

*Renewing Our Reconciling Community – Part 3*  
*October 21, 2007*

Friends, I would like you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine the ideal church. As you walked around that church, what would it look like? As you talked to its parishioners what message would it transmit? What theology would it profess? Would it be large or small? What would the people look like? Take a moment to capture that set of images and perhaps ideals in your mind. Have you got it? Maybe that ideal church is Bering or maybe it is the church of your childhood. Maybe it is a church you have visited or heard about or maybe it exists only in your imagination. You might describe it as welcoming...or inclusive...or loving... or energetic...or relevant to its community. It might be a church that is about Christian disciple-making for the transformation of the world. My hope is that it would be a reconciling community in which persons would be healed and made whole again – reconciled to God, to self and to the other.

As you open your eyes and look around this sanctuary and those gathered here, I would expect that part of your vision of an ideal church is that it is housed in a physical building. Yes? In my mind's eye I see a church without walls. My ideal church places no boundaries for membership or participation; it locks no one out. In fact a reconciling church is one more focused on those on the outside than it does on those on the inside. The church of Jesus Christ remains the only institution that exists primarily for those who are not its members.

Church consultants will give you many studied opinions on the difference between vital, growing churches and churches that are dying. Most of those studies can be summarized as follows: Dying churches are focused inwardly, proceed from a theology of scarcity, and concern themselves mostly with institutional maintenance.

Healthy churches are outwardly focused, operate out of a theology of abundance, and channel their energies toward mission. Dying churches are swamped by internal strife, whine about money and lack of resources and do everything to sustain institutions of the past. Healthy churches, like healthy people, are not preoccupied with self and trust in God's abundant blessings.

This morning's scriptures remind us of our human condition in limiting God's grace, in creating barriers to entering the community of faith, and in fighting against reconciliation. In Jonah's time there was much hatred between Israel and Assyria. Assyria was a conquering nation and Israel was their vassal state. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria. When God sent Jonah to preach repentance to the Assyrians it was the last thing that Jonah wanted to do. He ran the other way to Tarshish. Of course God's plan would not be prevented. Jonah spent his time of reflection in the belly of the fish and ultimately obeyed God in calling the Assyrians to repentance. Much to Jonah's chagrin, it worked! The Assyrians were reconciled to God. Jonah was so mad he wanted to die. So God tries to teach Jonah a lesson. The castor oil plant that keeps Jonah cool out in the desert is provided by God. When it dies Jonah is even more upset. God says, "what right do you have to be upset? I created you and the Assyrians. I am just as concerned about their redemption as I am about yours." In that poignant last line we see God agonizing about those 120,000 Assyrian souls and even their animals. God's grace is so much bigger than our little concepts of compassion and love. Why do we continue to not get that?

The letter to the Ephesians reminds us of what we always seem to do as faith communities – that is once we set up tent we put limits on whose on the inside and whose

on the outside. We create barriers of entry – circumcision, or who is clean enough to share table fellowship with... who has the right economic standing, creedal professions of faith, or the normative sexual orientation. You get the picture. We cheapen the cross of Christ to suggest that Christ only died for these kind of people or those kind of people. But the truth of the gospel is that God came in the person of Jesus Christ for you and me and for everyone. So whether you are a Syro-Phoenician woman, or a eunuch or an Assyrian or gay or straight or transgender, Jesus knocked down the walls once and for all. All means all!

But once we are on the inside of this idealized church without walls the work of reconciliation does not end. We will continue to have squabbles, petty arguments and downright family feuds. But Christ's radical words from the mountain in Matthew say we much do more than just not kill each other. Before we come to altar we ask the questions, "Are there brothers or sisters who things are just not quite right with?" "Am I in a lawsuit with a brother or sister in Christ?" For if I am, before I leave my offering to God, I must reconcile with that person before the sun goes down for the day. I must love my enemy and pray for him. I must always be in a radical, ethical way about the "other."

So what's our scorecard here at Bering Memorial UMC in reconciliation with the "other" in our midst? I have to tell you that Bering Memorial UMC is at the head of the class when it comes to social justice and ministry to the other. We also put our money where our mouth is. Approximately 37% of our operating budget goes to support those who are not our members and whom we have no expectation will ever become our members. That comes in our commitment to SEARCH, to EAC, to Habitat for Humanity, to hosting outside groups like Sex Addicts Anonymous that other churches

refuse to let inside their walls. In 2008 we are sharing the costs of our facility with these outside groups through a "Commonwealth" facility concept, but we are committed as ever to providing radical hospitality to the stranger. We are making a significant investment in Open Gate for the marginalized youth in our Montrose neighborhood. Now you think that we would get an "A" on our report card for all these ministries that we are doing for others. But I would only give us a "B" and here's why. One of the ways we serve others is through our Methodist apportionment system that supports ministry outside the local church shared by all the local Methodist churches. It's about 10% of our budget. The disappointing news is for the past few years we have only funded about 50% of that responsibility. Now I understand the ambivalence with which we face our Methodist obligations, given the imperfect system of which we are a part with respect to GLBT full inclusion. Nevertheless I believe it is an important symbolic action that we fund our apportionments. For it is out of our attitude of God's abundance that God can do miraculous things. Here's what I mean.

A little girl stood near a small church from which she had been turned away because it was "too crowded." "I can't go to Sunday School," she sobbed to the pastor as he walked by. Seeing her shabby, unkempt appearance, the pastor guessed the reason and, taking her by the hand, took her inside and found a place for her in the Sunday school class. The child was so happy that they found room for her, and she went to bed that night thinking of the children who have no place to worship Jesus. Some two years later, this child lay dead in one of the poor tenement buildings. Her parents called for the kindhearted pastor who had befriended their daughter to handle the final arrangements. As her poor little body was being moved, a worn and crumpled

red purse was found which seemed to have been rummaged from some trash dump. Inside was found 57 cents and a note, scribbled in childish handwriting, which read: "This is to help build the little church bigger so more children can go to Sunday School."

For two years she had saved for this offering of love. When the pastor tearfully read that note, he knew instantly what he would do. Carrying this note and the cracked, red pocketbook to the pulpit, he told the story of her unselfish love and devotion. He challenged his deacons to get busy and raise enough money for the larger building. But the story does not end there... A newspaper learned of the story and published it. It was read by a wealthy realtor who offered them a parcel of land worth many thousands. When told that the church could not pay so much, he offered to sell it to the little church for 57 cents. Church members made large donations. Checks came from far and wide. Within five years the little girl's gift had increased to \$250,000.00—a huge sum for that time (near the turn of the century). Her unselfish love had paid large dividends. When you are in the city of Philadelphia, look up Temple Baptist Church, with a seating capacity of 3,300. And be sure to visit Temple University, where thousands of students are educated, including my brother who received his MFA from Temple's Tyler School of Art. Have a look, too, at the Good Samaritan Hospital and at a Sunday School building which houses hundreds of beautiful children, built so that no child in the area will ever need to be left outside during Sunday school time. In one of the rooms of this building may be seen the picture of the sweet face of the little girl whose 57 cents, so sacrificially saved, made such remarkable history.

At least once a year I believe it is my vocational responsibility to talk to you about money. After all, it is a subject about which Jesus spoke almost more than any other, so

here goes. The fourth aspect of stewardship is our giving. The key, I believe, is proportionate giving. I believe one should give to the church out of sense of what is proportional to what God has given. I don't giving should ever be legalistic but, whatever you do, it needs to be sacrificial. It needs to hurt a little bit, if you know what I mean. Pray about how you have been blessed materially in the past year, make a commitment to what seems right, and then do a little bit more. The tithe or 10% of our income is where many of us feel that little bit of sacrificial pain. I believe it is still the standard toward which we should work. So what will the Noels commit to in 2008 as your pastoral leader? Katie and I have been so blessed by God financially. More than we deserve really. We've been able by the grace of God to make a gift this year of 10% of our income to Bering Memorial UMC. After much prayer, we want to increase that gift by 10%. Further, we will be instructing Gail, our business manager, to direct that increase to paying our apportionments, that largest and most visible gift to ministries outside the local church.

Would you consider also increasing your gift by 10% in 2008? Maybe you can do more based upon the way you have been blessed materially in this past year. Maybe you can't just do that much. Maybe you are considering making a pledge for the first time. Whatever you decide to do I ask you to do it out of a sense of risk-taking mission, out of a sense of God's abundance poured out upon your life, and as paying it forward to God's reconciling work in the name of Jesus Christ who is reconciling us to himself in a broken and hurting world.