

“With Deeds of Love & Mercy”

2 Corinthians 9:6-11; James 2:14-26 (14-17) ¹

As we sit here just one month before a Presidential Election, with new complications developing every day, I imagine that very few of us have escaped wondering what in the world we’re going to do to get out of the mess we’re in. Whether you lean red, lean blue, or teeter in the middle, I’ll bet you’ve wondered. I do, too. I’m happy to say that there’s some Good News, so I hope you’ll stick with me for a little while.

Last week, I made you think pretty hard about old Melchizedek, so this week, I’m mostly just going to tell stories. We’re going to take a trip around the country, making ten stops, the last of which will be here in Columbia. We begin in the Northeast, in Boston, nearly sixty years ago.

1. Boston. On what seemed like an ordinary winter day in 1961, a meteorologist at MIT named Edward Lorenz was using a computer model to work on a weather forecast, and as a shortcut he entered the decimal .506 instead of the more accurate .506127. What came out was a radically different weather scenario from what Lorenz had expected. The tiny and seemingly insignificant changes in input resulted in enormous differences in the final result.

A decade later, in 1972, Lorenz presented a research paper that has since become a classic. His title was “**Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set off a Tornado in Texas?**” According to Lorenz, the butterfly’s wing-flapping doesn’t actually cause a tornado, but it can start a chain reaction leading to giant changes in world-wide weather. Lorenz’s “chaos science” has caused us to realize more fully that even tiny, apparently insignificant actions can produce unbelievably large effects; and today we call Lorenz’s discovery “**the butterfly effect.**”²

Some of you have already recognized Lorenz’s discovery as the origin of the unusual graphics in this morning’s *PowerPoint*. These graphics are various iterations of a sequence of equations known as the *Lorenz Attractor*. Lorenz’s discovery became foundational for modern scientific theory, and it is such “butterfly moments” that I want to highlight as anchors for Hope in this contentious and chaotic season.

Edward Lorenz discovered that seemingly tiny and insignificant changes in input data could produce huge differences in the final outcomes. What we’re thinking about this morning is a similar “butterfly effect” in the realm of the Spirit. According to Jesus, the “spiritual butterfly effect” occurs when we do small things—making a meal, visiting the sick, befriending the lonely, opening our home to guests, praying with a friend—simple acts that change the very nature of the cosmos.³

The chorus of our hymn we will sing as our hymn of commitment this morning makes this point: *For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy the heav’nly Kingdom comes.*** Let’s travel now from Boston to New York City.

2. New York City. It was a cold November night in 2012. Officer Lawrence DePrimo was working a counterterrorism beat in Times Square when he ran into a barefoot homeless man who appeared to be much older than he.

Officer DePrimo said, “It hurt me to see someone laughing at this poor man, who had no socks and no shoes. I could see the blisters on his feet from a distance. I had on two pairs of

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 4, 2020.

² http://eapsweb.mit.edu/research/Lorenz/Butterfly_1972.pdf Edward Lorenz, “Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?” a paper presented to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C. in December 1972. Kenneth Chang, “Edward N. Lorenz, a Meteorologist and a Father of Chaos Theory, dies at 90,” www.newyorktimes.com, 4.17.08.

³ Matthew 25:31-46

socks, and I was still very cold. I went over and asked him whether he had anything with which he might cover his feet.”

“It’s okay, sir,” the man replied. “I’ve never had a pair of shoes in my life. But God bless you.”

The old man started to walk away, but DePrimo stopped him and asked if he knew his shoe size. He didn’t. DePrimo went into a Skechers shoe store on W. 42nd Street and told a sales person, “I’d like to buy a pair of good boots. I don’t care how much they cost.”

A few minutes later, this kind-hearted cop bought a \$100 pair of all-weather boots and went to put them on the old man. The store manager said, “We were all rather shocked. Most of us New Yorkers just kind of pass by that kind of thing. Especially in this neighborhood.”

Officer DePrimo didn’t want any recognition. The only way we know this story is that Jennifer Foster, a tourist from Arizona, filmed the encounter with her phone and posted it to *Facebook*.⁴ Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.” Off we go now to Philadelphia.

3. Philadelphia. Adam Bruckner was an assistant coach with the Philadelphia KiXX professional soccer team about fifteen years ago.⁵ Here’s Adam’s story:

“I used to see someone with a sign asking for money and wonder, ‘Why don’t you just get a job?’ Finally, I asked. I found that a common theme for many of them was that they did not have ID. And you need ID to get a job. And you need ID to get ID. And you need money to pay for it. It’s a vicious cycle. . . .

“I used to think that the homeless were plagued by drugs, alcohol, and mental illness . . . and some are. But the river that runs through all of them is No Family—no family to bail them out of the situations many of my friends have been in. So on Monday afternoons in front of Philadelphia’s Free Library on 19th and Vine, we become a family. We serve a meal. We pray. And we love across the lines.

“And instead of just putting a Band-Aid on a bleeder, we help them get ID. And that ID allows them to get jobs, to cash work checks, to get into rehab, and stay in shelters. It is only one day a week. The ID’s are only one step. But it is a start. And we are a family.”⁶

Today, “Philly ReStart” serves over 10,000 meals and helps over 5,000 Philadelphians get ID cards every year. Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

Here’s another Philly story. Author, preacher and professor, Tony Campolo was walking down Chestnut Street in Philadelphia one morning when he saw a filthy bum, covered with soot from head to toe. “He had a huge beard,” Tony said. “I’ll never forget the beard. It was a gigantic beard with rotted food stuck in it. He held a cup of McDonald’s coffee and mumbled as he walked along the street. He spotted me and said, ‘Hey, Mister. You want some of my coffee?’

⁴ David Goodman, “Photo of Officer Giving Boots to Barefoot Man Warms Hearts Online,” *The New York Times* (11-28-12); Amanda Mickelberg, “NYPD Officer Larry DePrimo immortalized in tourist’s photo . . .” *New York Post* (12-18-12).

⁵ www.kixxonline.com/team/frontoffice/?staff_id=13

⁶ www.phillyrestart.com

“I knew I should take some to be nice, and I did. I gave it back to him and said, ‘You’re being pretty generous giving away your coffee this morning. What’s gotten into you that you’re giving away your coffee all of a sudden?’

“He said, ‘Well, the coffee was especially delicious this morning, and I figured if God gives you something good you ought to share it with people.’

“*This is the perfect set up,*’ I thought, but I said, ‘Is there anything I can give you in return?’ I was sure he was going to hit me up for five dollars.

“He said, ‘Yeah, you can give me a hug.’ I wished he had asked for five dollars.

“He put his arms around me. I put my arms around him. And I realized something. This guy wasn’t going to let me go. He was holding onto me. Here I am an establishment guy, and this bum is hanging on me. He’s hugging me. He’s not going to let me go. People are passing on the street. They’re staring at me. I’m embarrassed. . . . But little by little my embarrassment turned to awe.

“I heard a voice echoing down the corridors of time saying, *I was hungry. Did you feed me? I was naked. Did you clothe me? I was sick. Did you care for me? I was the bum you met on Chestnut Street. Did you embrace me? For if you did it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.*”⁷ Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

My friends, God’s Spirit within us creates a “butterfly effect” that causes us to see every person we meet as *someone for whom Jesus died*, as someone whom Jesus loves desperately even in this moment. In particular, God’s Spirit gives us new eyes with which to see the people we usually don’t really see: the grocery checkers and baggers, the janitors, the food service persons, the gas attendants, the mentally ill persons who walk the streets, and many others. Off we go to Atlanta.

4. Atlanta. Author and priest, Brennan Manning was waiting to catch a plane in the Atlanta airport, and while he was waiting, he sat down in one of the many places where it usually happens that black men shine white men’s shoes. An elderly black man began to shine Brennan’s shoes, and as he did, Brennan got the sense—it was a very clear spiritual prompting—that after the man was done, he should pay him, tip him . . . and then reverse their roles. Spiritual promptings frequently lead to miracles, so Brennan decided to go for it.

When he had paid for his shine, Brennan stood up and looked at the man and said, “Now, sir, I would like to shine your shoes.” The man recoiled and stepped backward. “You’re going to do what?” Brennan said it again: “I’d like to shine your shoes, sir. Come. You sit down. How would you like them done?”

As Brennan began his work, the man began to cry. “No white man has ever talked to me like this before,” he said. When the shoes were done, a black man and a white man who had never met each other before embraced in a noisy airport corridor, where the words whispered through the air: “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”⁸

My friends, God’s Spirit prompts you and me, too, if we’re listening. These promptings come, not as “earthquake, wind, and fire,” but as God’s “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12), calling us to *intentional* acts of kindness and *purposeful* acts of beauty. These promptings lead us to dismantle the heavy walls of ethnic, racial, language and political differences, seeing in every person someone like ourselves. And we’re off to Baton Rouge.

⁷ Tony Campolo, “Year of Jubilee,” *Preaching Today* (212).

⁸ Brian Buhler, “The Ultimate Community,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 146.

5. Baton Rouge. After Hurricane Katrina, one Baptist church in Baton Rouge fed 16,000 people a day for weeks; another housed 700 homeless evacuees. Years after the hurricane, and long after Federal assistance had dried up, a network of churches in surrounding states was still sending regular teams to help rebuild houses. Our congregation helped, too, before I arrived.

Most impressively, all these church efforts crossed racial lines and barriers in the Deep South. As one worker told a reporter, “We had whites, blacks, Hispanics, Vietnamese, good old Cajun . . . We just tried to say, ‘Hey, let’s help people. This is our state. We’ll let everybody else sort out that other stuff. We’ve got to cook some rice.’”

The reporter later said, “I would argue that this was a watershed moment in the history of American Christianity. Nothing spoke more eloquently to believers, and to nonbelievers who were paying attention, than the success of a population of believing volunteers measured against the massive and near-total collapse of secular government efforts.

“The storm laid bare an unmistakable truth. More and more Christians have decided that the only way to reconquer America is through service.”⁹ That’s what we need today, too. Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.” Off to Indianapolis.

6. Indianapolis. Ernie Reno was walking back to work after lunch on a winter day when he noticed two burly Indianapolis MPD officers outside Circle Centre mall. Between them, sprawled on the hood of one of the patrol cars, his arms at his sides, was a shabbily dressed man who appeared to be in his late 50s. He was weak and shivering; next to him on the asphalt was a pile of stuff that appeared to be all of his worldly possessions.

The older of the two officers was stooped over in front of the man. His partner stood watching intently. My initial take was that the older officer was frisking the man; but five steps closer, my cynicism turned to amazement. The officer wasn’t patting the man down; he was bent over tying the man’s boot laces because the man was in such bad shape he couldn’t do it himself. As the officer put one dirty boot on his own pant leg and then another, his young partner talked quietly to the man, trying to determine what kind of help he needed.

At a time when a relative handful of “cowboy cops” harm people, kill people, and destroy public opinion of the police, officers of courage and character continue to perform quiet, unnoticed acts of selflessness.¹⁰ Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.” And we’re off to Minneapolis.

7. Minneapolis. People call him “Shoe Bob,” but his real name is Bob Fisher. He owns a small shoe repair shop tucked in a corner of a little strip mall in Wayzata, a suburb of Minneapolis. *Shoe Bob* looks like your average, hard-working, churchgoing guy; but he is not an average guy. *Shoe Bob* is a radical servant who has found a way to help the homeless. He helps the homeless by rallying his whole community, and he does it in his sleep.

In 1995, Bob was invited to go winter camping, something a man with a childhood fear of freezing to death had never considered. He kept his fear a secret from even his closest friends, hoping to one day overcome it with God and Minnesota.

“I purchased a pup tent, pitched it in the backyard, and bundled up in the warmest clothes I had,” Bob recalls. “My plan was to sleep in the tent for one night without retreating to my house.” Bob tried, but sleep eluded him. And each breath he took felt like sucking polar air.

⁹ Philip Yancey, *The Question That Never Goes Away* (Creative Trust Digital, Kindle Edition, 2013).

¹⁰ Ernie Reno, “Small gesture on busy street alters view of police,” *Indianapolis Star* (2-24-11).

He was cold; so he prayed. Bob prayed that he could last the whole night outside so he could tell his friends he gave it his best. But while he was tossing and turning trying to stay warm, God spoke to him. "This is a good idea, sleeping out here," [God] seemed to say. "Why don't you move the tent to the front yard and sleep outside to help the needy in Wayzata?"

Bob thought that surely he had imagined this, but after doing some research, he discovered that despite Wayzata's affluence, there were many homeless folk in the area. In November 1996, Bob committed to sleeping in his tent on his front lawn, as God had suggested, until he could raise \$7,000 to buy Thanksgiving dinners for 100 families.

In 14 days, Bob was back in his own bed, and he had raised \$10,000. When Bob realized that the most pressing need facing the needy in and around Wayzata was housing, he resolved to repeat his sleepout each year, dedicating the funds he raised to help meet housing needs of families in his community. And since that time, *Shoe Bob* has raised more than \$5,500,000 for the homeless of Wayzata.¹¹ Can you feel it? . . . "For not with swords' loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav'nly kingdom comes." Off to Portland.

8. Portland. In Portland, one of the places the homeless gather is under the Burnside Bridge. For more than three years, carloads of Christians from Bridgetown Ministries have shown up on Friday nights and ministered to these needy men and women. In addition to providing hot meals, shaves, and haircuts, some of the volunteers wash the homeless people's feet. Tom Krattenmaker, a writer for *USA Today*, was stunned by the display, calling it "one of the most audacious acts of compassion and humility I have ever witnessed."

Once a week, this group of society's outcasts have their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks. One man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt."

Krattenmaker commented on the significance of this foot washing: "Washing someone's feet is an act best performed while kneeling. Given the washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling."

In preparation for their outreach, the leader of Bridgetown Ministries offered these words to the volunteers: "When you go out there tonight, I want you to look for Jesus. You might see Him in the eyes of a drunk person, a homeless person. Keep your eyes open."¹² Can you feel it? . . . "For not with swords' loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav'nly kingdom comes." Off to Compton.

9. Compton. Faith Inspirational Missionary Baptist Church in Compton, California has adopted its local high school, the roughest school in a rough city. Forty percent of the students at Centennial High are from either a group home or foster home. Such students don't have any adult who will cheer for their football team, or for anything else. When two church members volunteered to help coach the team, they were appalled at the condition of the locker rooms, so they organized their church to refurbish and paint them.

The team was required to help with the project, and one of the young men on the team turned to the lady next to him and asked why she was painting his locker room. She simply replied, "Because I love you."

"Nobody loves me," he replied. When the woman heard that, she put down her paintbrush and gave the young man a big hug.

¹¹ Margaret Terry, "Wide Asleep in Minnesota," *Today's Christian* (November/December 2006).

¹² Tom Krattenmaker, "A Witness to What Faith Can Be," *USA Today* (12-18-06).

“No one has hugged me in seven years,” he said. But she wasn’t done yet. She called over a dozen other women, and they all lined up to hug this young man, to kiss him on the cheek, to tell him how special he is to God, and that God has a purpose for his life. The young man just sat down and wept.

Since that time, the church has lined up 15 adults to adopt each football player and to go to their games to cheer for them, so that they can each know how special they are to God.¹³ Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

Bill White was walking down a side street in that same town—Compton, California—toward a group that was redoing a house through a project like *Habitat*. Bill was wearing one of the bright shirts that marked him as one of the volunteers, and a neighbor to the house being redone engaged him in conversation. During that conversation the neighbor said, “I love your heart. *Where can I get a heart like yours?*”

Flabbergasted, Bill replied, “We got our hearts from Jesus, and He would be glad to give you one like His, too.”¹⁴ Can you feel it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.” Well, we’ve almost finished our tour, and now we need to zoom back across the nation to Columbia.

10. Columbia. Do you remember the awful explosion that rocked Beirut not too long ago? If you look on the Internet, you can see diagrams of what’s called the “blast radius” for that explosion. The military calculates “blast radii” for every sort of weapon, and usually tries to maximize it. Author Tyler Edwards has suggested that churches should have “love radiuses”—love radii—so that everyone within a certain distance of that church should be touched and transformed by that church’s love.¹⁵

Pastor Andrew and our C.O.R.E. Team¹⁶ have been working hard to help us begin to transform Oakland Mills into a community others want to replicate, and we’ve made huge strides, even during COVID, thanks to his leadership. In order to continue and to advance this work, in order to maximize our “Love Radius,” each of us needs to ask ourselves, every day, “**How can I use this day, this visit, this conversation, this meal, this errand to advance the Kingdom of God?**”

And once we’ve asked, we need to follow every prompting of God’s Spirit living in obedience in every area of our lives. God is quite willing to pour spiritual power into lives that are **committed, holy, and available**, but if any one of these is absent, God’s Spirit cannot flow into the world through our lives.

And so, my friends, my invitation to you, to me, to all of us this morning is that in these troubled times, we do what the persons in these stories have done. We need to offer ourselves to God so that we can become “butterflies for Jesus,” whether in our **praying**, our **giving**, or our **going**. The “butterfly effect” reminds us that God can and will use what we do . . . to change the world!

Lead on, O King Eternal, the day of march has come;
Henceforth in fields of conquest thy tents shall be our home:
Through days of preparation Thy grace has made us strong,
And now, O King Eternal, we lift our battle song.

¹³ www.preachingtoday.com

¹⁴ www.preachingtoday.com

¹⁵ Tyler Edwards, *Zombie Church* (Kregel Publishers, 2011), p. 59.

¹⁶ “Community Outreach, Revitalizing Evangelism”

Lead on, O King Eternal, till sin's fierce war shall cease,
And holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace;
**For not with swords' loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums;
With deeds of love and mercy the heav'nly kingdom comes.**¹⁷

¹⁷ "Lead On, O King Eternal," words by Ernest Shurtleff, music by Henry Smart.