

“Outside the Camp”

Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 ¹

Joel, thank you for your challenge to me as I undertake the shepherding and leading of this part of God’s flock. I look forward to our service together in the Mid-Maryland Association. I also look forward to shared ministry and friendship with the clergy of the other congregations of The Meeting House, some of whom are here this afternoon. Thank you for sharing this time with us!

Ron, thank you for your challenge to the congregation as we begin the journey together. Your service as our Interim Pastor has been exemplary in every respect, and we are all deeply grateful to you and Sonia for your leadership during this transitional time.

I’m grateful to the members of our Transition Team, chaired by Rob Eidson, who have met faithfully for nearly two years to shape and guide this chapter change in our church toward even greater strength and missional effectiveness. And I’m very grateful to Debbie & Neville, Jenetha & Peggy, who have carried unusual burdens and responsibilities for a very long time as you’ve led, cared for, and served our congregation. I count it a great privilege to join you on our staff team.

Finally, I want to thank Karen Canfield and the members of the Pastor Search Committee—Karen Bucchiere, Cathy Clarke, Veeda Gaines, Sam Odulana, and Nancy Wisthoff—for your months of working and praying toward this moment. I am humbled by your invitation to become your pastor, and I will give my very best to prove faithful to your trust.

I’ve chosen the same texts as background for my remarks this afternoon that I used when I preached for you the very first time, because this moment, like that one, is setting a crucial trajectory for the years ahead. The first text, Matthew 28:18-20, is what we usually call Jesus’ Great Commission, the Marching Orders of the Church. And British professor George Beasley-Murray called 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 “the clear kernel of the gospel.”

What God calls us to do in the chapter of our lives that takes on new significance today will certainly be consistent with the Marching Orders of the Church and with the Clear Kernel of the Gospel, with our Motive and our Message. While my texts are the same, and some of what I’ll say today will sound familiar, much of what I’ll say this afternoon will take a somewhat different tack from that first sermon.

If you’re reading through the Bible with me this year, you’ll remember that we’ve recently finished reading the book of Leviticus. There’s a phrase that catches my attention each year as I read through Leviticus. It’s the phrase “outside the camp.” That phrase occurs twelve times in the book, and one occurrence is particularly poignant for me. It’s found in chapter 13: *“Anyone with . . . a defiling disease [often translated “leprosy”] must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ . . . They must live alone; they must live **outside the camp**”* (vv. 45-46).

I identify with persons with “leprosy” because I had a lot of skin trouble as a child that frequently made it difficult for me to walk, much less to run and play. That situation put me “on the outside looking in” with respect to other children for a number of years, and I well remember the pain of being “outside the camp.” Have you ever had to live “outside the camp”?

¹ A message by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 4, 2012.

Terri Brewer is a friend of mine in Bristol who has a heart of compassion for women who find themselves in jail, and our church provided a place for her to meet with “her girls.” Terri wrote a poem not long ago that paints a powerful picture of what it’s like to be “outside the camp”:

Don't come looking
 For me today
 For I'm not sure
 What I would say
 I'm locked up
 In this dark cold place
 And I see no light
 Not even a trace
 And I wonder what happens next

Don't come looking for me today
 For if you do
 There may be a trade
 Where you lose a little bit of yourself
 As you find pieces of me
 Lying lifeless and shelved
 And something of you
 May never return
 To the place you now call home

So don't come looking for me today
 If you do
 You may have to stay
 And forever
 Be chained
 Beside this wreck
 Hopeless
 Exposed
 And unloved!

Don't come looking for
 Me today
 You'll be disappointed
 Made sad for sure
 And who knows
 What you might have to endure
 As you find me bound up [outside the camp]

You might feel compassion
 You might even decide to care
 And
 You might begin to feel
 Just how broken I am

And then you might have to make
 A decision
 You might have to be strong
 Stronger than you've ever been
 You might have to offer something

You might have to lend
More than just a word or two

You might have to really do
A powerful work
Greater than yourself
You might have to fight
Fight for me
Right in that dark place
Where you don't want to be

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So don't do it
Really
Just don't do it
Because if you don't look
You'll never know
Just what need really exists
In the lives

Of the disposable people [outside the camp].

Terri's poem catapults us outside the camp, and 2 Corinthians 5 includes the "outside the camp" image, though you may not have noticed it: ¹⁹ *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.* ²⁰ *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* ²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (cp. Matthew 28:19-20).

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. The Good News that we share—our message of reconciliation and divine friendship—is that our Creator took upon Himself our pain . . . **outside the camp.** As Isaiah foretold, *Jesus was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed* (Isaiah 53:5).

As we conduct this service marking the beginning of a new chapter in our life together, I expect that nearly all of us would agree that we want our church to grow. We want our church to fulfill the Great Commission in every way possible, and that's good, because that's God's purpose, too. And if we're serious about fulfilling the Great Commission, if we're serious about taking God's wonderful message of Hope to people who don't know its reality in their lives, we've first got to *go to them* . . . outside the camp.

We're talking about a certain kind of fishing here, as Jesus said to Peter and Andrew: "*Come, follow me,*" Jesus said, "*and I will send you out to fish for people*" (Matthew 4:19-20). When journalist Greg Barrett spoke in our church in Bristol several years ago, he used a phrase that has stuck with me. Greg said, "Jesus didn't say, 'Come to church and cheer for me.' He said, 'Follow me.'" Let me say that again: "**Jesus didn't say, 'Come to church and cheer for me.' He said, 'Follow me.'**"

And what Jesus says to us this afternoon is this: "Follow me outside the camp, and I'll teach you how to fish for people. I'll show you how to find the persons who need to know me. I'll teach you how to tell about the freedom of forgiveness and the gladness of obedience. And through you, I will change the world."

“Don’t come looking for me today,” Terri’s poem says. “You’ll be disappointed, made sad for sure; and who knows what you might have to endure as you find me bound up [outside the camp]?” Terri’s poem reminds us that we live in a lonely world. We live in a world where people are desperately searching in all the wrong places for *lives that matter* and for *relationships that last*.

People came to hear Jesus by the thousands because **Jesus loved them**, and they **knew it**. Jesus loved the people “outside the camp,” and He loved being with them. Jesus chose to spend most of His time with worldly people rather than with religious people, and this was so obvious that the religious leaders mockingly called Jesus “*the friend of sinners*” (Luke 7:34), a title He wore proudly. I continue to wonder how many people would say such a thing about you or about me?

If you and I are going to make the kind of difference in our world that Jesus has told us to do, we’re going to have to be willing to become friends with people whose lives may still be rather untidy, because if our world-changing strategy requires people to “get their lives together” before coming onboard, we’re not going to reach many folks outside the camp.

Well, I’m about done, but first I want to tell you a sea story by Theodore Wedel. I’m challenged every time I tell it. I think you’ll get the point

“On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought of themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

“Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as sort of a club.

“Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club’s decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

“At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

“As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” **Let’s get to work . . . outside the camp!**