

*It Takes a Village*  
*Romans 8:14-17, Acts 1:16-21*  
*Pentecost Sunday*  
*May 27, 2007*

“It takes a village to raise a child.” Many of you will remember this quote as the title to first lady Hillary Clinton’s 1996 book. Did you know that it came from an old African proverb? Even if you haven’t read the book you may remember the political controversy that surrounded this book during a particularly difficult time during the Clinton presidency and in the Clinton family. Critics claim that although the principles are sound – parents, but extended family, school and others influence the upbringing of a child – that Hillary used her book to endorse every social program of the last century. Hillary said this: “CHILDREN are not rugged individualists. They depend on adults they know and on thousands more who make decisions every day that affect their well-being. All of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, are responsible for deciding whether our children are raised in a nation that doesn't just espouse family values but values families and children.” Ultimately it came down to another battle over public tax policy, a topic that tends to raise all of our blood pressure levels.

Does it take a village not only to raise children but also to accomplish any thing great? This past week I was so proud of our city as Mayor Bill White was awarded the John F. Kennedy Freedom Award. I was especially proud of the way I hear he handled the media scrutiny as he received this award. When asked the question, “Did you calculate the social cost of taking in all these evacuees to the costs of Houston government?” “Of course not,” White said. “It was just the right thing to do!” “Did you think about the political impact with voters for taking this initiative?” “Not once,” said White. “That didn’t play at all into our decision-making.” As I reflected on Katrina a

couple of years ago I thought about our little church in Montgomery coming down to Houston to receive food service training before we were assigned to the George R. Brown Convention Center. There were 25,000 volunteers trained over three days! I saw the incredible religious and ethnic diversity of our great city all joining hands together for this cause to benefit people from another city and state. I remember first cleaning floors in the Convention Center kitchen and then getting promoted to cook, grilling countless chicken breasts over a hot but satisfying oven. Next to me was a gentleman who told he was from Ohio. I asked him how he got here. He said he was watching TV and saw the buses in New Orleans loading up for Houston to come to the Dome. He said he was so moved he called his business partner and told him to keep the business going while he headed to Houston. That had been three weeks before and he had been cooking chickens ever since. What a rush of the Spirit? The smell of grilled chicken and of the Holy Spirit was so thick you could cut both of them with a knife.

Pentecost was both a religious and a cultural festival. In celebration of the spring harvest and in gratitude for the Ten Commandments passed down by God through Moses Jews from all over the Mediterranean would gather in Jerusalem. Even after the first destruction of the Temple about 600 hundred years before this tenacious people rebuilt the Temple and resumed this sacred festival. So Jesus tells the disciples to wait for forty days until God will return with power. This Holy Spirit on the Day of the Lord would come and greater deeds would be performed, says Jesus, than the ones he performed. Peter preaches his first sermon alluding to the prophecy of Joel in which all of humankind, sons and daughters, youth and the elderly, would receive the Spirit as they called upon the name of the Lord. Several thousand were converted that day alone.

Finally Paul interprets our relationship to God through Jesus Christ as a kind of adoption in which we all become brothers and sisters to one another through faith. Paul describes this new village of faith in many metaphors in his writings – as the family of God and as the Body of Christ. Every metaphor has the same central message – that we are all interdependent on one another. We all need each other to grow in love. And the thing that binds us together is the love of God poured out through the Holy Spirit. We all need this village of the Christian faith to survive spiritually.

Some of us have been disenfranchised by our blood families. Some of us have formed families of choice that we have cobbled into a kind of village here in the Montrose. Others have retained good family relationships, but have added to those new family members into this fabric. Of course, there is a spiritual family that is Bering Memorial UMC – for some the only church where we have felt welcomed for who we really are. Sons, daughters who have been adopted into a village of love and acceptance. Many knew it from the first moment they walked into the Sanctuary, some others fell in love with the music, some with the ministry, some at this Communion rail, but all by that sense that they too could finally call God *ABBA* and each other's brothers and sisters in Christ. The good news is that it really does take a village to raise a child of God.

The other news, of course, is that our city is still a dangerous place all around us. This is particularly true if you are a marginalized GLBT or questioning youth. During our research for the Open Gate Youth ministry that I will expand on in just a few minutes we found a 2006 study published in the NY Times. A research team interviewed youth and others in six metropolitan areas. Their findings are frightening. Twenty percent of the 1.6 million homeless youth in our country identify themselves as GLBTQ. Up to

70% of repeat runaways are drug abusers. Approximately 25% participate in what is called survival sex. This is where a youth sells his or her body to obtain food, shelter or other physical need. There are even more dire consequences for GLBTQ youth. GLBT youth are over seven times more likely than straight youth to be victims of sexual or violent crime. There is a doubling of the probability of sexual abuse before the age of twelve. There is a higher incidence of drug abuse. With no hate crime protection, there is little or no safety net for GLBT youth. Just like in the case of Katrina we have an emergency on our hands, but it doesn't get the same attention from society. And just like Katrina it takes a village to raise and protect a child.

Just about eight weeks ago we began a process here at Bering to examine deeply this problem in our own community and to determine what groups were already doing about it. We didn't want to duplicate services. We interviewed many groups. We found the gaps in services. We prayed for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And we made a covenant to give you the congregation a readout on Pentecost Sunday as we move into the summer months. I am proud to report that our Sons and Daughters have been prophesying. Youth at our Project U have shared their vision. And old men, no offense to Jim Pate have dreamed dreams. Our Steering Committee presented initial plans to our Church Council this past Monday with a strong vote of confidence to pursue more targeted planning in three key areas. In your bulletin you have a summary of what Open Gate Ministry is. I encourage to read it carefully to become more acquainted with what it is about.

What I want to do this morning as I review these initial plans and what you can do next is for you to feel the rush of the Spirit, to feel the flame of the Holy Spirit under your

seat and to know the amazing love of God expressed through these first services of the Open Gate Ministry.

Just twenty years ago as our community was feeling the first desperation in encountering HIV and AIDS, a dinner group was formed in a particular home where affected ones could share a meal and share their souls in common support. That initial model became what we know today as Bering Support Network. We have a chance to do that again for our youth. Our first service is a Family Night Dinner and Support Group. A task force under Alan Richard is forming to make more specific recommendations on what that service will look like – where and when it might meet, how we would get the word out and how it will be supported over the future.

Our Steering Committee and Discernment groups studied many existing programs for youth in our community. Two issues they discovered is that those services close after 5 pm each day and provide no coverage over the weekend. Just as the bars open, when youth are most vulnerable, the safety net lifts. Also we found that though there are services for youth they are not communicated well in the community and there is much confusion over what is available to youth. Given those two issues, we have two other potential Open Gate service lines that will be further defined in task groups. An After Hours Services task group will form under Mark Spilman. This important group will begin to define scope of what services could be provided, when they would be provided, and define the volunteer resources needed. This is a big need and one of the more difficult areas we will be working on in the next three months.

Since there is much confusion over youth services and since we have done significant research and documenting of these services, the third and final area for task

group assignment is the Holding Hands Information and Referral Service. This task group will further define the community services infrastructure for youth and what our process will be not to just refer, but to literally walk through and hand off youth to the necessary service.

All of these task forces will be doing their work between now and September. We have leaders in place and a few task force volunteers. But we greatly need your help. Each of these groups needs additional volunteers to complete the task force assignments between now and September. For those of you who were around a little over twenty years ago, remember when the Dental Clinic started with a dream and a dentist chair? Remember when a few souls met in a home for a meal and fellowship that now has become the weekly Wednesday night Spiritual Support Group? Very soon you will all have an opportunity to be on the ground floor of another work of the Spirit. Open your hearts to the Spirit so that we can open the gates of this new ministry.