

WORSHIP

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The Whole City Was Gathered Around the Door

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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Last Sunday 646 people walked through our doors to come to worship.

Monday and Tuesday nights, twelve of our neighbors who are guests for Room in the Inn walked across or threshold to find warmth, a meal, and a place to sleep.

Last week – Monday, Tuesday, and Friday – three different anonymous groups of people walked through our halls to find their way to a meeting. Two of those groups were for AA. One was for Al-Anon.

Monday night last week a group of people gathered near the doors to the Good Samaritan Fresco lobby to spend an hour in prayer.



Every weekday, upwards of 300 children and their adults enter the doors to our schools to learn, grow, and play.

Wednesday afternoon we opened our doors to a group of volunteers who attending a training for an effort we are piloting to improve literacy at Westerly Hills Academy. Responding to a challenge from READ Charlotte, our leaders have developed a curriculum that is already being heralded by many as a model for other churches to follow.

On Wednesday evening a variety of people passed through the doors to the Wood Fellowship hall – some to have choir practice, some to ring handbells, some to attend a small group for young adults, and about a 100 to engage with the CEO of the Charlotte Housing Authority around the urgent need our city has for affordable housing.

Thursday morning, well before the sun came up, volunteers streamed through our doors to get hot coffee and a bite to eat before they went out into the streets of our city to conduct the annual “Point in Time” count, an effort to count how many of our neighbors are sleeping on benches or under overpasses or in makeshift camps. The Point in Time count serves an indicator to city and county and non-profit leaders about how many people in Charlotte are homeless.

On Tuesday and Thursday our doors swung open to greet men and women who were coming for Bible study.

Donna Dendy and Dianne Maye sat at the reception desk last week to open the door to a variety of people who came here to see the grandeur of our sanctuary, or to speak with a pastor because they were struggling.

Over there on Poplar Street, the doors to Loaves and Fishes welcomed hard-working people who still depend on our food pantry to make ends meet.

Yesterday, a sanctuary-full group of people found their way through our doors to celebrate the life of one of our long-time members and leaders, and to bear witness to the promise and the hope we have in the resurrection.

This week – we’ll do it again.

Opening our doors to those who are drawn to this place – in much the same way that we have been doing for 197 years.

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The way the gospel of Mark tells it, after he was baptized, Jesus began his ministry by making his way to a fishing village called Capernaum that sits on the banks of the Sea of Galilee.

Most scholars believe that Capernaum became something like Jesus’ home base. It was the corporate headquarters of the Jesus movement. Capernaum was a town that had some



commerce. They had a synagogue in the center of town – that’s where Jesus showed up first to teach. And after he taught, two of his disciples – Simon and Andrew – brought Jesus to their home.

We have no way of know how happening a spot Simon and Andrew’s house was before Jesus arrived on the scene, but we definitely get the sense that there was an uptick in activity as a result.

For it was there that Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law. And then word began to spread around town. And other people came by to be healed. And others to have demons cast out. And others to hear Jesus teach some more. And before you knew it, Mark tells us that “the whole city was gathered around the door.”

Can’t you picture it? People of all different ages and stages making their way in the cool of the evening to the house where Jesus was staying. A variety of backgrounds, a variety of needs – some spiritual, some physical. All gathered together at the door because the house contained something that they needed that they wouldn’t find anywhere else.

To me, it looks like church.

For when we are at our best, are we not the place where human need – whatever it is – encounters Jesus Christ.

When we are at our best, are we not the place where the human search, the quest for fulfillment, purpose, wholeness, salvation eventually leads?

More than an organization with members

Or an institution with history

Or a community center that offers services

Or a place that offers programs

The church proclaims the gospel.

We proclaim a message that saves and heals and helps and makes meaning and exposes our poor choices so that can make more faithful ones and reminds us that we don’t have to be anything more than what God has already created us to be.

That’s why people come to our doors – and through our doors.

They want healing. They want purpose. They want to confront their demons. They want to belong to a community that doesn’t define them by what they bring to the bottom line.

Isn’t that what you want? Isn’t that why you are here?



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Last week, one of our Deacons sent me an article from the New York Times about a new class offered at Yale University. The class is so popular, they had to move it from a classroom into what used to function as the University's chapel, and then from the chapel to the school's concert hall. One quarter of the student body is enrolled.

The class is Psych 157: The Psychology of the Good Life. Taught by Dr. Laurie Santos, the class tries to teach students how to lead a happier, more satisfying life. Dr. Santos speculates that the reason her class is so popular is because those who are now Yale students had to deprioritize their happiness to gain admission into the school, adopting harmful life habits that have – Dr. Santos believes – led to a mental health crisis. At Yale, 50% of undergraduates seek mental health care during their time at school.

Alannah Maynez, a 19-year-old freshman in the class, said “The fact that a class like this has such a large interest speaks to how tired students are of numbing their emotions – both positive and negative – so they can focus on their work, the next step, the next accomplishment.”

What does it tell us that some of our brightest teenagers have already figured out that a life spent chasing after their work, or the next step, or the next accomplishment will end up leaving them numb?

What can we learn from the fact that this next generation of leaders are already searching for something to help them fill – what Pascal once called – “a God-shaped” vacuum in their hearts?

I, for one, think it sounds like an opportunity.

A summons to action.

A rallying cry for the church to take seriously the importance of the gospel we exist to proclaim.

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Early in the morning, after a day of teaching and healing and ministering to the people who gathered at Simon and Andrew's house, Jesus went off to a deserted place to pray.

That's an important part of the story – and it's an important part of the Christian life: to take space away for prayer and reflection; for rest and a chance to re-focus.

The needs of the people don't stop.

While he was praying, Simon and his friends hunted for Jesus. You can almost hear the anxiety in their voices: “everyone is searching for you!” they said. Enough of this praying,



Jesus. We've still got people gathered at the door!

But Jesus – perhaps because he took the time to reflect and pray – told them that his message wasn't just meant to be proclaimed from one house. It needed to be shared more broadly.

“Let's go into the neighboring towns,” Jesus said, ‘Let's go to other houses...because the message needs to be proclaimed there, too.’”

A few weeks ago in a community gathering with Munro Richardson who is the Executive Director of READ Charlotte, I saw a map of our city. It was a map I have become familiar with – because it shows the “crescent and the wedge.” The wedge is the southeastern slice of our city (where I live) that is generally affluent and full of economic opportunity. The crescent is the area – much of it west, north, and east – that has dramatically less wealth, resources, or opportunities. It is a map that reveals a lot about our city – and from it you can predict which schools are succeeding or failing, where literacy rates are higher or lower, where there is a higher percentage of crime, and on and on.

It is map that tells the story of human need. And although some of them are different – the map reveals need in both the crescent and the wedge.

I had seen the map before, but then Munro went to the next slide and overlaid the map of the crescent and the wedge with 960 dots. And those dots were spread out over the entire community. They were proximate to every kind of human need. Not clustered in some parts of town and absent from others – but scattered – like seed – throughout the city.

They were churches.

Different houses of worship.

All of them – no matter the stripe – carrying the message of the gospel and with people gathered around their doors.

Yesterday 1000 people who represented more than 200 of those houses of worship – including ours – met for what was called “Movement Day.”

The purpose of Movement Day is to connect and equip Christian leaders to make a measurable impact on Charlotte through the gospel.

Movement Day is committed to working toward a number of missional goals – including affordable housing, strengthening public schools, finding homes for children in foster care, welcoming immigrants and refugees, and working to improve economic mobility –

but what gives me the most hope in this effort is the growing sense that as the church of Jesus Christ, we are in this together; that we have a shared mission; that regardless of our areas of difference – evangelical, mainline; conservative, liberal; hipster, or traditional; church-plant or historic – we are houses of worship that proclaim a message



that people are searching for; that people need.

A message that heals and helps and makes meaning like nothing else can or will.

There is a lot about this house of worship that is special.

But what we do here is not unique.

Christ's mission is not this house.

It is to equip this and every other house with the good news that brings transformation and salvation.

