

## Because We Are Here!

### 2. Building For The Future

Acts 2:40-47

Mark 2:1-12

October 8, 2023 Ministry Impact Sunday – 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

Peter Gomes served for many years as University Minister and Dean of the Harvard University Memorial Church. The Church is a large stately Georgian building, seating 1000, in the center of the historic Harvard campus. A few years ago, Gomes was meeting with an Academic Dean in the Administration Building, across the green from the church. Looking out the window toward the church, this caustic rather cynical official asked, “Gomes, we built that Church right in the middle of the campus. Tell me, if we were to build it again today, do you think we would put it there?” Peter Gomes quickly responded, “Well, we’re here, and we’re not moving, so get used to it!”

I

We might say the same thing about South Highland, our beloved church whose building is set here in the heart of the Southside, since 1891 near the campus of UAB, many hospitals, the most densely populated neighborhood in the state of Alabama with everything from stately mansions along Highland Avenue to small bungalows, to new high-rise condominiums, to government subsidized Highland Manor. We’re here, and we’re not moving, so get used to it!

We are here right smack dab in the middle of a thriving and ever-changing metropolis. A few years ago, we had mud wrestling next door and the 1<sup>st</sup> Place James Beard Award winning Highlands Grill restaurant a block away. In this mix sits this majestic stone cathedral-like church. A church built not on opinions but convictions. Today we are reflecting on ministries that are happening in and through South Highland because we are here.

We see in Acts chapter 2 a snapshot of the vibrant vital life flowing out from the Holy Spirit filled first Church in Jerusalem after the coming of the Spirit and the preaching of Peter. What was their life like? What was happening among them? We sometimes can feel our world is closing in on us, with clownish chaos in the Congress, war in Ukraine and Israel, starvation in Africa, the hottest September on record and mass shootings almost daily across America. Sometimes we may feel like throwing in the towel and giving in to our worst instincts.

But the Church has always ministered amid challenging circumstances. “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Peter pleaded in the first Christian sermon. And did they ever! 3000 people welcomed the message and were baptized that day. Then this was the game plan. This was the strategy, this was and is the secret sauce. These are the characteristics of what a faithful growing church does!

“They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to all, as many as had need.”

On top of that this caring band of brothers and sisters continued to worship daily in the Great historic Jerusalem Temple, first built by Solomon, rebuilt by the returned Exiles, expanded by Herod the Great. They ate together, regular meals and the Lord’s Supper with glad and generous hearts, “Praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”<sup>i</sup>

That same spirit of generosity and compassion and sharing and loving has been a part of our experience at South Highland for nearly 135 years now. We’re here and we’re not moving. So, get used to it, and get to using it! – This Magnificent ministry center!

You can see in the bulletin insert a sample of just how this building is being used, how many ministries take place daily right here in this building because we are here! Yes, we have a building built on strong faith commitment, one that is beautiful. One that, as Dr. Dana Waters used to say, “practices architectural evangelism.” But one that is a ministry center not a monument, here we are: feeding the hungry, caring for preschoolers and dementia patients, learning about God’s call for justice and then acting upon what we learn in such work as welcoming Afghan refugees, and housing homeless families. All this because we gather regularly around God’s word to grow as Christ’s disciples. All this because we are devoting ourselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers!

Friends incredible ministry is happening all around us and through us daily, **because we are here**. Think what this neighborhood would be without South Highland. It is not so pretty to contemplate.

Yes, we can feel overwhelmed at the challenge before us, particularly as we are engaging in this effort of “Building for the Future.” We know we can only do what we are called to do because the Living Christ is at work in us. We know “We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us! We are committed to being the presence of Christ, the Body of Christ right here at this exciting, challenging location on the corner of Highland Avenue and Richard Arrington Boulevard. And now we are being asked to raise a lot of money, over two million dollars to repair this building and equip South Highland for the next generation.

## II

I suppose those four men who brought their paralyzed friend on his bed to Jesus must have, for a moment, felt overwhelmed when they brought him to the house where Jesus was teaching and healing, and found such a vast crowd there blocking the door and windows so that they could not get their friend to him.

This scene occurs near the start of Jesus' public ministry as people were flocking to him, encouraged by his message, healed by his miracles, repenting of their sins, and believing the Word he was speaking. The house that day was overflowing with people. There was no way these four men could push their way through the door. So, do they give up and leave? No, they think of that flat thatched roof made of wooden cross beams overlaid with branches, held together with mud. That roof which had to be repaired with fresh branches and mud every fall before the rainy season.

Instantly these four friends decide to tear the roof open. Climbing the stone outer steps, found on these Palestinian houses, they carry their friend on his bed up to the roof, then pulling back the branches, knocking mud and debris down on the crowd filling the room, they open a hole large enough to lower their friend on his bed through. With ropes tied to the corners of the bed, they gently lower their friend to the feet of Jesus.

Now there are many lessons in this short simple story, but today we are going to focus mainly on this first point - the bold determined faith of these four men. The man is healed not because he does anything, nor initially is it even said that he believes anything. He is utterly paralyzed. Yet he is first healed spiritually – his sins are forgiven, and he is secondly healed physically - standing at the commanding word of Jesus, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home, and he does – he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them. "

Why did this happen? All because of the faith of these four men who risked anger and lawsuits over putting a hole in the roof to get their friend to the Lord who can heal. I wonder how the homeowner responded? Do you think he was concerned about getting his roof repaired or more rejoicing in the miracle that had unfolded right there in his own house? Which is it easier – to forgive sins or heal a cripple? Learned scholars in the Anchor Bible commentary, conclude, after all their PhD's reflecting, they say, "It's hard to say!" That's what a PhD. will get you, a tenured faculty position and, "It's hard to say!"

What we do know and can say clearly is, all this healing happens because of the faith of the four men. "When Jesus saw **their** faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus begins healing the man where he needs it most. You see there are many who can heal physically. But only God can heal spiritually, only God can wash away the sin that separates us from God. Healing of sin requires a sacrifice. What we know and can say is that it finally takes Jesus giving his life as a sacrifice for us, on the cross for our sins, to be forgiven.

These four men gave of themselves, significantly, took a risk, went out of their way because of their love for their friend and their faith in Jesus. Jesus gave of himself totally sacrificing his life on the cross because of his love for every single one of us.

How many are healed right here in South Highland because of your faith Church? I asked the staff last week. Allison Walker, Director of our Adult South Highland Center said, “Well I can tell you that in 2022 we had an average of 45 families a month who were bringing their loved ones here. So far in 2023 we have had to this date in October an average of 57 families present each month. If you figure the average number of Alzheimer’s patients who have been helped over our 25 years at this ministry it comes to something like 1,425 – **because we are here.**

Or take our Child Development Center, here for 53 years now. We have had up to 120 children many years. Since Covid we have dropped to 85 with hundreds more still on a waiting list, if we can just find more teachers. So, say an average of 100 children for 53 years, that’s 5300 children who have been loved and cared for and educated and learned to love Jesus Christ. Katya O’Leary let me know that in August a year ago a large team of South Highlanders of all ages packed 18,000 meals in less than 3 hours for hungry third world people – because we are here.

Just last week, thanks to our new Director of Administration and Assistant to the Pastors, Dina Glass, we again have interns from Horizon School up the hill, a school for students with learning disabilities who learn how to live and work independently coming three times a week from 9:00 am til 2:00 pm. Ashton Nickelson is helping Joe Whitley cook meals in the kitchen and Mark Trammel is assisting our sextons cleaning your building. They are helping us. We are helping them – **because we are here.**

Or consider the healing strength of music we offer in this place, singing, ringing, playing in particular today the special concert we will gather for this afternoon with internationally recognized Samuel Metzger, who has served as organist at the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Florida, played for Cort and Abby Gatliff’s wedding at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, and currently is organist at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Nashville. **Because we are here,** because this organ was restored by Kenny Lewis, because a generous outside donation was given in memory of Bob and Carolyn Hunter, then because Kenny Lewis himself has come to be our Organist and Director of Music Ministries, following in a long line of highly gifted musicians who have been dedicated committed Christians, we are “making a joyful noise unto the Lord and coming before his presence with singing.”

Do you know that I reached Kenny Lewis in Italy while he and Melissa were on their honeymoon, and we set up a lunch meeting when he got back? It is fair to say that Kenny was reluctant even to consider coming but agreed to meet with me. For three hours we sat in Daniel George Restaurant engaging in deep conversation which led to Kenny coming over from the Episcopal Church in Anniston to join us. When the committee interviewed Kenny, they did not even ask him to play again since they had heard his marvelous organ recital at the rededication concert the previous year. All this music and ministry and yes mission, **because we are here.**

It is not because the paralytic had value that he was loved by his friends and by Jesus. It is because he was loved that he had value. He was loved to life, healed first spiritually, which is the deeper healing, and then second healed physically, standing and rolling up his mat and going home.

And note this, the conclusion of the story says, "They were all amazed." All. All. All. That includes the skeptical scribes who question Jesus about what right does he have to claim the power to forgive sins, a power which rightly belongs to God alone. For a mere human being to claim that power was blasphemy. Jesus, perceiving exactly what they were thinking in their hearts, says, "I'm not going to tell you which miracle is easier – to forgive sins or to heal a cripple - but I am going to show you this, so you will know that the Son of man has authority and ability right here, right now, to forgive sins, that deeper healing, by commanding this cripple to stand up. And when he does, even these scribes are amazed and glorify God saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Such are the miracles going on at South Highland seven days a week, **because we are here.** I remember several years ago, Jerry Tracy telling me of a Sunday he was walking down the sidewalk along Arrington Boulevard to the "Tim Chandler Door" and he spoke to an older lady also approaching the sanctuary down that sidewalk. Jerry asked her, "Do you know today is Youth Sunday?" The lady replied, "No I did not, but I do know there is more going on at this Church than fleas on a dog!" **Because we are here!**

Friends the miracle is happening all around us because we are here. I counted again this week- there are 17 doors into this Church. We all probably have our favorite, depending on what part of the building we frequent the most. (You know one of my failings here over 22 years is I never got those corner bell doors open. When I first arrived, I thought opening them would be a great visual symbol that South Highland is open and welcoming and in the healing business. For pragmatic reasons we have not opened them literally. But figuratively, even in these days of necessary increased security, we are open and we are welcoming all. "All are welcome in the name of Jesus Christ!"

Have you seen the news about the Synod of Bishops that Pope Francis is convening currently at the Vatican in Rome? This convocation of over 360 delegates, more than 50 of whom for the very first time are women, is perhaps going to be on the scale of and as Francis says, comes as a follow-up of Vatican 2. For the first time, delegates include not only bishops and cardinals, but lay people and women leaders. The staid Roman Catholic Church is considering some big changes, including addressing the inclusion of LGBT people, women's ordination, and ending priestly celibacy. It is a big big meeting!

In his opening sermon, Pope Francis said this: The primary task of the Synod, and can now apply this to South Highland, the primary task is -

"to refocus our gaze on God, to be a Church that looks mercifully at humanity, a Church that is united and fraternal, that listens and dialogues; a Church that blesses and

encourages, that helps those who seek the Lord, that lovingly stirs up the indifferent, that opens paths in order to draw people into the beauty of faith. A Church that has God at its center and therefore, is not divided internally and is never harsh externally. This is how Jesus wants the Church, his bride to be.... The Holy Spirit often shatters our expectations to create something new that surpasses our predictions and negativity. Let us open ourselves to him and call upon him, the Protagonist, the Holy Spirit, and let us walk with him, in trust and with joy... Come, you who are weary and oppressed, come, you who have lost your way and feel far away, come you who have closed the door to hope. The doors of the Church are open to everyone, everyone, everyone.”

South Highland, because **we are here**, on this corner of Arrington and Highland Avenue, healing is happening. Hope is being restored. It has been my honor to serve as your pastor for half a generation, 22 years of the three and a half or so generations this Church has been ministering. As we build for future generations, with upfront LEAD commitment now of \$1,157,254.59 toward our building renewal and 10% mission goal of \$2,400,000 let us open ourselves, let us open the roofs of our hearts to the fresh blowing of the Holy Spirit telling us what with faith we are being called to give. And all all all will be amazed and say, “We have never seen anything like this!”

“Today we all are called to be Disciples of the Lord,  
 To help to set the captive free, Make plowshare out of sword.  
 To feed the hungry, quench their thirst, Make love and peace our fast.  
 To serve the poor and homeless first, our ease and comfort last.

May we in service to our God Act out the living Word,  
 And walk the road the saints have trod Till all have seen and heard.  
 As stewards of the earth may we Give thanks in one accord  
 To God who calls us all to be Disciples of the Lord. <sup>ii</sup>  
 Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 2:40-47 selected

<sup>ii</sup> The Presbyterian Hymnal, “Today We All Are Called to be Disciples” p.434