

Rev. Dr. Mark A. Fowler • Sunday, July 10, 2016  
Text: Matthew 5:13-16



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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It is a breathless moment! The anticipation of new beginnings has finally arrived. My heart overflows with gratitude. Some have voiced it, "What will he say?" How will the response be? Will you talk about this...?

It is a breathless moment in the life of our country. The violence that has erupted and the deep disappointment and grief that it continues turns some to anger and despair. It burdens our souls and weighs heavily on our future. It is hard enough to absorb, understand and respond to a Ferguson and then Cleveland or Charleston, Orlando or even here in Madison. Now Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas...all at once and overwhelmingly deadly.

Breathless as I leap fully into the reality of the ministry of this church, not knowing what all that might mean, but trusting in your embrace and hospitality and hope for our future together and the God who brought us to this place. Immersing in a church community that has taken the stand to be "Downtown for Good" that begs the daily question "How are we good for downtown?"

Hopeful, that the first impressions I have of this congregation are joy-filled and eager. A wide smile as the back door was opened to secret Susan and me up the stairs for the opening inquisition which turned into a conversation of future promise and possibility. An adventure to the Concert on the Square Wednesday evening. Navigating through the sea of people I heard my name several times. Each one was a member of this congregation reaching out with a hand and a smile wondering if I had a place and something to eat. A place, a name and a meal. Blessing a newcomer and welcoming a stranger.

When I first entered Madison coming off Route 30 down East Wash...the capitol gleaming in the sun...my mind ran to Jesus' words from his inaugural sermon, "A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden!" I was drawn to this center of the city and the state. Happy to find a home in Grandview Commons on the far east side of Madison where you can see the capitol from the rise nearby.

I shared that verse with someone who asked about the subject of this first sermon. "We aren't on a hill!" Remember I have just moved from Chicago where everything is flatter than flat. So, ok, perhaps it is a city set upon a gentle rise cannot be hidden. Or, for our contextual purposes and loose translation of the original Greek we might hear Jesus say, "A city set upon an isthmus cannot be hidden."

It is a more complex claim for our mission to be **A City Set Upon an Isthmus**. It claims us to be a bridge between two things that are otherwise separated. I asked another church member if folks were ever afraid that with all of this water around there would be a flood? "We are not! Never happen!" A courageous statement for our mission. We are not afraid to bridge that which is separated.

Jesus claimed those listening to his inaugural sermon to be a city set upon a hill. It is assumed by scholars that he was referring to the city of Sepphoris that looms above the site of his sermon by the Sea of Galilee. A Roman administrative city, a capital. It is surprising that he does not mention Jerusalem. But, this Roman city where power and politics, wealth and culture, art and sport, education and a wide diversity of people drawn to it swirl to shape its life. People are clearly more stratified than in the villages of the countryside. Wealth is concentrated, but so is poverty and those who came with a dream live in a nightmare. The insiders and outsiders, the powerful and their lobbyists are distinctive. What happens in Sepphoris does not stay in Sepphoris, but is known and affects the region and beyond.

It is reasonable to believe that Jesus knew Sepphoris as it was being built in his lifetime and the work of itinerant carpenters like Joseph and his apprenticed son Jesus would have given him intimate access to the dynamics of that city.

"You, are like that city set upon a hill." What is done cannot be hidden.

"Downtown for good affirms that claim." But, it also embraces an alternative vision of the city. A beloved community, a just community, an inclusive community, a community of belonging and fulfillment. Osvaldo Vena, New Testament scholar, has offered us a vision of Jesus as a disciple of this "Kingdom of God," as it is traditionally called. We are called to join in the transforming reversal laid out in the vision of the gospel.

At the heart of the City on an Isthmus is a vibrant faith community that practices and shares and opens itself to constantly becoming what it seeks for the society around it. The Wesleyan Methodist movement had its beginnings in the city among the poor and those on the margins. At its spiritual center were small groups/class

meetings in which “love divine” was practiced and care was extended each to the other. It fortified a sustaining movement of social transformation that could not be hidden in the meeting rooms and sanctuaries.

When I saw the capitol dome here in Madison and the missional challenge the city set on an Isthmus would be I remembered my introduction as a boy to the goldleaf dome of the capitol in Boston, on Beacon Hill. My grandmother admired the shining goldleaf and was grateful it was restored. It had been painted over during the Second World War to attempt to hide it from enemy bombers should they ever come. It was foolish, she said, you can never hide anything that big meant to be a shining light!

You can never hide something meant to be a shining light.

The church is called to be that light. We are not only to affirm that which is bright, but to shine in the shadows and difficult places. It is wonderful to enjoy what everyone means when they tell me I will love Madison...and I already do. But, we must continue to have the courage to be light in the difficult and dark places.

The Outreach ministry and its numerous volunteers shines a light in the homeless corners and sidewalks of this city. It reminds us that we follow Jesus who had no place to lay his head. As people of faith we must remember that the one we proclaim was homeless and was despised by many. Truly, to be downtown for good is to offer hospitality in the manner of Jesus...a homeless man who had the audacity to say, “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

I have been deeply impressed that this congregation offers itself in ministry and outreach to be Hope’s Home to Madison. The constant deliveries of food into and out from the church, the arrangements made to provide folks in need a place to lay their head and receive care is outstanding. We were blessed to open a new kitchen at a new residence for the once homeless this week at the Rethke Center.

Yet, we know these are triage and band aids. Imperative in the moment, but not transformative to the beloved community in the long term. We must speak and live the vision of the homeless man of Nazareth who refused to be silenced even in the humiliation of the cross. And, demand attention by the powers and principalities to the eternal reality that this homeless man of Nazareth is alive and is urgent about transformation in the way we live together in the light of the beloved community.

Stay in the Light. Downtown for Good must be Good for Downtown. We are Hope’s Home dedicated to being a community of love and grace and hospitality that strengthens us for the living of these days and the courage to remain an isthmus that bridges the separations.

St. Paul saw the spread of the church to the urban centers of the Roman Empire. He was greatly concerned about the divisions and stratifications he experienced. He was quite clear that in the household of faith...as a model for the world’s transformation...there would be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, black nor white nor Hispanic nor Asian, gay nor straight, we are all one as children of God.

This commitment to unity and our place as an *isthmus* speaks to the **urgency of the moment and a sustained commitment into the future:**

I sat down to my desk to wade through the pile of material Phil left for me. Prominent on the pile was a report from the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families: **The Exceptional Magnitude of Dane County’s Black/White Disparity.**

**Friends, we begin our ministry in a difficult time** that have been named for cities set upon hills: Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas. These are challenges of responsibility for us to name the names of the cherished children of God: Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Brent Thompson, Lorne Ahrens, Patrick Zamarripa Michael J. Smith and Michael Krol.

And, to be reminded of Tony Robinson and too many others.

Hard as this is, we must cope with the fact that the issues of race have plagued this nation from before its birth and were present at the beginning of the Methodist movement as the meeting of the African Methodist Episcopal Church bi-centennial conference reminds us on this day.

It is urgent upon us in a sustained way to attend to one another. It is incumbent upon us to know the names and the people whose lives are marginalized from birth and remind ourselves in the love we share with

one another that there are those whose hope rests in the fulfillment of the beloved community because the disparities of this present age are insurmountable and deadly. They lead to violence and deadly division.

In a welcoming meeting with Chancellor Blank at the University of Wisconsin we shared many hopes and possibilities for our life together in Madison, but what weighed heavy on her heart and concerned her plans for the fall was the issue of the divisions on the campus around race. We share those concerns. We have the capacity to address them as a church, as a connectional church. These are not just issues of Madison, but are the challenges of a city set upon an isthmus that draws the state to itself in the excellence of Badger education. But, it is also the collision of diversity and disparity that is often unknown at home. I have been told by some of my students when they return to Wisconsin that the emphasis on racial issues don't affect them. Yes they do!

**And, they are played out in the divisions of the campus.** We are called to be the isthmus within the city of Madison and the state of Wisconsin. Our hope is not to fix a problem, but to be agents of transformation to a beloved community in which there is truly no disparity nor division, but all are one in the household.

And so, we begin. With joy and with hope. With hospitality and with courage. With a commitment to a place and a name. With readiness to provide a meal and a mattress, a community and a journey. Downtown for Good, committed to being Hope's Home and an isthmus of grace. Amen.