

Good evening, saints! Good evening, sinners, and everyone else in between! It's good to be with you tonight. I'm very honored and grateful to be with you. What an invitation and introduction! I don't know that it's because I've been doing such a great job where I am. Sometimes I think it's because they don't know what else to do with me so I've been able to stay right where I am now for eleven years, but we love being in the mountains and calling that home, and Long's Chapel is a wonderful community and a wonderful church, which I've been privileged to serve. I'm thankful to your pastor, Jim Dennis, for the invitation to be here tonight and for reworking a little bit of that invitation because originally I know that they were hoping to have somebody here for the morning and then for the evening, but we're in a series right now at Long's Chapel that prevented me from being able to get away this morning plus I'm leaving with 36 other folks in our church this Tuesday morning for a Travels of Paul Tour in Greece so we have a pretty trip ahead of us, and it just seems to be a busy time of year, but I'm so glad we could fit in tonight to be here. I will say sometimes at Lake Junaluska the temperature will get above 50 degrees, and right when I start to complain about how warm it's getting, I drive down to South Carolina, and I used my air conditioning most of the way this afternoon. It's feeling like spring. What a beautiful, beautiful day! What a beautiful way to conclude the day for me. I don't mean to brag, but today's been about as good as it gets. We had wonderful worship services this morning. I'm a big Duke basketball fan, and we pulled out a tournament championship today. I'm afraid what my drive here would have been like had we lost that game. It's a good thing that we won. I'm grateful to be here. As we get ready for the message tonight, would you just bow your heads and pray with me.

Gracious Lord, we thank you for today and for the beauty of it. I pray as we center ourselves now upon your word and your presence and the reason for our gathering that you would allow our hearts to be ignited by the things that burn within your heart, that the things which burden you would burden us, the things which excite would excite us. I pray for Main Street church and what the days of this crusade might mean for this congregation, not only for increasing its size, but for increasing its spirit and for what you can do with us, Lord, in opening our hearts and our minds and our vision to all that your church can mean. So bless this evening, Lord. I invite your Holy Spirit upon us. Open now our minds and our hearts to hear and receive all that you would say to us, in the name and for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

A fellow named Reverend Jeff Kirby tells a funny story about an experience he had in an airport one time. He says, "I was barely sitting down when I heard a voice from the other stall say, "Hi, how are you?" I'm not the type to start a conversation in the men's restroom, but I don't know what got into me so I answered, somewhat embarrassed, "Doing just fine." The other guy says, "So, what are you up to?" Well, what do you say to that? Now, this was getting pretty bizarre so I said back, "Well, just like you, I'm traveling." At this point, I'm just trying to get out as fast as I can when another question comes. "Can I come over?" I try politely to end the conversation so I say, "No, I'm a little busy right now." Then I heard the guy say, "Honey, I'm going to have to call you back. There's an idiot in the next

stall who keeps answering my questions.” Oh, what cell phones have done to our society, huh?

Well, I tell that story because I think it captures sometimes what goes on in the conversation between the people in the church and the people outside the church. I think there is a breakdown in communication that happens where we think that people understand what we're saying. We think they know that we're talking to them, and come to find out, the communication is on a very different wavelength.

I had a renewed sense of that just this past week. I came home one night. I was fairly tired. I did what I typically do at night once we get our girls into bed. I sit down, and channel surf. I'm surfing the TV and I come upon the original Mash movie. I think that was 1972 or something. If you remember that movie, you'll know that the clown doctors, Hawkeye and Trapper John, they just kind of have it in for their tent mate, Frank Burns, who was played by Robert Duvall. They're getting to know him, and Frank gets down on his knees in the tent, and he starts to pray, and it's very clear that while Frank represents the church, these other two represent the 'not church', and they begin to make fun of him, and they start ridiculing him. As a way of mocking him, they start to sing a hymn. "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war," sing it with me, "with the cross of Jesus going on before." How does it go? "Christ, our royal banner, leads against the foe, forward into battle see His banner go. Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before." I don't know if you remember that part of that movie, but I watched that, and as they were singing, people who were outside in the gravel area, but could hear them in the tent, they joined in, and pretty soon half the camp, who doesn't go to church, is walking around singing all of that hymn! It dawned on me, my how things have changed in my lifetime because you see, while there was a time just a few years ago that there were many, many people not in here, not coming to the church, they still knew our language. They could still sing our hymns. They could quote certain Scriptures with us, but guess what? You can't do that anymore. The people who did not grow up with that like we did can't even sing the first few lines and know few of the Scriptures. They come in the door and wonder what on earth are we doing. It seems so foreign and so strange to them. Somehow we've got to relearn how to communicate.

Some years ago, there was a problem with pelicans out in California. It seems that pelicans, who by nature are incredible fishermen, they can hunt really well, got kind of lazy. In one particular bay where the fishing boats would come in every day, the fishermen in the bay would clean the fish and throw the waste into the water, and the pelicans pretty soon learned that this pattern was repeated every day so the birds just started sitting along the harbor waiting for the boats to come in, and when the waste was tossed out, they would just go and sit and eat because for a pelican, that's pretty good eating. Eventually, the fishermen learned that they could sell the waste, and they stopped dumping it off into the water, and something happened with these pelicans. They continued to wait every day and wait every day, but no more waste was coming in. They started to get thinner and thinner, and would not go out to fish. They finally called in a wildlife expert, who determined the pelicans

forgot how to fish, and they had to go out and bring in wild pelicans to teach these again how to fish. Boy, sometimes in the church we just have to relearn some things. You know, what I like about that story, you see it's in the DNA of pelicans to fish. It's in the DNA of those massive birds to do that, but they had to get back in touch with what is deep down inside of them. You know, it's in the DNA of the Methodist church to fish. Oh, there was a day when we were the best fishermen on the water. At the turn of the 1900s, we were the largest religious movement in America. We were fishing well, but somewhere along the way, we stopped fishing as much. We started to enjoy eating Spiritual food more and receiving.

Leonard Sweet, you may have heard that name before, says a lot of churches have more and more pew toads in them, folks who come to receive and receive and receive, and forget that what's really in our DNA is to be out fishing, to be out sharing. Main Street Methodist Church, I commend you! I commend you for saying, "Let's fish! Let's have a crusade! Let's start inviting people! Let's welcome them in! Let's communicate on their terms! Let's let them know we have something wonderful to offer!" Oh what a great, great thing you are doing!

I want to look at a story from the Scriptures this morning that I think is a pretty good example of what a community looks like when its seeking to bring people to Christ. It's found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter two, beginning of verse one, "A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that He had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and He preached the Word to them. Some men came, bringing to Him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it, and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now, some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? Immediately, Jesus knew in His spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier to say to this paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven or to say, get up, take your mat and walk?" I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins so he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat, and go home." He got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone, and they praised God saying, "We've never seen anything like this before." The Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Now, you say that sounds like a healing story, not an evangelism story, and certainly at one level it is a story of healing, but there is another level to that story, the level in which we see people bringing a friend of theirs to Jesus, giving us a pretty good model for what it means to be a community that does that. What I want to do for a few minutes is to look at some different things that these friends of this paralyzed man were doing that can teach us a pretty good example of what it means for you and me to be the kind of community that brings people to Jesus Christ. Now, one of the first things that stands out in this story about how

these folks brought this man to Jesus is that we notice that, first of all, they cared for their friend. That's the very simple thing that brought them to Jesus. They cared about their friend. They cared enough to seek help for him, and they brought him. Now, think about what it would have been like, for just a moment, to be the man who was lying on the mat. You're being carted by your buddies, and they're taking you to someone named Jesus, and when you get there, the people are so many that not only can you not get in the house, you can't even get close so they hoist you up on the rooftop, and then they dig a hole in the roof, and lower you down through it in front of Jesus. How scary do you think that would have been to be the man on the mat? Letting them lift you up like that! What on earth would allow you to let them do such a thing? Is it because you know Jesus? No, it's because you know your friends, and you know that you can trust them. You know that they care about you. You know that they're not going to do something to you that hurts you further.

Do you know whom as a people we have the greatest ability to witness to? The people we know and love the most. You know, whenever you use this frightening word in the church, evangelism, people get a little worried. People start to think all kinds of things. They start to think it means you've got to go out and knock on the doors of strangers and ask them if they know Jesus Christ. Sometimes you talk about evangelists, and people picture folks you see on television with perfect hair, and they say Jesus this way, "Jeee-suss." That scares me, too! In the Gospel, what we see when it comes to people who bring people to Jesus is folks who bring their relatives, who bring their friends, who bring people they already know who trust them, people who know that these folks care about them! You know, I believe for many people who didn't grow up in church to walk through those doors is about as scary a deal as the man being hoisted up on the mat, and the only thing that gets people from out there in here is to know that there are people in here whom they can trust!

There's a church in Chicago that just built a new sanctuary, and outside the sanctuary they built kind of a large atrium gathering space, and they lined the walls of that area with little benches, and they called the benches "fools' benches." The reason is this church is emphatic about encouraging their members to invite their colleagues at work, their relatives, their friends to come with them to church so every Sunday you will see members of the church sitting out on these benches before the worship service begins, looking and scanning the parking lot, waiting to see that person come, and many, many Sundays the worship service will begin, and they will be ten or fifteen minutes into the service when the person sitting out on the bench finally gives us because he or she knows that person isn't coming. They kind of feel like a fool. In that gathering area, they have a Scripture verse from 1 Corinthians, "Let us be fools for Jesus Christ."

Are we willing? Are we willing to do foolish things for people we care about, to take the risk of inviting them, of bringing them, of talking with them about what's important?

Tony Campolla is a Baptist minister and author and lecturer, and he had gone to Hawaii to speak, and arrived in Honolulu. Jet lag really played tricks on him, and he was waking up at 3:00 every morning. One morning, he woke up at 3:00, and decided to go walking down the

sidewalk, and he saw an all-night diner. He went in, and sat down, and got a cup of coffee and something to eat, and about 3:30, a group of loud, kind of raucous women came in, and it was very clear whom they were. It was a group of prostitutes, and at the end of their night's work, they were coming in the diner. Tony Campollo sat kind of listening to their crude language, and he started to look for a way just to sneak out of the diner and go back to his hotel until he heard one of the girls say, "Tomorrow is my birthday!" One of the girls said, "Well, what do you want – us to have a birthday party for you?" She said, "Heavens no, I've never had a birthday party in all my life. I just wanted you to know that." When they left, Tony Campollo went over to the owner of the diner, a fellow named Harry, and he said, "Do those girls come in every night?" Harry said, "Like clockwork, 3:30. They're in here every night." He said, "I want to have a birthday party tomorrow night for that girl." The owner kind of looked at him funny and said, "That'd be fine." He called his wife from the kitchen to come out, and he said, "This guy wants to throw a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow." She said, "Let me bake the cake!" So the next day, Tony Campollo went to a store, and he bought confetti and streamers to put up, Happy Birthday signs, and he got there about 3:00 in the morning the next morning, put up the decorations, and they put out the cake. The prostitutes came right at 3:30, and when Agnes walked in the door, and everybody shouted, "Happy Birthday!" and pulled up the cake, she just started crying. Tony Campollo just enjoyed the time with them, introduced himself, and said, when it got to be an appropriate moment, "Hey folks, do y'all mind if I just say a prayer?" He said a prayer and prayed for all of them, prayed for Agnes that God would watch over her and protect her and give her many more good years. After the prayer, the diner owner realized he was a minister, and said, "Hey, come here! You didn't tell me you were a preacher." He said, "Well, can't help it. I am." He said, "What kind of church do you preach at?" He said, "The kind of church that throws a birthday party for a prostitute at 3:00 in the morning." The owner of the diner said, "There ain't such a church like that because if there was, I'd go to it!"

When we have that kind of heart for anybody, people will want some of that action. These friends cared for their friend, but there's something more to what they did that speaks to the power of bringing people to Jesus. Not only did they care about him, they were convinced, they were convinced that Jesus could help the friend. Listen again to what the Scripture says in verse 5 when the paralyzed man was lowered on the mat, it says, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." Now, whose faith was Jesus talking about? The man on the mat? No! He was talking about the faith of the friends. You see, they had faith that Jesus could do something and make a difference in his paralyzed condition. You know what folks? There are a lot of things out there that are causing people to be paralyzed. There are people paralyzed by fear. There are people paralyzed by grief. There are people paralyzed by bitterness and by envy and by hurt, all kinds of things that make people just feel like they're stuck in life, and the only thing that can get a person unstuck is hope. When we're convinced, when we are sold out on the knowledge and the belief that in here is hope to get people unstuck, that the experience of the living Lord in Jesus Christ can do that, that the music that we sing, the prayers that we pray, the Scriptures

that we hear, the worship that we have, that it has power, it can do that. We get convinced to reach out.

There's a verse in Hebrews, which says, "For we share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." That's the key, isn't it? That we hold our original confidence. You remember your original confidence? Remember that day when you bowed on your knees, and you prayed for Jesus Christ to come into your heart? Are you experienced with vivid reality, the power and the difference that faith and God can make in your life? Boy, it's easy for that to get rusty, isn't it? It's so easy for that to dry up, and sometimes we have to go back to the place and reclaim that original confidence again.

This past week, our Staff Parrish Relations Committee interviewed a young man we're hoping is going to be appointed as an associate pastor at our church. Now, the neat thing about this is when I went to Long's Chapel, you talk about being there eleven years, when I went to Long's Chapel, he was in the eighth grade. He was in middle school, and we watched him grow up, and go to North Carolina State University, and experience the call to ministry. He went on to Asbury Seminary in Kentucky where finishes this spring, and he came to interview, and boy, he was glowing. He was on fire! He was excited about the church. The committee was asking him about his hopes and aspirations, and he was talking about all the great things he wants to see happen in the church. I kind of sat back and smirked, and said, "Aw, I remember being that green." I remember thinking boy ministry is just going to be simple. You're just going to go in, you're going to love people, and they're going to love you all the time, and everything in the church is just going to be like Christmas Day all the time. I sat there, and I looked at him, and I thought, "You'll change! He's going to learn." Then I realized, "No. I need him to come teach me. He can't get here fast enough to rekindle that kind of hope in me again." That kind of enthusiasm, that kind of fire, that kind of joy, I need to be his student, and reclaim that original confidence because when we have that, folks, we can't keep our mouths shut! These friends cared about their friend, and they were confident. Maybe the greatest thing that they teach us is they were also willing to be inconvenienced. They were willing to be inconvenienced. The only way these guys could get their friend to Jesus was with a lot of effort. Imagine the work of hoisting up an adult body on top of a roof, and then you're going to dig a hole in the roof, and lower him down! Now, think about what you're doing to somebody else's house! I'm sure after the service that day the owner of the house came up to these guys and said, "I'm happy about your friend, but I've still got a hole in my roof up here! Somebody's go to pay." You see, they were willing. They were willing to do something that was inconveniencing. They were willing to go to some trouble. They were willing to interrupt their comfort to see that he got to the one who could help. Oh boy, this is a big one! When a church gets radically committed to this one, man, there is no predicting what God can do! When enough believers in faith get together and say, "We'll do whatever it takes! If it means, we've gotta raise the roof, we'll do it! We'll go to any trouble, any cost to see that people come to Christ!"

A friend of mine in the Western North Carolina Conference with whom I went to seminary is a pastor in Hickory, and his church is just growing gangbusters. He has all contemporary worship, no traditional worship. They don't even have an organ in their building. All contemporary! Recently in a new-member class, the people were going around the room, talking about why they came into the church, and person after person talked about the music and the worship, and everybody just spoke so highly. My friend, who is the pastor, said that made him feel good because his wife is the music director, but then they came to a gentleman who said, "Well, I hate to be the only one here to state a negative impression of worship, but I'm 75 years old, and I have been in the Baptist church all my life, and I absolutely despise the music in this church. I can't stand contemporary worship. Give me an organ and an old-fashioned hymn any day of the week." He said, "But let me tell you what's more important than that. I turn around and look at the people who are beside me singing these songs on Sunday, and I get to know a little of their story and how they're coming to know Jesus Christ for the first time, and I see it on their faces, the difference it's making, and I want to be in a church that reaches people for Christ so I'll put up with the music if that's what you're going to sing in this church, and every now and then I might even sing one of the songs or two. I might not like it, but I like people coming to the Lord."

We've waged those battles at Long's Chapel. When I went there, I had heard they had a contemporary service. The pastor before me, in their early morning service on Sundays, decided that instead of singing the opening hymn, he and a couple of others who played guitar would sing maybe one or two praise choruses. Now, when I got there, I thought that this was a very different service, but that was the only thing different. They had hymns for the rest of the service. They had all the liturgy. He wore an alb. I didn't even know what one was until I went to that church. So I said, you know guys, if we're going to have something called a contemporary service, it's not my cup of tea, but let's maybe make it even more contemporary so we did! Do you know the spirit of God got a hold of that service and started bringing people in the door? You know, of course, everyone in the church was so excited about that, right? We had people who couldn't stand it. When that service started outgrowing the traditional service, ooooh. I started hearing it left and right. You know what really got people fired up? When the early service got so big, we had to start a second one! We started another contemporary service, and I said, I tell you what, if we start this second one, and we aren't averaging at least 80 or 90 people within six months, we'd do away with it and go back to what we were. Dadgummit, if God didn't have the attendance of that service up to about 150 in six months! Then it became the largest, and people started dealing with the difficulty of what kind of church we were becoming, and saying we were different and not like we had always been, and I've had to give up my parking space on Sunday, and I can't just walk into my 11:00 service now because that service isn't finished! We don't like this! We're changing!

One Sunday a woman named Sharon came to church. She sat at the furthest seat to the back of the balcony, in other words, the furthest place removed and still be inside the sanctuary that you could get. Over a number of Sundays, I think she literally moved up one pew a week until she was down front and on the floor, and before long, some people in our praise

team recognized her. You see, she used to sing in the bars years ago. She had a good voice. I didn't ask my people why they knew that she sang in the bars, but I just took their word for it, so they eventually got her up front singing with them in the praise team. One day, I learned her story. One Sunday during the message, I asked her to share that. She was greatly depressed. She was an addicted gambler, and had lost most everything she owned, and had just kind of given up on life. She drove up to the Blue Ridge Parkway one day, put the loaded pistol on the seat beside the steering column, and started writing her suicide letter. The whole time she was writing the letter, she kept hearing the voice of her niece, who kept saying, "Aunt Sharon, just come one Sunday, just one Sunday, come with me to church. Sharon, I don't like what I'm seeing in you. You're not the same person anymore. You used to have so much joy. I don't know, maybe the church could make a difference. Just one Sunday." She says now that she came to understand that was the voice of God gnawing at her so much that she knew she could not go through with it without at least honoring her niece's wish and so she came and sat in that place. She told about how God had totally changed her life. Now, get this! The Sunday she told that story there was a man sitting in the balcony in the furthest pew in the back of the balcony. Just that week he had tried to take an overdose of medication and take his life at his apartment, but some members of our church, who worked with him, got worried about him, and they went and knocked on his door. When there was no answer, they kicked it in, and they found him on the floor and took him to the ER, and his life was spared. They told him that Sunday that they were going to bring him with them to church, and so he sat up there. When he heard Sharon's story, he started weeping uncontrollably because he felt like God was talking to him. That was his story! See because our people were willing to be inconvenienced, to do something that wasn't comfortable, that wasn't easy, that went to a little trouble, that was willing to break tradition, some lives have been saved. Man! I believe when a community of God's people get so on fire about caring for their friends coming to know Christ and doing whatever it takes, convinced that Jesus will help, and will go to any trouble that it takes, you know what I believe happens out there? I believe that what happens out there is what got described in the story, and everybody walks away and says we've never seen anything like this before. I believe that can happen in Greenwood as the people of Main Street just get set on fire for caring and convinced in their original confidence, willing to be inconvenienced. I can just imagine the rumors I'm going to start to hear in Lake Junaluska, NC about what's going on a couple of hours south of me. I know you've had some cards given to you in recent days inviting you to put names of people on them. I pray as we get ready to close tonight that you might use this space as a place to come and to pray about those folks and to pray about how God might open up your eyes and your heart to people you encounter all the time in ways that you might develop a friendship and a relationship and ways that you might be able to show grace to them and begin something that might get them from out there into here. I know our worship leader is going to come back and lead us in a closing song, and as they do that, the altar is open to us for a place to come and allow God to seal our hearts as friends who want to bring friends to Jesus.