

Annual Conference Sermon  
Tuesday, July 3, 2007  
“When Shame Meets Grace: The Gospel According to Jesus”  
Text: Matthew 28:18-20; John 4:4-30

The year 1925 was an important one for the Brethren in Roanoke, VA. On May 3 of that year, the congregation where I serve as pastor was opened. In many ways, the founding of Central Church of the Brethren in downtown Roanoke, VA is no more or less significant than the founding of any of our churches. It is always a cause for great celebration when a new congregation opens their doors for public worship. But the story of the founding of Central Church is helpful for understanding the missional task of the church.

In the early 1920's a group of Brethren met to assess the need for a new congregation in the city of Roanoke. Prior to this, there was one Brethren congregation in the city limits of Roanoke, but growth in this church was not keeping pace with the growth of the city. So a committee was formed to look into planting a new congregation. Their purposes are described in a July 18, 1925 article of the *Gospel Messenger* by J. Allen Flora, one of the founding members of the Central congregation. Brother Flora said...

The Central church is the direct result of the efforts of a group of people who are very much interested in the church and in the saving of their own children to the church. **It is a lamentable fact, and yet a fact known to all, that in the past generation the church in this city and community has lost enough of its own to make a church larger than any we have**

Did you hear that? The Brethren in Roanoke realized that in one way, shape, or form they had lost enough members or potential members to form a congregation larger than the one they had. But in the face of this concern, Brother Flora and his committee did more than lament the fact of congregational decline, and their vision was not limited to only what had worked in the past. He continues...

The group decided on the following: first, select a favorable location, second, build a

modern plant, and third, have a unique program for the developing of the young people. So about three years ago a location was selected in a good section of the city where there was no Brethren church, and in a part of the city where quite a few members lived. Plans were immediately laid for the building of a new church and the present plant is the concrete result of the humble, but noble efforts of a consecrated, sacrificing, enthusiastic, united group of people. In this the Lord has most graciously blessed the group beyond their fondest anticipations. The outlook is bright and the opportunity great for service.

Brothers and sisters, even though our methods may have changed, the underlying reasons that Brother Flora and his committee had for planting a church are quite valid for our own day. What is more, their motivations fall squarely in line with the Brethren understanding of being the church...

- Their motivations were similar to those of the first Brethren in Germany who were diligent in sharing their faith and were willing to baptize adult believers who could count and accept the cost, even if this meant being forced to leave the places they were living.
- Their motivations were similar to those of the Germantown congregation who in the fall of 1724 sent their entire male membership on an evangelistic trip.
- Their motivations were similar to those of Raymond and Laura Cottrell, who left North Manchester, IN in 1913 to travel to the mission field in India.
- Their motivations were similar to countless other Christians throughout the history of our faith who understood that the church is not called to survive, and it is not called to only care for its own membership. We are called by our Lord to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, making disciples of all nations and to train them in Kingdom living in this life, even while we look forward to the next.

All of them understood that opportunities for evangelism come as disciples are actively involved in the world, confronting the sinful systems of this age in the power of Jesus Christ.

We see this at work in Jesus' life, specifically in his conversation with the woman at the well. Jesus is traveling. On this trip, he had an option: take the route more commonly used by his contemporaries and bypass Samaria, or take the road straight through Samaria. Jesus takes the road into the heart of Samaria. One day along this journey, in the middle of the day, Jesus is tired and thirsty and he comes a well where he can get some water. A woman comes by to get some water for herself and Jesus begins to speak with her. And in this conversation between Jesus and this unnamed woman, she gets one of the worst cases of the "Yes, but's" that you will find in Scripture.

What are the “Yes, but’s”? If you’ve ever had children in your home, I suspect you know. The “Yes, but’s” are what happens when every reason you give as to why something should be one way is met with a reason why it can’t be that way.

“Can I please have a drink of water?”

“Yes, but...you’re not really supposed to be talking to me.”

“Ah, but if you knew who was asking, you’d ask for living water.”

“Yes, but...you don’t even have a jug, and anyway, how could what you offer be greater than this well from our father Jacob?”

“The water I offer leads to eternal life.”

“Yes, but...let me have a drink of this water.”

All through the conversation, the woman is blocking Jesus, both with her cultural ideas of how people are supposed to relate to one another, as well as with her misunderstanding of what Jesus is talking about.

But Jesus is not put off by her. The conversation is where he wants it, and he takes it from water to salvation; from human need to God’s gift; from shame to grace. He makes the shift by asking her about the men in her life.

It’s a strange shift in the conversation—totally out of the blue. It ought to occur to us to wonder how Jesus knew to ask about her husband. **This, brothers and sisters, is the power of God. Jesus knows that opportunities to share the good news come as the sinful systems of the world are challenged, that when the shame of this world meets the grace of God, the gospel according to Jesus will be on the scene.** And so, Jesus asks her about the men in her life.

It turns out there are six. Five husbands now off the scene and one man she is presently living with. We’re not told why there have been five husbands. From what we know of the practices of the day, it is reasonable to assume that some of them have died, and some of them have divorced her.

We’re also not told why she’s only living with the sixth. It could be that somewhere along the way in a world where single women had no voice she decided that entering a relationship for the promise

of shelter was a reasonable trade. It could be that she has given up on the prospects of marriage and has just made a practical decision to take care of her needs.

Whatever the reasons, this woman is an outcast in her own community, left to get water for her jug in the middle of the day so she can avoid the shame of stares and whispers of other women. And it is here that Jesus meets her. Having intentionally chosen to be in a place that nearly every other rabbi avoids; having made a decision to talk to a woman that nearly every other person ignores, Jesus demonstrates what evangelism can look like. Jesus is not so hung up on where she's been and how she's been living that he must condemn her, but he is sure enough about grace that he will not allow her own shame to be just one more "Yes, but" that stands between her and a loving God. Her shame has met God's grace, and it transforms this ignored woman into an evangelist, proclaiming the Gospel according to Jesus. **When other people spoke of "everything" this woman had done, it was a cause for shame. But when Jesus spoke of "everything" she had ever done, it was an opportunity for grace.**

When you tell others of Jesus, does it have this effect on people? You know the Samaritan villages around your church; the places where things are a certain way, and everyone likes it when they are left alone. The places where people are living in shame and in sin, the places where the circumstances of people's living make us uncomfortable. Are we being—and making—evangelists there? When we speak of "everything" someone has done, is it a cause for shame or an opportunity for grace?

If we're serious about being disciples of Jesus, evangelism is not an optional part of our living. Theologian Donald Bloesch says this in no uncertain terms; he says that the church that is not an evangelizing church is either not yet, or has stopped being, the church. Jesus, in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 says simply "make disciples:" persons who claim Jesus as their Lord

and seek to do the things Jesus would do if Jesus were in our place. The first task of the church is to invite other people to follow Jesus along this road we have found.

But as we do so, we must reject one piece of bad theology that often clouds our thinking. We must reject the notion that service in the name of service only is enough. Acts of service are a wonderful, essential part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is a sign of the Spirit's power in our life when we feel compassion for the pain and suffering and loss of other persons. And in this age of service and volunteerism, we have much to offer people who want to begin to think about living outside of themselves. I'm convinced that the Church of the Brethren has the right theology to meet the needs of coming generations.

But, if all we're doing is serving people only for the sake of meeting a human need, then we are not doing enough. Our acts of service must call the values and systems of this world into question. And when they do, many will ask our motivations. Our explanation will point people toward the God we serve.

Faithful Christian living calls the priorities of this world into question. It happened in Jesus' ministry all the time:

- "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"
- "Who is this who even forgives sins?"
- "Who is this fellow who told you to pick up your mat and walk?"
- "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

As it was for Jesus, so must it be for us.

- "Who are these people, who forgive when they are mistreated?"
- "Who are these people, who are willing to care for the sick, the outcast, the lost in our communities?"
- "Who are these people who believe loving their enemies means not killing them?"

And when they ask, we will have opportunities to explain the power of God—to tell others of the wonderful Savior we serve and His Spirit who lives in us. Not everyone will repent and believe.

Some will benefit from our graceful living and never come back to say “Thank you” for the blessing they have received. But some will—and when they do, we can tell them about the living water that we have found.

We have been called to Samaria and to all the world. But will we go?

For the past 4 years I have had the distinct privilege of serving on the General Board. I have come to deeply appreciate the persons I’ve shared that experience with, as we’ve laughed together, prayed and worshiped together, played games together, shared about our kids and grandkids—all the kinds of things that people who care about one another do. This evening, I want to invite you into a dream that the General Board has concerning our church, and give you the opportunity to make our dream the dream of all the Brethren.

It started in March as the Executive Committee was meeting in executive session prior to our spring board meeting. We were in the large conference room at the General Offices in Elgin, going over the business at hand. Somewhere during the morning, we began to dream. As I look back on that event, I’m convinced that it wasn’t so much our dream, as it was the Holy Spirit’s dream for the Brethren. We began to share our ideas and hopes for the church. And although we didn’t come about quite like I’m about to share it with you, it might just look something like this...

Imagine that early one afternoon, our General Secretary, Stan Noffsinger, is sitting at his desk in Elgin, busily working at matters pertaining to the church. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door; it’s Dan McFadden, standing there with a rather confused look about him, but with the hint of a grin on his face. Stan asks what the issue is, and Dan says, “All week long I’ve been getting these calls about Brethren Volunteer Service. It seems as if there are 300 persons wanting to give a year of their life to BVS—next year! We need to figure out how to accommodate all these people.”

Next comes Walt Wiltschek. He’s come to report that 300 congregations have contributed

news items about outreach ministries in their local congregations, and he's trying to find the money to run an extra-large special edition of *Messenger* about all of the local mission happening in our congregations.

Walt barely has the last sentence out of his mouth when Merv Keeney walks in, saying that 300 individuals have contacted him, each wishing to give \$300 to Brethren mission projects overseas: \$90,000 in new mission money.

Finally, the crowd of people has gotten too big to be contained in Stan's office, so they move out into the meeting area of the General Secretary's office, where they find Chris Douglas waiting for them. Chris is so excited with her news, she can barely keep the look of wonder and amazement off her face. It seems that she has learned of 300 Brethren high school seniors who have been so impacted by National Youth Conference and Summer Workcamps that they plan to go to college with the intention of starting a Bible Study in their dorm room, and they're looking for resources.

On and on the news continues...

- news of districts planting churches
- congregations calling pastors
- stewardship teams in congregations wanting to change their giving from being "90/10 churches" (where 90% of the budget is spent on the congregational needs and 10% on mission) to "50/50 churches."
- people wanting to help resettle refugees from Iraq
- a call to rebuild 300 homes in New Orleans over the next 10 years
- pastors seeking to lead their congregations through spiritual renewal.

Eventually, amidst the celebration, our General Board staff members begin to realize what is going on. It's a new commitment to "making disciples of all nations," realizing that the work of evangelism comes as disciples are actively involved in the world, confronting the sinful systems of this age in the power of Jesus Christ. Our preaching of the gospel is the explanation of the power at work in the manner of our living.

This is the General Board's "Dream of 300." Believing that this is God's dream for our church,

we want to invite you to be a part of that dream tonight as well. In a moment, persons will gather around the floor of the arena, and during the closing hymn, you are invited to respond as the Holy Spirit leads you to either offer a prayer or make a commitment to move outside the walls of your congregation and engage the Samaritan villages—wherever they may be—praying for the opportunity to share your faith and invite people to join you in our life of discipleship.