

A People, A Place, A Purpose – Go and Do Likewise

135th Anniversary Sermon – South Highland Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 46

Luke 10:25-37

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It all started 135 years ago when 9 women, who were members at Birmingham's Third Presbyterian Church, petitioned to establish a new church in the upscale new suburb of Highlands. The city had only a few years before experienced rapid growth with the production of steel in the region, because of the availability of needed natural raw materials in the nearby valleys. So, it was that on All Hallows Eve, October 31, 1888 23 charter members met for the first time at Professor W.P. Taylor's private school at the corner of 11th and Cottonwood Avenue, a night our church history called, "Dark and drizzly". But inside their hopes were high, their faith expectant.

The small congregation quickly built a little white frame chapel near what is now the Southside Library. And only three years later, as they experienced rapid growth, on January 1, 1892 they laid the cornerstone of this majestic stone cathedral sanctuary, its massive bell tower pointing heavenward, toward healing and hope. Our beloved Martha Hood, who only left us in her 103rd year, wrote while a staff writer for the Birmingham News, on Sunday, February 13, 1955, an article celebrating the recent completion of the Fellowship Hall, classrooms and Chapel, an article printed just two and a half weeks before I was born,

"The original structure, which is on the corner, is Gothic in style. It was built to house all the needs of the church with a sanctuary, Sunday School rooms and a church parlor. The Stain Glass windows in the church, three of which are rose windows, were put in at the construction time and were paid for by the children and the young members of the church.ⁱ

Thus today, more than a century and a third since that beginning, we give thanks to God for the witness and worship of South Highland through all these years. Enduring through schisms and depressions, two world wars and many more wars, racial strife, most recently a worldwide pandemic and now a war between Israel and Hamas. We are still here- "fully alive with the passion of Christ." Still trying to do what Jesus told a Jewish lawyer, who recognized that the Samaritan man was the neighbor, "Go and do likewise."ⁱⁱ

It is probably the best known of Jesus' parables, illustrating, in a way you just cannot miss, the meaning of what real faith, hope and love look like in action. This is what Jesus is calling us to as we seek to, implement the mandate of the Great Commandment. Jesus is teaching his disciples, preparing them to go out in his name, when this lawyer comes up and asks the way to heaven. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus characteristically answers a question with a question, “How do you read it in the Bible? What does Scripture teach? This man knows well the twin peaks of the Law, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

“Bingo!” Jesus says, you’ve got it. “Now you just do this and you will live, and keep on living!” This fellow, however, wants to narrow the scope of his neighborhood. “Just how big is this neighborhood supposed to be?” So, Jesus answers with this story about a man robbed and left for dead along the side of the Jericho Road and, let’s say, instead of a priest and a Levite, a Presbyterian pastor and a Presbyterian elder, leaders in the faith community, come by, and do all they can to avoid the man and the messy situation. They have places to go and people to meet. So, they pass by on the other side, trying to avoid eye contact with the dying stranger.

It is left to an outsider, a member of the heretical despised Samaritan tribe, who had watered down the teachings of Torah, to come by, and he is the one who sees and responds. He goes to the man, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine on them, puts him on his donkey, and takes him to an inn, where he pays for the man’s lodging and nursing. “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” There is no limit set on what he is prepared to give to help this wounded stranger, his neighbor.

I

South Highland has long been a **PEOPLE** who try to offer this sort of love, care, compassion, and mercy to one another and those whose names we do not even know, as the Lord gives us strength. As I have reviewed our history, and the way we have responded in times of world crises, through war and peace, I am amazed at how we have been present to neighbors here on the Southside, and neighbors on the other side of the planet.

We have endured crises inside our body and outside our body. In 1915, on this very Sunday, over half the congregation departed to form what has become Independent Presbyterian Church leaving over some significant theological differences the pastor at the time had with core Presbyterian beliefs. In the 1970’s another good sized group from South Highland departed to form Briarwood Presbyterian Church. I said in an early sermon from this pulpit, “Well we helped start a church to the left of us, and we helped start a church to the right of us, now we just have to discover who we are!”

And I believe we have been discovering that. Who we are is a church centered on Christ. We are clear the center in our profession that we are a people who believe in and seek to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, our Master and friend, our brother and teacher.

We are a people who seek to follow Jesus. We take scripture seriously and we pay special attention to the parts of the Gospels written in red. Jesus’ words. Beyond that we are all sorts of people from all parts of multiple counties and suburbs and downtown, and even Jasper, people who are white and black and Asian and Hispanic, people of meager means and people of significant means, people studying and teaching at UAB Med School and people getting food stamps, all coming together because we are looking to learn and live out what it means to love God with our all and to love our neighbor as ourselves, best we can, in what we are learning is a big big neighborhood.

Today's bulletin bears witness to the 22 gifted pastors certainly Dr. Waters among them, who have served here, and the 30 members who became pastors here, and the 46 gifted elders, deacons and trustees who serve here, now, emblematic of generations of officers who preceded them, and our current staff of 22 committed servant leaders who help people grow in faith by doing everything from keeping the building clean, to cooking wonderful meals, to preparing countless bulletins and flyers and electronic communications, to teaching children, youth and adults. We are a **people** trying to follow Jesus.

II

And we are a **PLACE**, a place trying to follow Jesus, a safe place where questions can be asked, and Jesus can be found. South Highland really means it when we say on our sign, "**No Matter Where You Are From, We Are Glad You Are Our Neighbor. All Are Welcome In The Name Of Jesus Christ!**" God has put us here on this corner for a reason. Because we are where we are we have opportunity to come alongside all sorts of people with Jesus' love; health care professionals, college students, teachers, people in government housing, people who live on the streets, Jewish neighbors across the street and up the street.

Jesus sets his parable there on the dangerous bandit-filled road going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. A location filled with great danger and great need. Like where we are. And we have worked hard to stay right here where we are enduring vandalism, building wear and tear, and water, water, water, for which we are undertaking this "Building for the Future" effort so we can keep doing the Gospel things we are called to do from here.

People come here with all sorts of hurts and hopes, all sorts of needs and desires. Just glance at the 42 outreach ministries we are undertaking, 24 of which happen only because this building is here. We are not a shrine to an elegant past. We are an equipping center for living the way Jesus tells us today and tomorrow. We are a **place** where one beggar tells another beggar where to find food. And we offer that food.

This time last year I had just returned from an amazing mission journey to Syria and Lebanon. There our little team from the Outreach Foundation shared life with Presbyterian Christians in the small Synod of Syria and Lebanon, churches suffering in a country where 1/3 of the population are now displaced refugees, a place which has a dictatorial leader, economic collapse, and has suffered attacks of the Islamists terrorists of Issus. Many of these churches had been bombed, and South Highland together with churches around the world has partnered with them in massive support. These believers we met were so utterly determined to continue being **places** that show forth the love of Jesus. **Places** where Jesus can be found. All the congregations we visited were centered in their weekly worship. But they also had children's programs and schools, health clinics and clothing stores tied in with them. They were **places** of light and hope in dangerous neighborhoods. Now SHPC has, since then, helped build a new safe playground at the National Presbyterian Church in Latakia, Syria.

One amazing man we visited with for several days was Rev. Ibrahim Nsaïr, pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in Aleppo, Syria. Their church had been bombed to the ground in 2014. Since then, they rebuilt a beautiful new church in another part of town, and the original damaged church, when we were there, was being rebuilt with partnership from South Highland, to become a Seminary, and a Christian Retreat and Culture Center, where Christians; Protestant,

Catholic, and Orthodox, and Muslims will gather, and friendships and mutual understanding will grow.

Rev. Ibrahim described for us **the vision and dream become reality** that his congregation of 400 was living out. They had recently bought a storefront building next to their new church to convert to children's Sunday School classrooms. He told us,

“When we bought the additional building next door for the church to make space for children's Sunday School classes, we were called crazy. But faith is not rational. Faith is crazy. Faith works with the unseen. **I had a Vision. The Vision became a dream. The Dream became reality.**”

III

South Highland- we are a **PEOPLE**, a people who are family who care for one another and for the wounded person on the side of the road. We are a **PLACE**, a place where healing and hope and good news may be found. A place where faith and friendship grow. Finally, we have a **PURPOSE**. Our purpose is to live out the Good News of Jesus Christ in what we say and in what we do.

Isn't purpose, meaning, a sense of significance what so many are so hungry for? As our culture and our world are fragmenting, pulling away into angry bitter polarized tribes built on lies and propaganda, people are so hungry for truth. This is what we offer. In the 1980's the big push was for contemporary worship. Today the hunger young adults and youth is for a sense of transcendence. For connection with something and someone bigger than ourselves. For a sense of awe in worship. For truth that is beyond us. For meaning that is grounded in the God who is beyond us yet with us. If these stones could speak – they would say, at the center of this place is the urgent truth of the Gospel truth found in Jesus here and growing.

Our purpose is summed up beautifully in the first answer of the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism of Faith. **“What is the chief end of man?” “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.**

We are a **people** and a **place** that offers a **purpose** to any and all in need. And it takes us all pulling together in the same direction to fulfill this purpose. Yes, it takes a village. We want people of all ages to experience the love of the Living God, who we praise in exalted worship, then who we serve in extensive mission as we go out these doors every week.

That does not mean we do not have differences of opinion. That does not mean we all march in lock-step. But it does mean once we have worked through a matter, whether of a mission project, or a program for Wed. night, or whether to place a Cross on top of the steeple, after we dig in, research and share on an issue, that when a decision is finally made, we get behind it.

I hope you will enjoy the “Heritage of Witness 1888-2023” which is in today's bulletin. Take this bulletin home, hang on to it, get extra copies to send to your children and friends. It tells a **purposeful story**. One picture in the history is of Dr. Dewey White and Dr. John

Ponder and yours truly holding the massive 12-foot-tall cross on the Saturday morning just before a crane lifted it to the top of our steeple.

Funny as it may seem today, there was actually some lively controversy over whether a cross should sit on top of our steeple. Dr. White and Dr. Ponder were on opposite sides in this matter, which was resolved only by a secret ballot vote of the Session. Yet once the decision was made the whole church got behind it to “lift high the cross!” And so, it has gone through the years at South Highland.

IV

The call to each of us, as we build for the future God is leading us into, is first to keep the main thing the main thing, loving God and loving our neighbor. And then to discover day by day and more and more, just who is our neighbor and just how big our neighborhood is. As John Wesley said, “The world is my Parish.

Recently our 5-year-old grandson Winfield, who lives in Nashville, was being picked up by his other grandmother Gigi from his wonderful Christian kindergarten and elementary school. Gigi took Winfield to get a snack, and then they went to a nearby park to play. It was one of these gorgeous October afternoons, and Gigi pointed out how beautiful and blue, blue, blue She said there’s not a cloud in the sky! Five-year-old Winfield said, “Yes Gigi, God made it. It’s like God took a big paint brush and God made it all blue. Winfield laughed and said, “Oh Gigi, God can do anything!”

My friends, that is what South Highland is discovering as we are here, **“In the heart of the City, For the Whole of the City, With the Passion of Christ.”** God can do anything! The lesson Jesus imprinted upon the lawyer is that Jesus was calling this lawyer to be a neighbor. Jesus does not answer the man’s question about **“Who is my neighbor?”** A question the man was asking in order to put a limit, on just how far his responsibilities must go.

Instead, Jesus turns the question around 180 degrees and says, **“You are to think of yourself as a neighbor.”** The question is not whether a particular person is worthy of being my neighbor and thus worthy of my love. Rather the question Jesus asks the man, and asks us, is **“Are you willing to take what you have, what you know, and what you can do and place all this at the disposal of another person’s need or growth?”ⁱⁱⁱ**

Martha Hood’s February 13, 1955, article in the Birmingham News concludes,

“Throughout the history of the Church there is great evidence of the sacrifices and hard work of its members. In the early days no task was too menial for the church’s members. The women ran a Saturday market at Five Points, swept and cleaned lamps in the first little chapel and even came to the rescue when foreclosure proceedings on the bonded debt of the new church was threatened. The money was proceeds from ice cream and oyster suppers, bazars, and cake sales.

No family holds together without the combined efforts of the whole. Thus, has the South Highland Presbyterian Church been able to meet the spiritual needs of its community with dignity and faith.”^{iv}

A PEOPLE, A PLACE, A PURPOSE! We have been given so much my friends by the generations of our forebears. We have so much to do now and in generations yet to come. We are being called to use this sacred space generously, prayerfully, and faithfully. To offer reconciliation and healing. To fill it with the spirit of Jesus himself to enable people to encounter the Amazing Love behind the universe – and then to join us in serving our world. As Rev. Ibrahim said,

Faith is not rational. Faith is crazy. Faith works with the unseen. I had a **Vision**. The **Vision** became a **Dream**. The **Dream** became **Reality**.”

IN the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

ⁱ Martha Hood, staff writer *The Birmingham News*, Sunday February 13, 1955

ⁱⁱ Luke 10:37

ⁱⁱⁱ John Claypool, *Stories Jesus Still Tells*, p.92

^{iv} Martha Hood, *ibid*