that I take very seriously.

And yet I've had this stirring in my heart... a sense that we're missing something in the bigger picture. I've wondered about our depth in Christ, across the board of our church. I've wondered about our focus. Is it clear enough? Is it specific enough for today's world?

I hear the statistics of decline within not only our denomination but churches across the gamut, especially among the younger generation, who we are losing touch with, and our full Sanctuary doesn't mask the ones who are missing. I read of the church 'prophets' – and prognosticators – who predict an uncertain future for the Christian church in America. They're looking at what's already happened in Europe and they're claiming that we are following close behind. Empty churches, hostility...

We talked earlier this year about the book UnChristian by David Kinnaman, which focuses in on the picture that 16 – 26 year old Americans have of the Church. All of the top 10 images, you remember, were negative. If that doesn't trouble you, well, it should. This is our world, we're commissioned by Christ to reach them, and love them.

In one review of this book, also written by a young person, I read this:

Kinnaman's vision is for the church to fix its "image problem" via real, personal change. What he doesn't really address is how current, institutionalized forms of church may be inadequate to the task.

You know that famous definition of insanity, right? [You keep doing the same things expecting different results.] We can't go on business as usual. Did you know that the United Methodist Church, as a denomination, has a mission statement? We do, and it is very clear, and it is bold: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Our mission statement defines how we are attempting to do that, but it does not negate the Denominational statement. That's our mission, as well.

As one who truly believes that as much as ever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is what the world

New Terms for New Times

needs today, and, coincidentally, in a world that is *exceptionally* open to spirituality and the supernatural I believe that we need to get very serious about how we plan to *reach* the world as it exists today in 2009, and forward... and we need to be open to examples of leaders, teachers, and churches who are doing this very thing successfully.

I mentioned the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, KS; their senior pastor is Adam Hamilton (whom I've quoted many times recently). This is a dynamic church of about 9,000 in worship, but their story is much more than numbers.

And let me say this – I hope you can hear it... This is not about numbers...I have no dreams whatsoever of leading a church of 9000 or 5000 or any specific number. In fact, should this church grow too much larger than it is now, I probably would not be the right person to lead it. I would just implode. I am not a numbers person, as a 'goal', I don't find my validity as a pastor in counting how many were in worship.

On the other hand, we do keep track of attendance, and we *have* a budget and all that, because numbers tell us *something* about the health of our congregation. And that's important information. Jesus told the parable of the shepherd who went out after the one lost sheep, leaving the other 99 behind. How did he know there was one missing? It stands to reason that he counted!

So you likely are going to be hearing a lot (from me) in the coming weeks about two churches that are leading a change – a revolution of thought and practice – within our Denomination. (COR and the Ginghamburg Church, in Tipp City, Ohio.) Michael Slaughter, Ginghamburg's lead pastor was at our church all day last Thursday. They are both United Methodist congregations, yet are very different in what they look like. They happen to both be very large for UM churches. What is most important is that their ministry focus is almost exactly the same.

And I'm convinced that we need to learn from them. Not to try and 'be' them – that would be an affront to God who put us here for a reason. We have an identity as a congregation. But because

New Terms for New Times

their focus is deep and biblical – and they are reaching unchurched people for Christ, and truly are *transforming the world* – I am convinced we can learn from them.

I believe that God has something special in store for the ministry here, as we humble ourselves and seek God’s vision for this community. And I believe that this will ‘trickle down’ (forgive that terminology!) as we continue to have influence on congregations in our locality.

One characteristic of both these communities of faith is how thoroughly they understand the theology of the Kingdom of God. Our relationship with God is not simply about finding a way to get to ‘heaven’. Eternal life is a relationship with God that begins right here on this earth and it effects the way we live, and what we do, or attempt to do, as children of the King. When we focus on ourselves, i.e., if our priority, our goal is simply bringing people “into the church”, we are missing much of our Biblical mandate.

Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men (and women)” [i.e., in this world] – “so that they may see your *good works* and give glory to God in heaven.” Jesus never said, “Make sure your church doors are open, and the lights are on, and if anyone wants to come in, let them be welcome.” He said to go out into the world and not just *tell* people about Christ, *show them* who he is.

He did it – he met with all sorts of people, and it got him into trouble, too. But, interestingly, most of his criticism came from the religious people, because of the kinds of people that he was hanging out with. He fed hungry people, he healed the sick and cared for them – he took care of physical needs as well as people’s need to find a relationship with their Creator. He sacrificed for the good of the world – *everything*. And he said, “This is what love is about... now you do the same.” Show my love to the world, just as I did.

Do we do this? *Yes, we do...* but what I’ve been feeling in my spirit is that we have not engaged the world in the way that Jesus wants us to. The sermon series that I referred to is going to be called (I think) “Breaking Through the Walls”.

New Terms for New Times

I'm going to be challenging you, and myself, to a new level of commitment. A deeper of Discipleship. Jesus said in Luke 4:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Later on in Luke 7 there is a group of John's disciples who come to Jesus and ask him if he is the one that they've been waiting for.

His response:

So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Did you notice that both of those statements – which are kind of like Jesus' mission statement specifically include reaching out to the poor. Serving – as Jesus did – the outcasts, the hurting, the suffering is a huge part of what *our* mission is. Since Jesus sent us out to finish his work, and called us 'his body'. "Let your light so shine..."

Let me finish with this. Mike Slaughter's congregation uses some different vocabulary in describing their mission. And I'm going to share some of their terms with you to close today. Again, we'll be talking more about all this starting in a couple weeks... but let this sit with you for awhile. Let it 'simmer'.

1. Volunteers → Servants

One of the most significant differences in terms is that at Ginghamburg, they don't talk about, or ever ask for volunteers. They will tell you that they are not 'volunteers', they are *servants*. The difference, is that volunteers serve at *their* convenience. Servants serve at the call of the Master. (Now, of course, the Master is Christ, not, certainly, me!) But the idea is that in a Spirit-led

New Terms for New Times

congregation people will be seeking opportunities to serve, because we understand that we *are* servants.

2. Contributions → Sacrifices

Related to this is the vocabulary of giving. You can put this in terms of a question. Do we make contributions, or do we give sacrificially? You see, the difference is a matter of commitment. Slaughter says there are three kinds of people, basically, in a church. There are the curious, the convinced, and the committed.

In a healthy church you will find all three ‘kinds’, because this is certainly a process, and like any process, it takes time. You don’t start at ‘committed’. But somehow we need to understand that the end result – according to Jesus who calls us to ‘follow him’, is commitment. And commitment to Christ, biblically speaking, is a serious thing... and it certainly involves getting our hands dirty, as we get out of the safe areas and move into the world to be servants as he leads us.

3. “Bring them In” → Send Them Out

I’ve already mentioned this one, but here it is again. The *ultimate* purpose of a church is not to simply bring people *in*, but to send people *out* in mission and service. It is an exciting life; and it is also challenging. But Jesus also called it – abundant life!

4. Individual → Community

This is something that we have certainly talked about, but in some ways we still haven’t captured as a culture here. For all the fear that people have about the Emerging Church, and those ‘post-moderns’, they are the ones who are renewing a very basic biblical teaching that has been neglected for so long: Christianity is meant to be lived in a community of faith. We can’t grow, worship, serve, be accountable – or do anything significant in Christ if we try to be lone rangers. Or if our community is weak. This needs to be intentional, and as we get out beyond the walls we need to have a structure in place (an organic structure!) that invites people to become part of community in a significant way.

New Terms for New Times

Not just being part of a large worshipping population, but having a place where a person can experience comfort, challenge, and like up with people to serve with in this world.

5. Religious Preference → “Who is your God?”

Here’s the last one. It really made an impact on me as I read it a few nights ago. In bed... Mike Slaughter was writing about a form that he was filling out for something or other, you know, a census, or a hospital admission form, or something similar. And one point on the form it asked, “What is your religious preference?” and there was a checklist. You could choose from a menu.

And he said, “I think the Old Testament prophets would have put this a little differently... their question would be, “Who is your God?” Having just read through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Hosea, I would have to agree with that. That’s really the most significant question we can be asked; and the answer, according to those same prophets has something to do with what we *believe* but it has *a lot* more to do with what we *do*. In matters of justice, poverty, servanthood, the use of our time, our spiritual gifts and talents, our money, our worship... our ‘God’ is what we actually spend time and effort to serve.

It can be success, or TV, or sports, or looks... or it can be the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who said, “Follow me”...

Who is your God?