

“We are a community in the heart of the city...”

*A sermon preached on Mark 7:24-37 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 9, 2018*

I.

As it often happens in the beginning of a new school year, our family’s rhythms and patterns have shifted to make room for a new school in our lives, and all that comes with it – a new community, new needs for school lunches and volunteering for field trips and the car dropoff line, new artwork that comes home and stories of all the day’s discoveries, and for me, a new traffic pattern around downtown! Our son’s school is just a handful of blocks away from First Baptist, but with various road closures, overflow traffic from Business-40, one-way streets, and construction swirling all around us, I am still regularly opening up my Google Maps app to help me navigate the best way to get there.

I don’t think I’ve yet mastered my route, but I have experienced far more of the little quirks and side streets and views than I had prior to these last few weeks. For me, when you have the opportunity to see the cityscape differently, it takes on a new feel – whether I’m driving under the Reynolds smokestacks, or navigating around the sprawling Innovation Quarter or through construction of half a dozen new apartment buildings around town, walking up MLK Boulevard or down Poplar to Crystal Towers, passing the bus station and artisans on Trade, noticing the charming architectural connection between the recently-renovated Benton Convention Center and the Sawtooth Center, and the list could go on for days. It seems sometimes

without even realizing it, I fail to see what and who lies outside of the space of my living, even if it's already there in plain sight.

II.

Through this lens, we begin today a four-week preaching series, looking to Jesus as we always do to illuminate for us as *individuals* a new way of living, but also asking particularly for us as a *church* how we might understand and apply our church's recent vision statement in light of Jesus's life and ministry. For as we have recently claimed, "we are a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people." Piece by piece, we'll wonder together with Jesus how this may actually unfold.

But first, we turn to the Gospel of Mark where we meet Jesus on the road. First to the region of Tyre, not far from the Sea of Galilee in a land populated heavily with Gentiles. Scholars tell us that Jesus had likely traveled to this region, not to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles while there, but rather first to carry out his mission to the Jews.¹ But as is often the state of things around Jesus, he is sought out and found, first by a Canaanite woman of Syrian origin. A Gentile. Doubly an outsider, but one in need, for her daughter was afflicted by evil spirit and, like most moms, she was willing to go to whatever lengths and means necessary to ensure her child can be well. But as she begged Jesus for her daughter's healing, his response was curt and uncomfortably dismissive: "Let the children be fed first for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Yet her advocacy must have stirred something within him, helping him to see a more expansive vision for

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, "Mark 7:24-37," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p45.

his ministry, for when she reminded Jesus that “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” he relented and her daughter was made well.

The story continues: another city, another particular location, another person coming to Jesus on behalf one in need. This time Jesus traveled towards the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis. Met there by a group of friends who brought to him a man who was deaf and begged for his healing. This time, Jesus pulled him aside, laid hands on his ears and tongue, and pronounced a word: “*ephpatha*,” which means “be opened.” Ears unstopped and spirit set free, those who witnessed such a transformation joined this man in their awe.

III.

I hear these familiar texts in light of our vision statement and wonder anew about *space* and *shape*: the space in which these people and communities found new life, and the shape of their community because of it.

The gospel writer makes it clear that these stories happened in a real space, a place and a location and a neighborhood where the Word was made flesh in transformative ways. But in these various spaces, healing wasn’t limited to their bodies; it fell upon their communities and relationships. You see, in a day and age without scientific advancement to help explain otherwise, physical impairments were seen as the consequence of sin, and those who bore them engendered fear and isolation from others.² Jesus understands that a woman whose daughter flailed and cried and hollered was a woman not likely to be included, or invited into people’s homes and lives, or trusted, or beloved. He understands that a man unable to hear or to speak

² Amy C. Howe, “Mark 7:24-37,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p46.

clearly was one often silenced in spirit, not merely in voice. And more than two thousand years later, he understands that our human proclivity is to overlook, marginalize, leave out, and ignore those who fall outside the real or perceived boundaries of our communities. So natural is this human tendency that even Jesus himself needed the reminder of inclusion, one that for him and for us often comes from those who live just outside the community's edges. For when the Spirit is at work, borders that preserve space may fall away, opening wide the welcome on behalf of God. Never do we see that more profoundly than we do in the arms that stretched so broadly to include the whole wide world and then be nailed so openly on that cross.³

I imagine too that the shape of the communities in Tyre and the Decapolis couldn't help but to be impacted by what transpired there. As the once excluded came in, who else might soon belong? How might their communities shift and change? What and who will they become?

III.

For most of the day yesterday, all our pastoral staff, a group from our outreach team, and several of you who stopped in for shade and support offered ourselves as a presence of love in downtown Winston as part of the annual Bookmarks Festival. This was the first time we've done such an event in awhile, and thanks to the creative spark of our own Mitch Phipps and the tireless efforts of our Amy Cook and others, we were — I think! — a warm and inviting presence for all who stepped up into our booth.

No detail had gone unnoticed. From the bright tablecloth, the colorful basket of Starburst candy, the little stickers and buttons bearing our church

³ An image evoked from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven*, p65

logo, the stack of cards with information about our church, the stones and paint pens standing ready for people of all ages to write an encouraging word upon these 'kindness stones,' and even a raffle for a Bookmarks gift card, all these pieces were carefully assembled to be neighborly, engaging those in our city who make Bookmarks an annual tradition but who may have never stepped foot in our building some three blocks away. Throughout the day, we met hundreds of folks, some who just needed a fruity piece of candy, others who wanted to hear more about our renovation project and buildings, and a hearty handful who had real, honest questions about our church.

"Oh I know about Baptist churches," one said, eyeing me with fair cynicism. "The Baptist church in my hometown is a place where women can't speak or lead. Is yours like that?" Several asked some variation on the question: "does your church have anything for me / my spouse who grew up Catholic / my 12 year-old / my baby / my passion for arts / my love of a slower pace to life?" Some asked about our congregation's political views, or if we'll ever open another children's center or house the homeless again, or what you look like, or how we're active in the community.

And when one person asked rather bluntly, "so tell me — my family recently moved here and actually is looking for a church home. Why should I come to your church?," I took a deep breath and said again to her what I had said to so many others throughout the day. "First Baptist Church on Fifth," I started, the words from our vision statement flooding my mind, "is a community in the heart of our city." I paused for a moment, feeling the need to describe who we are before I finished the statement about what we do. I told her about our beautiful and messy and hospitable and hopeful

congregation, about how we have members who span just about every spectrum you might imagine: age, gender, race, orientation, ability, life stages, economic background, political worldview, you name it. I lamented the way our world is ever-more divided, fractured across lines big and small, told and told again – hoping we'll actually start believing it – the lie that we the people are more different than we are alike, and that we should be afraid of those we don't know or understand. "And yet," I said, "sometimes our diversity in the midst of such a culture makes what we do together very hard, because we aren't all the same and we don't always agree. Sometimes it would make things far easier if we moved in lockstep with one another on all manner of issues! But thank God we don't! Because of that, because our fellowship together is free and faithful, vibrant and varied, our church has become for me a harbinger of hope in a cynical, fearful world. In such a landscape, I experience First Baptist Church on Fifth to be an outpost of hospitality and generosity, welcome and care, filled with people from all stages and seasons of life, united in Christ and commissioned to love well."

I realized then that I had accidentally climbed on a favorite soapbox of mine, and paused, checking in with my new conversation partner to be sure I hadn't lost her along the way. "Huh," she said, her mind seeming to process all that I had said. After a long pause and a deep, searching look, she ended with what seemed like an interested smile and a curious spirit: "well maybe I'll come check y'all out sometime."

IV.

And it was there, surrounded by a new community in the heart of the city with the space and shape of Jesus on my mind, I prayed for our church and God's vision which calls us.

Would that we never escape the notice of those who come to us in need or that we never dismiss the cry of a parent or a friend on another's behalf.

Would that we be so willing like Jesus to be stirred and shaken by a beloved child of God in our midst.

Would that we become such advocates for the afflicted that we exercise some holy persistence on behalf of justice and mercy.

Would that we be a community willing to come to Jesus when our own collective listening to one another and hearing the noisy city around us becomes impacted and diminished. And would that we be so willing to 'be opened' right here in the heart of the city.

Would that we strain our ears to hear wisdom crying out in these streets, raising her voice on Fifth and Spruce, speaking truth on Broad as on MLK, 52 as on Business 40, Stratford Road as on Peters Creek Parkway.

Would that we seek the welfare of our city – not just the spaces we frequent, the land we love, the restaurants and shops and parks and roads we visit, but **all** the city, particularly those places we may never go.

Would that we realize that the welfare of *me* is bound up in the welfare of *we*; that whatever impacts one part of our city impacts us all – north, south, east, west, and all the hamlets and highways in between.

And would that we ask God as we tear down buildings to build up our church — not for our sake, but for God’s sake. Not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Not for gain or reward, status or acclaim, but only for the joy of participating in the in-breaking kingdom of God here on earth, to this city in which we live and move and have our being.

Would that we become a community whose heart and witness and life together and calling were situated so firmly within our city, I imagine that our community might be changed from the inside out, with ears opened to God and neighbor and eyes to see anew all what and who is around us, even if it’s already there in plain sight.

Amen.