

“Freely You Have Received, Freely Give”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

June 12, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

I do not want to neglect to thank the Building Committee for all the work and all the hours and all the emotional energy they put into making this new building happen and Family Ministries Committee, which has been expanded in its scope and its membership and its charge to fill the building with new activities, working closely with our Program Director, and I also want to note that we have with us today, Ken Durham from Edgefield. We have David Todd from Edgefield, and we have our architect, John Clayton, and they will be available for complaints, omissions, no, we are honored to have them here today. I do want all, after the sermon and after the blessing, which will be blessing and benediction together, I would like everyone who is involved in the program and in the tour of the new building and in the consecration to please feel free to go first. Feel free to go first through the lunch line, which will be in the hallway just outside and take a right, through the library where the desserts are, and into the fellowship hall. We'll get that out of the way so you won't wonder about it, and you can pay attention to the sermon.

Now, some of my family is here today. Believe nothing they tell you about me.

I will never forget, shortly after I moved just 12 miles down the road, as a freshman, into the dorm at Wofford College, my family all picked up and moved out from under me to the coast. I finally found them in Myrtle Beach. Yes, my family moved out from under me, and some of you may well feel that the Main Street you've known and loved and supported has moved out from under you, with all these changes, but no, it is just growing. Growth and change happens in every living organism, and Main Street will grow and will change as long as it is alive. We thank God we are alive and growing, and so change is a good thing. After we cut the ribbons and open that building, Main Street Church will never, ever be the same. Never feel the same or be perceived in the same way by the community around us. More than that, after we consecrate the building, we are saying, "Here, God, use this to build your kingdom. Use us and this new tool in whatever way you see fit." That is consecration as Steve already pointed out. Tell God something like that, and watch out! New things will happen. Things we haven't even thought of yet. Main Street members, before this day is over, you will be members of a new church.

I had a visitor point out yesterday at the wedding that we have more church now on that end than we have on this end, and we should put a sign out there to say who we are and why we are here, and you know, he was right. We can't have traffic drive by day by day, and wonder what it is that we're doing here. We know why we're here. We are here to give directions home to prodigals. We are here to give a break to families, a safe Christian environment in which to learn and to play and to fellowship together. We are here to give notice. Main Street United Methodist Church is digging in and claiming Greenwood as our parish. We are here to give thanks to God, who has blessed us with wealth and generous pledges and a vision to step out boldly in faith. This is home base for our faith and for God's work through us. Someone said the church is not a fortress. It

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is rather a supply house from which much is given out daily and freely to help those low and high. Faith is fed here. Worship and prayer are foundational, but worship and prayer are meant to strengthen our resolve to go beyond these walls, and invite others to the place where we found strength and love and hope. This is where we get trained up so we can go out and do what Jesus did. You know it was hard for him, and it will be hard for you, too. He did not stay in the manger. He did not stay on the mountain top. He did not stay in the garden praying. Out of love for you and me, he went to the cross. The cross, which revealed just how hostile the world can be to those who live out God's will. Yes, he went to the cross, but he did not stay in the grave. He rose, proving his dominion over sin and death. We cannot stay in the church and be what we were called to be.

Main Street United Methodist Church, our church, God's church, is an incubator for baby faith, for growing faith, for disciples who grow until they are ready to live Christ out loud, out there. You know, while learning, we are properly called disciples. Disciples learn at the feet of their master, but at some point we have learned enough to step out as those who are sent with the word to proclaim in our lives, then we become functionally apostles. Disciples learn, and apostles are sent. You can hide in the shadow of your master for a while, but there comes a time for all of us when he sends us on ahead. He says in the scripture today, money won't help you, extra clothing won't help you, you take only the message God gave you. God was in Christ making peace by the blood of his cross. Trust him. Your sins are forgiven. Accept that. Judge not, and have compassion. There comes a time when your faith must venture out beyond Sunday morning and beyond these walls into the workplace, into your marriage of all places, into the world wherever you go. Faith is planted here. It is fed here, but it must grow and bear fruit out there. Disciples sooner or later become apostles, freely and openly sharing the love, forgiveness and grace we have heard of and accepted in this place. You know, you don't need a seminary degree to invite someone you know to come to a special event, to come to see the new building, to come to a Bible study or Men's Club meeting or Youth Group or United Methodist Women or a mission project. We all can do that.

I heard once about a bitter lady who complained to her pastor, every time he saw her, that she regretted having children because, because of having children, she could never fulfill her dream to be a missionary. He said, the pastor, with a sad smile, that her other favorite subject was complaining about the woman across the street, who was dying of cancer. She just didn't know what to do about her. That sick lady called everyday and interrupted her schedule and made a nuisance of herself. Imagine, she felt called to the foreign mission field, but she couldn't be bothered to call on the lady across the street, who was dying. Faith is more than words. It is being available and vulnerable to the pain and the needs of others, and we do have, and we have tried to institute a buddy system here where you can simply make a phone call every day to someone with special needs. Contact Fred Alewine. Consider this a ministry commercial, if you'd like to volunteer. Our faith should change us.

Churches are either like freezers or ovens. This occurred to me, and I hope the analogy works. A freezer can keep you the same until you reach your expiration date, but an oven

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turns raw ingredients into something new. You take flour and water and yeast and salt, I didn't check with my, my chef daughter if those are the complete ingredient list for bread, but you take flour and water and yeast and salt, and you put these into an oven, and the proteins change, and it becomes something new. You take raw souls, melded with the warmth of Christ, and we become something wonderful and new, forever changed. May our church become more of an oven, which makes us new, than a freezer for what some call the frozen chosen.

We have named our new building the Asbury Outreach Center, and may it be so. The building is a huge public statement that we intend to be here, and be a vital part of Greenwood's future for generations to come. Is it expensive? Yes. It was expensive when this first building was built, too. Imagine what toys and gadgets and fine things they could have bought with the money that instead built this sanctuary. Imagine what toys and gadgets and fine things, which later would become garbage on the lowest level of the landfill, but instead they left this magnificent sanctuary, a holy place, and we leave for the future a place of education in the new building and safe recreation instead of toys and gadgets and fine things destined for the same garbage heap. It's priorities. We need your presence here, and your talents here, and your sacrificial donations here to grow in our calling, our claim on this parish of downtown Greenwood.

A fellow pastor was asked, just as he was walking down a hallway, into a stranger's hospital room by a family that had just made the decision to turn off a relative's ventilator, and one of the family members was not a churchgoer, was not a believer, and was angry, and he asked the pastor, “Are you here just looking for new members?” The pastor said the answer just popped into his head. He said, “I am here because somebody needs to remind you that God is in this room and is always with you no matter how you feel or what you think.” We build churches and new facilities and buildings to echo that statement to all who pass by. We are here because somebody needs to remind the world that God is in this world and always available to you no matter how you feel or what you think. The church is of God, and will last until the end of time. Mission and harvest and growing disciples and sending apostles to bring in the lost, the wandering, the hurt, and the hopeless, that is why we are here. We are maturing in our understanding of what God requires of us. What is maturity in the eyes of God? Well, biological maturity is the ability to reproduce. We are spiritually mature when we seek to plant and nurture the seed of faith in another person. When you feel an overwhelming desire to share your faith with others, I believe you have reached spiritual maturity. Now Main Street is a great church, and it is easy to invite people to a growing church, but we have more to offer than shows up on our calendar. We have the God of the last resort, a God who fulfills what we really want and really need in our souls. We have a God who gave himself to us and for us so that we might be with him forever. A God who identified with the poor and the outcast, and who offers hope to anyone who knocks, anyone who follows, anyone who comes, anyone at all. What a positive and gracious God! How much bigger is God's love and grace than ours. Theologian Karl Barth said, “Folks come to church asking the church people this question, “Is it true that God is present here? What is all the fuss about?” They come asking that question, and they look at us to see

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the answer. It is true for the seeking world only after they see God’s truth living in us. It rings false to the world when they see in us no welcome, no hope, no love, no acceptance, no peace. We have something to give. The love of God. It was freely given to us. We did not deserve it. We did not earn it. Let us freely and generously and intentionally offer God’s love to others within and outside our walls. We do have something to give, the forgiveness of God. It was freely given to us. We did not earn it. Let us freely and intentionally give it to others, inside and outside our walls. We have something to give, the eternal hope of Christ. Beyond all the things of dust and rust and decay, the eternal hope of finding that one place where we truly and always belonged, in the arms of God. That eternal hope was freely given to us. We did not deserve it. We did not earn it. Let us freely and generously and intentionally offer God’s eternal hope to those within and outside our walls.

Yes, what an exciting time to be here, mid-stream in the long history of Main Street United Methodist Church. We have so many things. I’m going to just briefly go down the list. The Lander Methodist Student Union is happening. It will be here. Expanded youth activities are happening. Exercise and sports activities, they will occur on our schedule. We’ll be hosting an internationally accredited music program for young children, and before summer ends, a pastoral counseling center. A focused year-long six-stage outreach effort with custom banners and brochures, this is happening. 40 men and women from all over the state will come here the last week of this month, and use Main Street as home base to repair and renovate four homes through the Conference Salkehatchie Program – that is happening. Our United Methodist Men are already building ramps for those in need, and I think that we shall, after awhile, gain a reputation as that church that helps people. The new 15-passenger bus – the money has been pledged, off-budget, to purchase it. The improvements for the sound system – the money has been pledged, off-budget to improve it, although every time we start to get money for the sound system, Coach Dula does something, and with his voice, people say, “There’s nothing wrong with the sound system.” All these things. I’ve left out so many, but we are a forever-changed church, and at the consecration, we invoke God’s spirit to inhabit and freely inspire us to use it, the building and more, in unexpected ways.

As I close, in my seventh year at my last church, I got a phone call from the emergency room. The nurse said, “I have some parents here whose daughter just died. Now, they are not members of yours, but will you come help them?” And I asked myself, I said, “Help them? What can I do?” Now, their pastor was out of town so I went. The parents were hysterical, and not only had the mother given life to this child, but she had given life again by giving one of her kidneys for a transplant. They so wanted their daughter to live, but they feared what the doctor said could happen, and it did, from complications. She just died. They would not leave the examining room. They would not let her go. We prayed, we cried, we hugged in a most intimate and holy way, and nowhere else to turn in that moment but to God. I was so out of my element and out of my emotional comfort zone! I was so out, way out! I was praying to God for them and to God for myself, how to pray, all at once. Now, they began to calm down, and they began to make phone calls and plans, and they later left. Now, no one from the hospital had ever called

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me in seven years like that before, and this nurse did not really know me, and they weren't my members, and I had to ask her, “Why did you call me?” She simply said, “I thought you would come.” Now, apparently so did God. You see, God does not care for maintaining our comfort zones. God does not care for maintaining our staid and polite distance from those who hurt around us. It felt to me like God said, “I need a man to comfort and pray with this couple, STAT. Now, who in Bamberg has ever raised their hand and said, “Here I am, send me.” St. Peter went down the list, and said, “Well, Jim Dennis did, and he's not doing anything right now.” God said, “Okay, he'll do.” Folks, you have freely received God's love, forgiveness, and the comfort of God's Holy Spirit. You have freely received. Be willing to freely give. Witness just a little beyond your comfort zone. God will sustain you. Do it. Invite a friend, a neighbor, a bitter old so and so, who quit coming three preachers ago. Invite them, too. Build them up. Send them out. Let's do what we exist to do. Build God's kingdom one soul at a time. If God is in this new endeavor, God will indeed do what God always does, and he will send us out to others, beyond our comfort zones and deep into our surrounding community, as scary and dangerous as it is. We consecrate a building, but we also consecrate ourselves. It means nothing less than being ready, willing and able to go and to share what God has already given us. The building is complete, and I quote our Finance Chair, Philip Nickles, “Now let's tear down the walls.” You need not be perfect, Lord knows, I'm not. You need only be willing to be used of God. All we do, as the church, is to provide places and opportunities for people to know about God's love, and to find their talents and to go out and live that faith day by day. God will tap you on the shoulder some time, will nudge your soul and ask, “Didn't you say, here I am, send me?” Even if you never knock on a door to invite, you can witness here, you can witness today, for many of you, your witness is right here or nowhere. Your welcome to others seeking God is right here or nowhere, and I realize that, but if you are not ready to invite from the outside, then please welcome those who have already come, and volunteer on the inside. Say, “Yes, here I am God, consecrate me as well, use me, help me cross the street, pick up the phone, cross the hallway in the apartment, or at least the aisle at church. Send me, I will go. Call me, I will come. Freely I have received, freely I will give.” Amen.