

## **100 Years: Of the City**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 4:23-25  
on October 5, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC  
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Early last month on a beautiful Saturday morning, our Deacons and pastors gathered for one of those day-long meetings called a “retreat.” We had several “important but less urgent” discussion topics on our plate to consider outside of the constraints of a regular meeting. Instead of leaving town to tuck away in the woods, we retreated across and up – across the street to 500 West Fifth and up high where we could consider our church and surrounding context from a bird’s eye view.

The meeting went well, aided by delicious food, good coffee, and snacks, and we capped it off at the end with a trip to the rooftop terrace. The view was fabulous – Pilot Mountain over here, the steeple tower of Wait Chapel over there, Reynolds Auditorium regally facing the city, and a fantastic view of the church house just below. We saw the bus station just down the way, 4th Street cutting through downtown like an artery of restaurants and shops, neighborhoods and new parks, highways and hotels, office buildings and overpasses, and all the people moving about like little ants between them. You should know that our city is just stunning from the 18th floor.

You should also know that when you’re up that high, not only can you see the city, but you also can see the gathering storm clouds and right where they’re headed, which we did. By the time we had finished cleaning and packing up from the retreat, the sky had opened all the way up. I insisted to the Deacon officers I’d be fine pushing the stainless steel rolling cart full of stuff back over to the church, and before I ventured out in the rain, one of the

kind security guards from 500 West Fifth lent me an umbrella to make it across Fifth Street. I'd be fine.

I started rolling off to a grand start, and made it nearly halfway across the plaza feeling pretty proud of myself, if I'm being honest. But it seems I hadn't factored in that storms sometimes bring wind, and wind tunnels sometimes form on a busy weather day between our church house and the building across the street. Just at that moment, a gust of wind lifted a glass bowl full of sugar packets and Sweet N Lows right off the top of the stack of paper plates it was weighing down, and one by one, paper plates started flying all around the plaza. I was still trying vainly to hold onto that umbrella while I was picking them up, when the napkin holder blew over and popped open, and then napkins joined the mighty chorus of paper goods raining down around us. Thank God Nikki Byers saw me in that moment and came out to help – and thank God she didn't hear the choice words I was muttering at the time! I gave up on the umbrella. Nikki and I scooped up as much as we could, and then started moving once again toward the church. The rain was coming down in sheets by then, and right as we were trying to cross the street, one wheel of the cart got caught in a divet in the curb, and the soggy paper goods we sloshed back on top of the cart started flying again. (Thank God none of you heard the choice words both of us were saying at that point!) As if on cue, a blessed downtown neighbor named Heather – caught in the rain on a run – came right over to rescue us. She dislodged the cart. She rolled us across the street and up the ramp. She made sure we had it from there, and wished us well.

I tell you, despite the mess and the rain and the drenched sugar packets, thanks to neighbors like Heather, our city is just as stunning from the ground as it is from the 18th floor.

## II.

Over the past two weeks, we've been considering what it means to be a community in place. We're celebrating 100 years in this place, and we're wondering how we have cultivated home in this building over 100 years and what remains in the heart for us here. Today we complete our theme phrase by considering these 100 years – not just in a beautiful building, not just sharing our open hearts with God and each other, but 100 years in this city we call home.

"We are a community," our church's vision statement begins, "in the heart of the city." Being in the heart of the city forms our imagination, we said of our neighborhood in the Confession of Identity we wrote together as a church back in 2021. "Our downtown home isn't just a city block in which our building sits," we wrote. "Rather, downtown Winston-Salem has become the place that shapes our priorities, our resources, our relationships, our imagination. Here, we are from, and from here, we are sent."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as we've talked about over these weeks, when, given the opportunity at various points in our church's story to move out toward new housing developments or away from the teeming energy of downtown, we've chosen to move deeper into the center of the city, because we feel *this* is where God has called us to serve.

If you think about it, our church would have an entirely different flavor if we were plopped off Peters Creek out near the county line, or in the quiet shadow of Pilot Mountain, or off the interstate in the suburban sprawl of

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<sup>1</sup> First Baptist Church on Fifth, *Confession of Identity*, <https://firstonfifth.org/confession-of-identity/>

Clemmons, or in the shaded neighborhoods of Ardmore or West Salem or Buena Vista or Waughtown. Think about that aerial view of where we sit – Crystal Towers out the back, 500 West Fifth out the front, Benton Convention Center and a new amphitheater to come on the east, and businesses, organizations, and a neighborhood to the west. That we are a church who, in the words of our Deacon chair, Wally Cox, “does ministry out our front door and our back door,” means we are changed by the city in which we gather. God has beckoned us to be called *to* the city, and formed *by* the city, and hopeful *with* the city, and invested *in* the city. Together, we seek its welfare and contribute to its flourishing.

Some see cities as the site and source of identity transformation, of finding oneself, seekers of the “if I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere” variety. Others come to life in the teeming masses of difference that cities harbor – scholars and dropouts, the bored and the addicted, the millionaires and the penniless, traditional and modern, conservative and liberal and libertarian and socialist and a few others you may not even have heard of, and every shade on the human rainbow of race and gender and sexuality and nationality and ethnicity. And yet, today our cities are the places where the national guard is being summoned, sites for “training grounds” of our US military, nothing more than a dangerous threat for those obsessed with total control and uniformity. You see, at the heart of a city’s power isn’t its commerce or architecture, not the businesses or organizations that line the streets. At the heart of a city’s power is its people.

### III.

Of that, Jesus was never confused. For in our brief passage for today – these three verses that give shape to Jesus’s public ministry in the world – people in all their variety and fullness are everywhere.

We’re in the Gospel of Matthew today, meeting Jesus after his baptism and forty days in the wilderness. He has left his hometown of Nazareth for Capernaum, and there by the Sea of Galilee, called Simon Peter, Andrew, James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John. “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of people.” But before Jesus will offer his timeless Sermon on the Mount, before he’d begin healing people, and stilling storms, and sparring with Pharisees, and teaching in parables, he has to start somewhere in his public ministry. And he begins, Matthew tells us, right where the people are.

For the good news of Jesus is good news for the people. Right at the center of Jesus’s ministry is the good news of the kingdom of God, God’s audacious dream for this world where the hungry are filled, and the shackled are liberated, and the lowly are lifted, and the pompous are brought down, where all people flourish in the abundance of God. Who is this good news for? *The people*. Those inside the religious spaces and those on the outside. Those living with disease and sickness and pain. Those tortured by their own thoughts and bound by their own bodies. Those exiled from their communities and bereft of resources to come to their aid. Those the world around them would call “unclean” or “impure.”<sup>2</sup> They came to him, streaming one right after the other, Matthew tells us, in clumps and clans and crowds, from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

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<sup>2</sup> Gratitude to Erik Kolbell for his description of the people to which Jesus was sent in *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, p19-21.

Where, you might ask, is Jesus in relation to the people? Scandalously right in their midst. Shockingly biased to those at the bottom. Centering their flourishing. Imbuing every life with sacred worth. Making their physical, emotional, and mental health a necessary expression of the coming kingdom of God. Intertwining the ministries of teaching and proclaiming and healing and caregiving so fully in his ministry, that we who follow behind should never pull them apart.

Jesus is not watching them from a safe and dry distance on the 18th floor. He's not afraid of them and acting as though they're threats. He's dwelling among them. With them. Alongside them. In the mess and the rain, in the pain and the suffering, in the hope and the possibility, in the territory where ends give way to new beginnings, in the place where death makes way for resurrection. Jesus is there. And that's where we're called to be too.

#### IV.

Friends, as we consider this 100th anniversary and our "home in the heart of the city," I wonder: how is God deepening our connection to this place and all her complexities? What ways have we not yet imagined for planting and rooting ourselves in the heart, at God's heart, of our city? In the next year or five or ten or 100, how might our city enlarge the hearts of First on Fifth? How will we be changed by our downtown neighbors?

It's 2025. We know that proximity doesn't guarantee relationship. Two people can live side by side, work side by side, play side by side, and have views and votes and habits as far away from each other as anything. And yet, where else but a city is the gift of proximity so available? Where else but a city can you find within arm's reach those on every end of every spectrum – representing the wide global imagination of the world God so loves? Where

else but a city can hold the most colorful and vibrant tapestry of human experience: each one a holy ground for light to break through? Where else but a city can God's boundless imagination for this world be in fullest view?

Tonight, we'll go out these doors, and close down Fifth Street, and have a dinner party with our neighbors. We're calling it The Longest Table. (Well, 40 tables, to be exact.) Who knows who might show up! We'll be there with our food and plates and napkins (hopefully not blowing all over the plaza!). Together, we'll sit at tables with neighbors we don't know. Together, we'll be in close proximity. Together, we'll break bread. Together, we'll share a meal. God will be there, right in the heart of our city.

Friends, how might our church's proximity to the city out our doors be its greatest agent of transformation? What will it take for us to disrupt the boundaries of our place, so that when we come to our church house, we're not passing by all the people and places of our city and missing their gifts? How can we be sure that we're not parachuting in but rather participating with?

## V.

Over in Liverpool, England, St. Nicholas Church stands facing the harbor, where ships come from all over the world, bearing food and supplies and items to be sold for the citizens all around them. Before World War Two, though, the church house of St. Nicholas faced away from the harbor, such that when you entered in, you effectively turned your back on the world outside. But when that church house was destroyed by bombs during the war and chose to rebuild, the congregation made the decision to reorient the

foundation and build the sanctuary facing the harbor to never again be the kind of church who turns away from the people of this world.<sup>3</sup>

First Baptist on Fifth, may we be like St. Nicholas Church, whose backs never face our neighbors. May we be like Jesus, whose earthly life centered the people he came to dwell among. May we become the shapers of our city, leaders who seek its welfare for the common good. May we be shaped by our city, listening to, participating with, and loving those right outside our doors. God has beckoned us to be called to the city, and formed by the city, and hopeful with the city, and invested in the city. So maybe, just maybe, the most significant years won't be the 100 behind us, but rather the 100 ahead. Right here, at our home in the heart of the city. Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> G. Curtis Jones, *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, p71-72.