

## **SERMON “BREAKING DOWN WALLS AND BUILDING NEW BRIDGES”**

(Matthew 28:16-20 & Ephesians 2:11-22 Preached at MPC on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

Last week on Pentecost Sunday we saw the coming of the Holy Spirit and birth of the Church—we witnessed an explosive and extraordinary display of God’s gifts of Wind and Fire! 120 disciples were issued a tongue of fire and people from all nations—all assembled were speaking in their own languages and dialects everyone understood what was being said.

As I said last Sunday, the tongue of fire that rested on the disciples showed that EACH disciple was empowered by the Holy Spirit—empowered by God. God intends for EVERY disciple to do his or her part. God calls EACH of us to a special calling—calls EACH of us to fill a niche that no one else can fill—calls EACH of us to do special work that no one else can do.

In our scripture text for today on Trinity Sunday, we hear the Lord Jesus issue a four-point command coming right at the end of Matthew’s gospel. He says in v. 19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit, v. 20, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”

So, we hear Christ calling each one of us to some specific task or tasks associated with going, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching people to obey him—in other words, Jesus is making it clear to all disciples how we can help fulfill His “Great Commission.”

Next week on Father’s Day will be a busy day of worship in the life of MPC. We will be welcoming 7 new members, installing and ordaining 2 elders and 3 deacons, and commissioning 3 new Stephen Ministers.

In Matthew’s text for today in 28:18-20, Jesus gives an example of commissioning. He just spent three years living with them— teaching them who he was and how they should live—He died for them and appeared to them after his resurrection. It was after the resurrection and after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, that he knew they were would be ready to go out and spread the gospel. But before they set out, he gathered them together and said in v. 18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been

given to me therefore go, make disciples, baptize, and teach them to obey everything I taught you.”

Jesus made it public to commission the disciples and affirm the importance of their work. His commissioning reinforces their identity, their accountability, and Christ’s unconditional authority to help them complete their mission.

We too in the celebration of the church’s life make it a part of public worship with our Baptisms, Communion, Weddings, Celebrations of life—for all our new members to profess their faith, for new elders and deacons to be ordained or (set apart) and installed, and for our newly trained Stephen Ministers to be commissioned—and to emphasize the congregation’s role to pledge themselves as encouraging witnesses to the work and ministry God has instituted in His church.

Because next week’s Lord’s Day will be full, the service will be streamlined to allow us to incorporate the public reception of our new members, ordination and installation of officers, and commissioning our Stephen Ministers. So, today’s message, “Breaking Down Walls and Building New Bridges” will focus on one specific task in disciple making—the commissioning of our Stephen Ministers to answer Jesus’ call to fulfill the Great Commission.

In Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall” the speaker repairs his rock wall and ponders for a moment—“Something is there that doesn’t love a wall.” The poem speaks of how every year, two neighbors meet to repair the stone wall that divides their property. ... The neighbor, on the other hand, asserts that the wall is crucial to maintaining their relationship, asserting, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

And we know people still build fences and walls—Because land is scarce and so valuable, and we live so close to each other in Hawaii, the rock wall has become a plentiful and powerful symbol of our neighbor’s assertion that “Good fences make good neighbors.”

All throughout history man has erected small to giant walls to keep people out! The ancient Egyptians built one 100 miles long, the same time the Babylonians put one up 175 miles long. Roman emperors built walls not only in Britain but in German. The Chinese hold the record for length: The Great Wall ran 1500 miles and can be seen from space. Hitler erected the “Atlantic Wall” protecting lands he called “Fortress Europe” and not too long ago, the “Berlin Wall” literally stood a disconnected symbol of the

Russia's Iron Curtain when it came down in 1989.

In Paul's time, one of the signs on the inner walls of Jerusalem's temple warned and carved in Greek, "Let no foreigner enter inside the barrier and the fence around the sanctuary. Whosoever is caught will be the cause of death following a penalty."

Just as Jesus came to break the walls and barriers between people of all nations—Jews and Gentiles—Jesus came to bridge the gap of sin and separation between people and God—our Stephen Leaders and Ministers help people who may have felt threatened by harsh and exclusive religions—our Stephen Ministers bring the light and love of Christ to walk along side, to listen, pray, and to ask Jesus to share the burdens of their care receivers.

In Jesus' day, priests on duty at the Temple in Jerusalem literally slept in the Temple Court with the keys in their hands. Having the key in one's hands meant they were responsible for guarding a locked temple—a locked temple was an expression to keep temple sacrifices, the priesthood, and the whole system not as a way to manifest God to the world, but to keep the barriers and walls up—to separate people and keep them away from one another and worship God as one.

Jesus however breaks down the walls and barriers that divide and separate people and brings them back to God the Father with the touch of his hand! Jesus' style is "hands on"—no matter what a person's condition may be or what others may think of them. In Mark's gospel, Jesus heals by touching Peter's mother in law, a dead girl, a deaf man, a demon possessed boy, and a blind man. Mark's gospel tells of Jesus actually lifting children in his arms to bless them. Jesus's ministry changes lives with his hands doing things for others in God's name.

Just as Jesus was moved deeply with compassion to minister to the lives of those in need, our Stephen Leaders and Ministers are also motivated by their deep concern and compassion for those experiencing pain, loss, grief, and difficulty. The touch of one's hand in the act of prayer is a common sight with our prayer partners at our Stephen Ministry meetings, and for our Stephen ministers praying with their care receivers.

We all remember the story and may have seen the movie "Elephant Man"—a story of John Merrick who died in London in 1890 at the age of 26. Merrick suffered from a

disease called “neurofibromatosis”—the disease manifested itself in the extensions of long nodes of bone that extended from his head like a giant mass of dough—a hunk of bone protruded like a pink stump from his mouth. His back hung like sacks of flesh covered in a cauliflower skin, his hip left him permanently lame, unable to walk without a cane.

Dr. Frederick Teves, senior surgeon at London Hospital felt compassion for John’s plight, as unscrupulous and unsympathetic patrons of the circus were placing Merrick on display for all to scorn and laugh at his physical unsightliness. Dr. Teves took him into the hospital as a permanent resident providing for all his needs with a bed-sitting room and a bathroom. John found a home where he felt loved.

One day a young woman entered his room and wished him good morning and shook his hand—John sobbed uncontrollably—apart from his mother, she was the first woman to ever smiled at him and touched his hand.

John was transformed by the love of Dr. Teves and this young woman. He lost his shyness, left his door open and was happy to meet and greet the world. He found a place of acceptance where being ugly and deformed did not matter—it was discovered John was highly intelligent, sensitive and imaginative. John knew his Bible and prayer book intimately. Our Stephen Leaders and Ministers also work closely with health care professionals, always seeking permission from counselors before establishing a loving relationship in Christ under their care.

In a disciplined and organized manner and through the 50 hours of required training, our Stephen Ministers are commissioned and sent out as much needed care givers to the people in any church— our Stephen ministers are trained not to attempt to fix people’s problems; but through regular supervision, they use the skill of active listening, sharing in the context of a covenant of confidentiality. They care for people who are suffering from a host of maladies; people who have been betrayed or let down by others in life; people who have made poor choices in their lives; care for people whose spouses won’t seek help and for those whose spouses need their help. They care for people before or after surgery; before and after marriage, before and after childbirth, after a divorce, and especially after the death of a loved one.

Stephen Ministers care for those recovering from all kinds of physical illnesses and chronic problems—all these services performed in the name of Jesus declare that because of the sacrifice of God's son on the cross, all walls and barriers between God and humanity and between competing groups—all walls have been torn down and Jesus bridges the gap to bring all together as one.

At the end of WWII after the World Council of Churches met in Geneva, the mayor of Dresden Germany and the mayor of Coventry England, enemies during the war, brought pieces of bomb shrapnel obtained from both cities and melted the iron shrapnel and fashioned it into a cross.

Friends, what is that something that doesn't love a wall?" It is the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ that doesn't love walls or fences—it is the Spirit of Lord Jesus Christ that brings us back together to God, and to one another granting us peace. How can we fulfill the commission of Jesus Christ? Perhaps today one of you might consider asking one of our Stephen Leaders to refer one of our Stephen Ministers. To serve as a Stephen Leader or Minister is only one way to fulfill Christ's great commission.

And we know our Stephen Ministry team serving through Christ's authority and power of the Holy Spirit, seeks to break down all walls that divide people, to walk in faith—to follow the footsteps of Jesus as the bridge—Our Stephen Ministry team working in cooperation with all our ministry teams at MPC, is a great way to celebrate God's call to go, make disciples, to teach to obey God, and to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost! Amen! Let us pray:

