

When a Building Tells a Story

I'd like to read to you a passage from a book - a gift from a friend. I read the book, and then read it again. I'm now reading it a third time. I highly recommend it to you – I just bought 12 copies to give away. I wish I could give a copy to every one of you – but if you come to enough services in the next few months, you likely will hear it bit by bit!

It is the latest book by Brennan Manning, called The Furious Longing of God. And let me say, 'furious' is used here not in the sense that we often do – i.e., 'angry' – but furious with the meaning of 'intensity'. Like 'a furious storm' – incredibly powerful, unstoppable force. The message of the book is that's how God longs for each of us. This is from the chapter entitled "**healing**":¹

When you read the Gospels carefully, you notice this extraordinary gift that Jesus had. I'm not talking about physical healing per se, but more of the inner healing through a simple word, a look, a glance, a touch...

Jesus said you are to love one another as I have loved you, a love that will possibly lead to the bloody, anguished gift of yourself; a love that forgives seventy times seven, that keeps no score of wrongdoing. Jesus said this, this love, is the one criterion, the sole norm, the standard of discipleship in the New Israel of God. He said you're going to be identified as His disciples, not because of your church-going, Bible-toting, or song-singing. No, you'll be identified as His by one sign only: the deep and delicate respect for one another, the cordial love impregnated with reverence for the sacred dimension of the human personality because of the mysterious substitution of Christ for the Christian.

Matthew 25:34 (NASB) says that the King will say, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." He tells me that I'm blessed, beloved, beautiful, and pleasing to the eyes of my Abba to the extent that I've become a beneficiary of the kingdom. Why? Not because I shouted, "Jesus is Lord," but because someone was hungry and I gave him food. Somebody was thirsty and I gave her a drink. I welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, comforted the sick, and visited the prisoner. On that day, many of us will protest, "Lord, when?" and then comes the revelation of revelations, the end of the greatest story every told, when Jesus looks into my eyes and says, "What you did to them, you did to Me; as often as for one of the least of My brothers and sisters, so to Me."

What is the sign, par excellence, of authentic discipleship? The night before Jesus died, He left no doubt in anybody's mind. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you...by this all... will know" (John 13: 34 – 35 NASB)

I've had a number of conversations with trusted people from our church over the past six months or so, to try and figure out how we were going to approach the whole mortgage issue once again.

¹ Brennan Manning, The Furious Longing of God, David C. Cook, 2009

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One thing we considered was what you might refer to as the ‘blunt’ approach – meaning, just matter-of-factly letting people know that our last three year commitment was over, and we still have nine years to go on our Mortgage.

\$18,000/ month, about \$600/ day. Believe me, I know these figures well. I see them in my head, typically about 3AM! That procedure was considered, honestly, because I was (and I still am) convinced that when we committed ourselves to this project, we meant to see it through. And even though the past two years have been horrific for our nation – economically – yet, we have continued to meet our payments and our obligations. God has been good – and glorified through your faithfulness. So, I figured, all we need to do is tell you that we still have a need, and you would respond.

But, the more we talked about it, (and in consultation with the amazing people at Panzano and Partners) we thought might be encouraging to give you an update regarding what has been happening in this new building since the “Embrace the Future” campaign. So, I asked Joan to make a list of people, organizations, etc. that have used this building (the whole complex – it’s really hard to limit this to just the new structure) in the past three years.

It was a about a three page single spaced list. I showed it to Mike, and he said to me “I had no idea that all this was happening. This is amazing.” And I went in and talked with their creative people, about what has been happening in this church in the past three years. And they helped me understand (with their reflecting back my story) how we have changed over that timeframe. And it became clear to us, that something wonderful is taking place here.

See, years ago, as contemplated building a new building, we thought we would then, adjust our programming and adapt to the reality of having more space – and even (as you saw on the DVD that we made three years ago, which I replayed for you a few weeks ago) we even anticipated some sort of increase in our outreach as a result. But I don’t think that any of us envisioned that we weren’t simply going to *adapt* – we were going to be *changed*.

Two years ago at our Church Conference... Scott McGough was giving an impromptu Trustees report. The written report was in our booklet, and our District Superintendent, Bob Smith, asked

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Scott if he had a word for us. Scott stood up and said something like, “Well, the Trustees have been talking, among other things, about how we can make our facilities *more* accessible to the community around us. We’re working on some things in that regard, and we’ll be getting back to you on that.”

Now, most, if not all of us in that meeting received that word with a kind of, “OK, good job. What’s next on the agenda?”

But when we looked back at the DS to move us to the next item, we saw that he was standing there openly weeping. After a few minutes he said, “You have no idea how unusual it is for me to hear that from a group of church Trustees. Most of what I hear is ‘How can we protect our building from the ‘outsiders’?’ He said, ‘It kills me... but it’s what I hear all the time.’”

The theologian Emil Brunner said, “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” And, while we have *always* (at least as long as I’ve been here, and I’m sure long before that) been about ministry, and mission, at FUMC, something has happened in recent years that has caused us to look outside these walls, beyond ourselves as never before in defining who we are. The Mission Statement has sunk in...

Last fall we started talking about “Radical Hospitality”, meaning, to be Jesus in our world. Loving in unexpected ways – radical ways – just like Jesus did (and does). Reaching out to our hurting world without an expectation of response or reward. We have been changed, and that change didn’t start with this building project, but it without a doubt, to me, was greatly intensified by it. And that transformation is continuing every day.

So we wanted to tell that story. This DVD is not a fund raising ‘gimmick’. (I know you know that.) It was meant to tell the story of our church – to show you some of what God is doing through you. And we look at our mortgage payments, as we do our regular ministry budget (with the only difference that this is a commitment that we’ve made that we can’t change), we look at all this as the cost of doing business, so to speak... and, my expectation and prayer is that you will be encouraged in your giving by seeing that we have a facility that God is using in a much

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bigger way than just providing space. God is blessing us - and our community, and the world - through it.

We have a staff that is doing incredible ministry here, functioning at a very high level. I am so proud of them. I am humbled and proud to be the senior pastor of this congregation.

We are a church of leaders; lay people who serve God in the area that you've been called to, with excellence, and humility, and effectiveness. You saw just a taste of that in the DVD. That was lay driven ministry. I'm doing my part, but you are doing your part; we're working side by side to fulfill our mission. Not for accolades, or attention, but for the glory of God.

Its what makes this church special. As Brennan Manning pointed out, we are here to love one another. We're trying to do that. We are going to continue to do that. We have not always gotten it right, some have fallen through the cracks, we are imperfect humans, but as we've come this far by grace, we will continue on with confidence through the same grace of God. (Trusting that love *does* cover a multitude of sins, as James promised!)

And we'll do it all recognizing that sometimes the work requires sacrifice. But you know that - you've done it. You've been doing it. May God continue to lead us, and show us that it's all worth it. May God bless us as we respond to those challenges to us that still lie ahead!

My friends, my family in Christ, thank you for your graciousness in receiving this word, and for your constant affirmation of God's presence in this place, through your ministry and service.

Amen.