

“ONE DEGREE OF SEPARATION”

Ezekiel 37:1-3 ¹

For some years, now, I’ve heard people talking about “two degrees of separation,” “six degrees of separation,” and other variants of the same idea . . . but I was only vaguely aware of what they were talking about. After consulting “Dr. Google,” it appears to me that a “degree of separation” is a measure of social distance between people—and “social distance” is something we’re hearing a lot about right now.

As I understand it, you are “one degree” away from everyone you know, “two degrees” away from everyone they know, and so on. The idea seems to have originated with the Hungarian author, Frigyes Karinthy in a 1930 article called “Chain Links.” According to Karinthy, most people know about 100 other people through their networks of family, friends, and co-workers, and each of those, 100 more. This results in an exponential progression that by the fifth iteration exceeds the number of people on the planet.²

A number of researchers have tested Karinthy’s hypothesis and have concluded that because every human is linked to other humans by chains of acquaintance, any two random humans are only about six introductions away from one another, no matter where they live.³

The current spread of the coronavirus around the world is an unpleasant reminder of how this works. On a more positive note, such exponential networks of relationships also explain how Christian faith spread across the Roman empire so quickly after Jesus’ Resurrection; and it is by such networks of relationships that the Gospel still changes neighborhoods, nations, and cultures today.⁴

As I mention the spread of Christian faith, I should also note that there is a great spiritual awakening underway in our land, even—maybe *especially*—in such troubled times as these. People sense a new freedom to explore things of faith, and they’re checking out not only pastors and priests but also spiritual guides of many other sorts. Some are taking up yoga; some are channeling; others meditate; and they’re burning up the Internet in their search.

Now the good news is that people are spiritually hungry today, and they know it. The modern world has left folks in a state of spiritual emptiness in which they sense a significant vacuum in their lives. But the bad news is that this awakening is largely taking place outside the Christian community.

Unlike previous awakenings, the Church is not at the center of this awakening, but at its edge, and many traditional churches probably don’t have the spiritual vitality necessary to survive the journey. Many traditional churches are already functionally dead, though a few members are still hanging around to turn off the lights. There is a net loss of seven Christian churches in America every day, and this brings us to today’s familiar text in Ezekiel.

Like his contemporary, Jeremiah, Ezekiel prophesied in politically volatile times. After Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., only the southern kingdom of Judah was left.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 15, 2020.

² 100 – 10,000 – 1,000,000 – 100,000,000 – 10,000,000,000 – 1,000,000,000,000

³ Microsoft tested this about ten years ago by checking 30 billion electronic messages and concluded that the average number of introductions was actually 6.6. Other researchers have come up with numbers as small as 6.2. www.theguardian.com/technology/2008/aug/03/internet.email
<https://exploringyourmind.com/the-six-degrees-of-separation-theory>

⁴ To make a bad joke, we might call this “corona-evangelism.”

After Babylon conquered Assyria in 612 B.C., Judah became a vassal state of the Babylonian Empire. King Zedekiah revolted against Babylon, hoping for Egypt's support, but help did not come, and Nebuchadnezzar reinforced his sovereignty over Judah in 605, deporting thousands of Jews in the process. Nebuchadnezzar enforced a second deportation in 598 B.C., and Ezekiel was among this second group of exiles.⁵

Later, when Judah's King Jehoiakim instigated yet another revolt, Nebuchadnezzar put Jerusalem under a horrible siege for two years and then destroyed both the city and the Temple in 587 B.C. Time passed, as time will do, and as the end of what we call "The Babylonian Captivity" approached,⁶ Ezekiel had a vision in Babylon.

Actually, Ezekiel had a number of visions and rather weird experiences in Babylon. The most famous of Ezekiel's visions is the one we consider today, but second place probably goes to the one memorialized in the spiritual, "Ezekiel saw the wheel, way in the middle of the sky."⁷ The book of Ezekiel is largely apocalyptic writing similar to John's Revelation in the New Testament; and Ezekiel's writing is so strange that the rabbis forbade anyone under thirty years old to read the visions at the beginning and the end of the book.

In the vision we consider today, Ezekiel found himself transported to a valley filled with human bones that had been bleached by the sun. It was as though this had been an awful field of battle where thousands had been killed and left unburied:

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know" (Ezekiel 37:1-3).

The immediate context for the vision was the return of the nation of Israel from the Babylonian Exile—that was the resurrection specifically foretold in this most unusual vision—but perhaps other applications might be made. Ezekiel's vision of "the Dry Bones," ending as it does with revivification and renewal, can be an encouragement to us as we move through uncharted and virus-filled waters.

The point of "uncharted waters," of course, is that no one has been there before, and so we don't know what's out there. We don't know what's ahead. And in a way, that's where we are as a congregation . . . but in another way, that's not where we are at all.

As we sit here this morning, we as a congregation are certainly not "dead." We're not discouraged. We're not afraid—whether of the coronavirus or of the future. We've faced significant challenges and transitions many times before, and we are solidly together as we move through this year.

At the same time, there are a good many things we don't yet know, and about those things, we say with Ezekiel, "*Sovereign LORD, you alone know.*" The wonderful thing about our God is that God still intends to redeem this old world and to establish the Kingdom of Light in all its wonder and glory. Another wonderful thing about our God is that God invites us to join in pushing back the Darkness, one person, one family, and one community at a time, so that God's Kingdom can grow and God's people can flourish. We get to help!

⁵ So far as we know, Ezekiel never returned to Judah.

⁶ The captivity ended when the Persians conquered the Babylonians in 539 B.C.

⁷ Ezekiel's visions are recorded in chapters 1-3, 7-11, 37, and 40-48.

You and I stand today on the shoulders of many saints who preceded us in this congregation, and it is given to us to build well for those who will follow us. Our task is not to recreate the past, however glorious, but rather to shape an even better future.

These who went before us were effective because they responded creatively and courageously to the challenges of living out the Great Commission in their day. Because we live in a very different world than our pioneering members did, our challenge is to take the faith principles that they passed on to us and to implement them in ways appropriate to today's needs.

Some years ago I took a bunch of our members—from another church—to a conference at the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina. I was interested in the trip for several reasons. Both of my parents used to live in Wilmington, and in fact they met at the First Baptist Church, where my Mom was the Director of Christian Education during World War II.

The name of the conference was *Hopeful Imagination: Traditional Churches Finding God's Way in a Changing World*. That's really another way to ask the question God asked Ezekiel: "*Can these bones live?*" And there were a number of related questions we asked ourselves before that conference; questions that are also relevant for us as we worship together this morning:

- Do we believe God has a purpose for our church in our community?
- Do we value both tradition and innovation?
- Do we hope to engage a new generation of leaders?
- Do we desire to see ministry spontaneously bubble up from among our people?
- Do we want to experience God's Story unfolding uniquely through our lives?
- Such *Hopeful Imagination* is for ordinary leaders who trust in an extraordinary God.
- Such *Hopeful Imagination* is for ordinary leaders who desire to be changed and who desire to be used by God to transform families and neighborhoods, even cities and nations.
- Such *Hopeful Imagination* is for the steady, the faithful, the hopeful who keep their eyes and hearts open for God to break into our ordinary days and places and to declare the "impossible" possible!

I don't know about you, but even now, a dozen years later, these questions and challenges still stir my spirit and quicken my pulse! And as we consider these questions, we do well to remember that our goal as a congregation is not "to get people to come to church." What we're really trying to do is to introduce our friends and neighbors to a vital, intimate, personal, loving and transforming relationship with the Living God!

The first thing we have to do in order to reach our neighbors is to **love** them—not as means to our ends, but as ends in themselves, *because God loves them*. And as we think about loving our neighbors, we need to ask ourselves whether we're really willing to be uncomfortable, to stretch into new ways of following Jesus so that our neighbors can come to know Him?

My friends, no matter how old we are, God calls us to live out on the end of the rope, out on the cutting edge, out on the frontier where the Kingdom is being formed, where lives are being transformed, by being willing to imagine, support, participate in and underwrite ways to reach those who have not yet come to faith, whose language, as it were, is different from ours.

Another way to describe what we're trying to do is to help our friends learn how to "dance" with God, a dance in which we follow God's lead, moving in the same direction and with the same cadence that God is using in our time. Our purpose is to discover where God is already at work and to join ourselves to what God is already doing. I've told you this before, but I continue to be challenged by the way Rick Warren began his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*:

If you take a class on surfing, you'll be taught everything you need to know about surfing: how to choose the right equipment; how to use it properly; how to recognize a 'surfable' wave; how to catch a wave and ride it as long as possible; and, most important of all, how to get off a wave without wiping out. But you'll never find a course that teaches "How to Build a Wave."⁸

Rick's point is that it is God—not we humans—Who builds waves in the ocean, and it is God—not we humans—Who builds the reality we know as the Church, the Advance Party of the Kingdom of God. What we have to do is to learn to recognize the spiritual wave God is building under us and to dare to ride that wave.

Strategies that are effective in reaching one generation with the Gospel are seldom effective in reaching the next, especially in a world that changes as quickly as our own does. In many respects, the world now changes more in five or ten years than it did across the entire lifetimes of our grandmothers and our grandfathers.

God hasn't charged us with simply "holding our position." The Great Commission is a challenge to "take new ground." You and I are on the front lines of an invading army that is taking back this planet for our King!

And so, as we begin to do some "hopeful imagining," it seems to me that within five years—or less—we could double our worship attendance as well as the number of people involved in various weekly Bible study groups. Within those same five years, dozens of us could participate in mission trips across America and around the world, and we could double our giving to mission causes. And as a result of all these ministries, within five years we could average several baptisms every month as we experience renewed effectiveness in bringing persons into the Kingdom of God!

Do these ideas appeal to you? Can you feel your spirit lifting? Does your heart begin to speed up? Mine does. And that brings me to the title of this message, which some of you have been wondering about.

I began by talking about "six degrees of separation," but my real point is "**one degree of separation.**" J. W. Holmes gave an engaging presentation some months ago about how nuclear power plants generate electricity; and the truth of the matter is that nearly all power plants generate electricity in the same way—through steam and steam turbines. The difference is in how they heat the water.

Now if you have a container of water at 211 degrees Fahrenheit, what you have is some very hot water. If you heat that water just *one degree* more, then you have steam, which, when under pressure, can generate electricity. *Just ONE DEGREE separates water from steam.*

So **what would it take** for YOU to add ONE DEGREE to the level of your commitment to following Jesus in this place so that all those questions we considered earlier might become reality? **What would it take** for your spiritual life to be truly flourishing and truly contagious?

Maybe such flourishing is something you can remember at some point in the past, but it's not your situation right now. Maybe you can't remember having ever experienced a clear sense of life purpose, an awareness that you are living well and effectively, a deep and durable connection to other people, and a hopeful expectancy as you participate in the future God is birthing . . . but wouldn't you *like* to experience those things?

⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Zondervan, 1995).

Another term we sometimes use for the kind of experiences I'm talking about is "spiritual awakening"; and once we experience spiritual awakening, all sorts of remarkable things begin to happen. We find ourselves able to **believe, feel, and do** things we couldn't do before. We discover ourselves to be on a path that is really—finally!—going somewhere, somewhere important and eternal.

Can these bones live? Can your spiritual life be vibrant, flourishing, and contagious? Can this congregation be the catalyst for transforming this neighborhood and this city? Yes! Yes! And YES!!

My friends, God's Best is yet to be in this place! **Just one degree.** Will you do it?