

Breaking Down Walls

Matthew 5: 1 - 12

¹ One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, ² and he began to teach them.

³ “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

⁴ God blesses those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ God blesses those who are humble,
for they will inherit the whole earth.

⁶ God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,
for they will be satisfied.

⁷ God blesses those who are merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ God blesses those whose hearts are pure,
for they will see God.

⁹ God blesses those who work for peace,
for they will be called the children of God.

¹⁰ God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

¹¹ “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.

Three Sundays ago I shared with you my plans to begin a series of messages today that would, Lord willing, begin the process of helping us – to use the slogan of the UM Board of Discipleship – to ‘Rethink Church’. We’ve all heard the statistics of the decline within our Denomination, statistics which reflect what is happening across the board in this country’s Christian Churches, particularly main-line denominations. And they are frightening. We will lose this year something like 75,000 people a weekend, and that is an astounding number. Its not that we’re losing people in droves, they’re not walking away... they are dieing. And it grieves me.

I shared my conviction that the fact that this is not happening in *this* church right now is not a reason for us to breathe a sigh of relief and go on with business as usual. There is a missing generation, for the most part, in our churches, and they are missing because we have not been very effective in translating the Good News of Jesus Christ into terms that our younger

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generations can hear and receive. The word of ‘welcome’ may be intended, but it has not been heard.

My interaction with Mike Slaughter, lead pastor at Ginghamburg UMC (hearing him at an all day seminar, reading one of his books, and some personal conversation with him) began to galvanize my inner sense that we need to think harder about what we are doing here. We need to take a close look at what we do, and *why* we do it and find ways to do it better – by which I mean more *effectively*... more *Biblically* ... and certainly more *prayerfully*. As well as looking for some new things that we need to get involved in, adding some ‘missing pieces’ if you will.

Two weeks after that time with Mike Slaughter, I had the privilege – with our program staff (HeyYoung, Glenn, Brad, Karen, and Sue) to attend a Leadership Conference at the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS (near Kansas City). That turned out to be one of the most intense and nearly overwhelming experiences I’ve had in ministry. I will not attempt to speak for others on our staff, but for me, the past two weeks have been a pivotal time for my ministry. I shared three weeks ago my feeling that the Lord was trying to get my attention, and my sense that this was going to involve some long term changes. It was one of those ‘paradigm shift’ times.

That suspicion has been affirmed...I know I’m a low-key guy, and it may be hard to tell (!) but am practically vibrating here with excitement over what God has in store for us. I am intensely optimistic about the future of this church (long term and short term); *and* I am proud (in a good way) to be a United Methodist pastor. I’m seeing our church with new eyes, and I believe along with Adam Hamilton, and Slaughter, and a host of others, that with our historic combination of social awareness / action along with an understanding of the possibility of a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ; because our institutional DNA is rooted in work of justice, from preaching to the coal miners in England, and campaigning for workers rights, our long term emphasis on helping the poor and the disadvantaged, combined with that preaching emphasis of the ‘heart strangely warmed’ – because of this unique combination, I believe that we are uniquely positioned to reach today’s world – these neighbors of ours that Jesus died for.

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And today and next week, I want to talk about that a bit... I want to share a vision, so to speak, of where we can go. If I said that I had no idea on how we can get there, I'd be lying, so I'm not going to say that. But I'm leaving the 'how' (to some degree) open... you are going to write that part of the story. I understand my role as the Senior Pastor in this exciting time (perhaps now more than ever before) I also realize that this – if it is of God – is about *us*, not *me*.

I am having conversations with my staff, and some key lay people, and they are, I trust, going to do the same, and this 'thing' that God *wants to do* is going to grow and develop from there organically, through more and more of you taking time to talk, listen, pray, study and act. But there are some big picture horizons that I am going to be raising, and describing to you – not just this week and next – but over and over and over. This year, next year... and you get the idea. This is not going to be a two-part sermon and then we'll go on to something else.

Let me say one other thing in a more general way: I've shared this with some of you already. What I experienced at the Church of the Resurrection was a model (an extremely powerful model) of a ministry that is engaging the world very intentionally, and is effectively making disciples for the transformation for the world. The key words there are 'effective', 'disciples' and 'the world'.

I told you that I'm not about 'numbers', and I'm not, but when a church grows to 15,000 people in worship every weekend, and gets there in less than 20 years, and when 70% of their growth is people with little or no church background...when a church is making such a difference in their community that the local #1 TV News Team was willing to partner with them in a sermon series, you listen to what they have to say, you know? The largest demographic in that church (as in ours) are 'aging baby boomers', but the *fastest growing* segment are the 20's and 30's age group... the 'missing' generation. It is definitely worth taking a careful look at what they are doing, and figure out what we can take, tweak, mold, etc., to fit our situation and our vision.

And what struck me as we've begun to do just that – we are examining what COR is doing,

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which is pretty easy to do, because they are very excited and open about giving away *everything* they've learned – I've been very encouraged to notice that for the most part the things I was seeing, the things I've been hearing are things that to one degree or another *we are already doing*. They are, frankly, *way* ahead of us in *how* they're doing most of this. But I say that for this reason: what I'm going to be sharing with you is not a completely different way of doing ministry. I'm not going to suggest that we need to tear everything apart and start over.

That would be as discouraging to me as it would be for you, because, don't forget, I've invested 15 years of my life in this community, too. It would be a difficult emotional blow to me to even *think* that we've been doing it 'wrong' for all these years. We haven't! And if you were at any of the Laity Weekend services last week, you heard stories of our congregation at its best. I was so blessed. The question we need to look at is 'how can we do this kind of ministry *more intentionally*?' How can we love more people into the Kingdom?

We are doing a lot of things right. But, just as clearly, I think that we do a lot of things without understanding *why* we do them, why this is so important. We have a good mission statement, but we have no statement of strategy on *how* we are expect to *get there*, how we plan to accomplish that mission, and no easily enumerated description of what we will look like when we do (not that we'll ever be finished), but what is our 'goal'? what are we trying to build as we act on this mission? If we all can't answer those questions, especially our leaders, then it stands to reason that there is going to be a lot of wasted effort, which can be discouraging. And with limited resources, and limited time, and such an urgent mission, we can't afford to waste *anything*. More about that later...

Another thing I'm *not* going to do to you (intentionally, anyway) is that I'm not going to put burdens on already overstressed people. What you are not going to hear from me is a blanket statement to 'work harder'! I am not going to be the Pharaoh to you poor Israelites (you know, the 'More bricks – less straw!') Some of you *need* to do more, but as we seek the leadership of God for our community, I fully believe that many will respond to God's leading with joy, and enthusiasm, not because you have been 'guilted' into doing something you have no desire to do.

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But I will without apology be challenging you (and myself) in three basic areas, three dimensions.

First, we will be challenging you to go deeper in your walk with God

* personal **discipleship**

We are going to be talking about what that means, what it looks like. We'll be talking about spiritual disciplines – worship, prayer, fasting, tithing, witness, and service. And we're going to give you many opportunities and tools to respond as God leads you.

Second, there will be a renewed emphasis on

* **community.**

What does a 'community of faith' look like? Who's invited? How can we practice 'radical hospitality' here, like Jesus expressed in his parable of the King's Wedding Banquet... when the invited guests didn't show up, the master, remember, sends out the servants saying:

'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

" 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'

"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.

How can we do that? How can we establish multiple access points into this community? Not expecting people to be 'like us' but understanding that this is a community of *faith*, which includes believers, seekers, the curious as well as the committed, we're going to be on different points of the road. What would that look like? These are questions that we need to ask. And answer!

A Third Emphasis will be

* to move our focus more intentionally to **Service** to those who are outside of this community...

finding ways to share the Love of Jesus Christ with a hurting world. In letting our light shine, said Jesus, 'the world will see our good works and give glory to God in heaven.' We're going to be talking about how *every ministry* in this church, and every activity in this community can be more intentional about including those who are not here... actively finding areas of need and

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meeting them, looking for the ‘strays’ and taking their hand in love, and inviting them ‘home’.

Some of them may end up here, or somewhere else; many won’t – or we’ll have no idea, anyway. But in doing the things the Jesus told us to do – giving that ‘cup of cold water’ to the thirsty, food for the hungry, visiting those who are sick, and in prison – brightening up the days of a neglected elderly person with a Teddy Bear (isn’t that in your translation?), sending out more mission teams, partnering up with ministries to the poor in Camden, needs of people in Moorestown, Mt. Laurel, Maple Shade, are being met, etc – in these ways and many others we are going to be obedient to the call of Christ, and to our mission. As best we can. Whatever it takes. *And God will be glorified!*

Next week I’d like to share a ‘big picture’ view of what our emphasis in these three areas might look like. You’re going to see that it’s not too complicated. I’ll share some examples of what is already happening here (some things you may not know about), I’ll talk about some changes that I’m going to make (particularly in preaching), and how some of you can help me in this, and we’ll see where the Holy Spirit leads us.

But you know, when your eyes get opened, you can’t help but see things. I shared with you that in my devotional reading of the Scripture since last summer, I’ve been doing a program of reading through the Bible in one year. And I’m happy to be able to tell you, that I just finished the prophets... ALL of them!... In some ways, that was hard reading. But you’d have to be pretty dense to not get this as you read Jeremiah, and Isaiah, and Amos, and all the others: God hates injustice! How we treat the poor, how we live – what we’re worshipping – is all very important to God. And God is not interested in receiving our worship when we close our eyes to needs around us... I know we can’t meet every need. And we won’t.

And I know we’re doing a lot, perhaps compared to some other institutions. But I know there are still tremendous untapped resources here... in time, spiritual gifts, talents, finances, skills, vision... all of these. And the needs are great. The fields are white with harvest, said, Jesus. We can do more.

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Last Sunday I was riding home after visiting Ken Wedge out at Fox Chase Hospital. And I'll be honest with you, I was really tired, hadn't recovered from the Seminar in Kansas, some long days, very emotional. And the Eagles were playing... so, I'm riding home. And I pass by an empty lot, right down Camden Ave. next to the White House. On the grass there are sheets laid out with stuff on them. like a yard sale. I hardly noticed.

But as I passed, I saw a Jeep parked on Camden Ave. and on the back windshield I read, "Good prices... Eviction Sale... Make an Offer." So, now I'm passed the intersection, and I'm thinking, "Here I want to go home and sit down in my living room and watch a football game... while this person is selling their possessions because they're being evicted."

You know, I found myself driving slower and slower... and by the time I got to Shirley Ave., I turned around and went back. And I saw two women sitting there. I asked if that sign referred to one of them, and one said, "Yes". Her name is Diane, and the other woman was her sister-in-law, who was selling a lot of *her* stuff to help out. I introduced myself, and asked if she had a place to go.

She said, that she was fighting this... she's lived in her apartment over five years, has never been late. She has a job; her ex-husband is three months behind in child support, her hours have been cut, etc. (you know, she's a 'statistic' right now.)

I took her information and I said, "Call us tomorrow morning... I'm from the Methodist Church right up the street. We'll help you out." Now, first of all – I was able to offer that help because of your special communion offerings. These funds get distributed almost weekly, through our ministry here, and through the community Good Samaritan Fund (we use discretionary funds to contribute to that – something like \$4000/ year).

When I told her this... she just wept. She said, "This hasn't been a good day... we only made about \$60." She said, "I've been sitting here all day praying about what to do... and then this guy rolls up on a motorcycle." She goes, "I'd really like to hug you..." (She didn't know me!

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Ha!)

She told me about a blog where someone passing by wrote about her situation, and posted these pictures. She sent me two emails since, and called me – all to say, “thank you” and to assure me that her intention is to give this back when she’s back on her feet. I said, “There are no conditions to this help. But if you can pass it on someday, that would be great.”

Here’s my point: that was really easy. And God was glorified.