

Sermon Text: John 6:25-35

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, as always when I have something serious to approach, I start with a joke, and let you know that it’s a joke in advance so you’ll know when I stop what to do.

A dog food company had a brand new product that wasn’t selling well, and the president called in his management staff, and says, “How is our advertising?” The advertising executives said, “It’s great! We’ll probably win some of the industry’s top awards this year with our ads.” He said, “Okay. How about our product design?” The production manager spoke up, and he said, “It’s great, boss! We have a new label, and our packaging scored very high in all the marketing tests that we ran.” He says, “Hunh. What about our sales staff? Are they doing their job?” The sales manager said, “Oh sure. Our people are the best in the business.” Then there was a heavy silence from the president. He thought about what he had just heard, and he said, “We’ve got a top advertising campaign. We’ve got good packaging. We’ve got a top-notch sales force. Yet, this product is coming in dead last in the dog food market! Does anybody have any idea what the problem might be?” Again, an uncomfortable silence. Everybody looked at one another, and finally one brave soul spoke up. He said, “It’s those stupid dogs, sir! They just won’t touch the stuff.”

When we invite others to come here to taste and see that the Lord is good, to fill their spiritual hunger here, we must be sure that the bread of life is fresh, that the harvest of love and compassion and good fruits are in evidence and on display. Thanks to Dennis Moore, some of them are. People want growth and change and depth and truth. They want spiritual substance and meat. If we invite people, and people feel welcome, then see God’s power to change lives in our lives, and see that God has put us in unity to work to build God’s kingdom as we claim, if they see that, those people will stay. We have been called by many generations here “a sleeping giant.” Are we awake? Are we yet awake to our needs and to what others need to feel welcomed and included and a part of this family in Christ? Are we awake to what we have to share, and are we sharing it?

I was on a mission situation years ago with a man, who was a professing agnostic, a borderline atheist, but he told me, to my great shock, that he saw something in the eyes of the young people on this mission event and in some of the adult leaders on this mission event. He said, “They have something I want!”

When people come to worship God here through song and sermon and prayer, and then they turn to you on the left and the right before leaving, what do they see? I hope not the cloud of dust as you rush out to lunch! Or people fascinated with their watches while the benediction is being spoken, or Main Street members giving their last greeting. I hope they see Main Street members giving a last greeting and an invitation to please return

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 18, 2007

next week, and to visit their Sunday school class or their men’s group or their women’s circle or whatever small group you may be active in and could invite.

Studies have proven that people, who join when a hot preacher comes usually leave when the hot preacher leaves, but people who find warmth and welcome and inclusion in a church family stay and grow and build year after year. Someone sometime spoke to you about God, maybe someone quite ordinary! They were a light unto your feet showing you where the bread you needed was to be found, showing you your need for a Savior and the door to knock on! Someone comforted you as an echo of God’s Holy Spirit when you needed it most. Someone gave you grace when you really deserved judgment. Someone cried his goodbye to you when everyone else turned their backs. God was present for you at those kinds of moments. Now, it is your turn to be in those kinds of moments for others in Christ’s name and through the Spirit’s power, you can and have been called to do just that!

We must not become people who seek to further social and business connections because there is something much more important and lasting. There is spiritual hunger in the world. You may hear that, and say well, of course, there is, but that is God’s job to deal with. There is spiritual hunger in this town. God has decided how to deal with it locally – through churches, through centers where people have experienced God’s grace and are eager to pass it on! Churches where people have experienced God’s love and forgiveness and are eager to pass it on! Churches – places where people have honestly looked inward, and seen real sin, real selfishness, real hypocrisy, and so would never pass judgment on another because we know, that’s God’s job.

God has gone to great lengths, even the cross and the tomb, to offer forgiveness and grace, and we know that is what we need. That’s what others need, and that’s what we are here for, to save people from empty lives and wasted lives and angry lives and hurtful lives and hateful lives. It is our calling, our job, our mission to be the person who notices, who cares, who reaches out to others, and who has fed upon Christ to such a degree that we radiate a certain calmness, a certain joy, a certain certainty that in the end God wins, love wins.

So look around in your neighborhood, look around at your work, look around at your friends and even family, people you know. Some people you even like are obsessing with trivial, hollow things. Spending their lives and spinning their wheels feeding on spiritual junk food! Some fight relationship after relationship. They may be triple-divorced, but what they are hungry for is a healthy relationship with God in Christ and with an accepting, loving, forgiving community. Some feel the hunger to belong, to feel okay, and they feed that hunger with drugs or alcohol. Of course, it solves nothing, and in fact it creates more problems, but at least, for a few moments, they are numb to their pain! We should offer them as well true solace and true welcome and true belonging, not just after they clean up their act, but before and during. Some try to fill their spiritual emptiness with money and with hobbies and with career building.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 18, 2007

I need to say something about this. I have more than once stood by the bed of a multimillionaire as a pastor as he died, and it has always impressed me that what they had earned and what they had retained in the bank and invested meant absolutely nothing in that moment! As they lay dying, they focused on first family, a few friends, called in their pastor, wanted to hear some Scripture, wanted to hear a prayer, and what they owned or had on was suddenly utterly meaningless! We were made to be in close, trusting, honest relationship with God and with others.

While people are healthy, money often makes relationship with God skewed because we feel that we have money, well, I’m not poor so I’m not really thankful for my daily bread. We say in essence, I’ve got this one, God! I can handle things on my own. If I need help, I’ll give you a call. So God stays distant. Money can do that. Money often changes your relationship with other people. In most towns, certain names are associated with money, and in those towns, when you are introduced, and someone recognizes your name and asks, oh, are you related to? All at once, the mood changes. The power of money changes everything. Not for the better, not for the more honest, not for the more sincere. It changes in ways that say, I would like to know you so that your power and connections can rub off on me!

You see money can be a spiritual junk food of the highest order. We defer to its power in an almost worshipful way. We of all people should know better. I know that some churches are filled only with a certain sort of people, in certain professions, from certain neighborhoods, and I know what Jesus would say to His church. Be used in that way to feed people’s needs with a sense of belonging based on a counterfeit standard. I know without a shadow of doubt that belonging based on money and class, etc., is utterly meaningless as you lay dying. I have seen that truth. I pity those who spend their lives purchasing belonging and buy for themselves the supposed right to look down upon others.

We are not here to merely fill up the building in ways that please us. We are here to offer comfort, to offer hope, and to offer healing, and to welcome into and to incorporate whomsoever will come looking for the grace and for the peace of Jesus Christ. I have very often heard, “Oh, I’ve never thought of inviting so and so to church. So and so wouldn’t fit in here. If I invite him, then I’ll have to invite him to my Sunday school class, and well, he’s just different. Or “She’s not like your average church member, and so I never invite her.”

There are so many people seeking meaning in so many superficial starving ways, looking for connections to God, and God has left only one plan and one organization for connecting people – the church! We are God’s church! Disciple making has not been very high on our list for years and years. I know that we have done careful casual invitations of low-maintenance people, who are not too needy, not too far outside our comfort zone. Those have been invited. Folks with real needs, who need real attention and time and discipling and prayer tend, I say tend, not to be invited. Or if they are

invited, they are not completely welcomed. Or if welcomed, they are not finally incorporated into the church family.

Belonging, belonging is a basic emotional and spiritual need. People need to know that they are fully family. People need to know that we are serious about our outreach and hospitality and embrace of those who seek a deeper relationship with God through this worshiping community.

Now, I am not scolding though it may sound like it. I am not scolding. This is a prayer. I am praying out loud. I am begging the sleeping giant of Main Street to awake to the full potential. This is not in our potential members. What I mean is awake to our mission and ministry of making and growing and incorporating disciples from every corner of Greenwood. God may be in the very last place some of your friends and associates would look for hope or healing, but don’t keep your faith in God a secret. Don’t be afraid or ashamed that you have found comfort, love, and hope right here. Please don’t keep it a secret.

The early Christians often risked their lives to spread the Gospel. We can risk some embarrassment or rejection for the sake of someone else’s soul. We can do that. Main Street has a great past and is growing forward a growing slate of offerings to the community, but we have more to offer than just what shows up on our calendar. We have the true bread of Heaven. We have Jesus Christ, not physical and not fiscal gifts alone, but spiritual food that can satisfy the hunger of every soul running on empty. We have the God of the last resort, the God of the second and third chance, the God who gave Himself up for us that we might be with Him forever. A God who identified with the poor and the outcast, 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 tends to be!

There is a shift coming. Our future is being born. The old is dying, and the new is being born. We may say it is impossible, but God says all things are possible. We may say, I’m too tired. God says I will give you rest. We may say nobody really loves me. God says I love you. We may say I can’t go on, and God says my grace is sufficient. We may say I can’t figure things out. It’s too complex. God says I will direct your steps. We say I can’t do it. God says you can do all things. We say I’m not able. God says I am able. We may say I can’t manage, God, but God says I will supply all of your needs. We may say I’m afraid, but God says I am not giving you a spirit of fear. We may say I’m not smart enough. God says I will give you wisdom. We say I feel all alone. God says I will never leave you nor forsake you. God has made all of these promises and more through Scripture, and what some may call childlike faith, I believe it. I believe it. Many have already become realities in our lives. We are here because we believe or we want to believe that God can feed our souls with something real and true and nourishing and lasting. We are here because God has touched us and changed us for the better. We can only suspect there is more to come, more places and more depth and more fullness of God in our lives that we have not yet experienced. This is the place to see and follow

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 18, 2007

people just ahead of us in faith or to lead people just behind. We need each other. We need to talk about it, to share our faith in its triumphs and in its defeats.

You know over the years, when you look at the statistics, Main Street has mostly grown by transfers, transfers from people who have already professed faith other places. It is time, I believe, to see ourselves as a church fulfilling the great commission and making disciples, looking for opportunities to share our faith, reaching out and bringing in and nourishing those who are starving for meaning and belonging. That’s a far cry from growing by transfer, but that is our call. I know it will be uncomfortable for many of us, and change always is, but as I said before, there is a shift coming. Our future is being born. The old is dying. The new is being born. We are here to offer hope, not just when someone moves to town and transfers, but hope after a whole slew of mistakes and missteps, hope after someone’s career has failed, after someone’s marriage has failed, after the sentence is over, or after graduation from rehab. We are here to offer hope.

The great theologian, Karl Barth, said that broken people come to church asking is it true, is it true? If we do not welcome broken people, then on behalf of God, we have said to them, no, the Gospel is not true. We must never be guilty of sending seekers away doubting the love of God.

You may be familiar with the pollster; he’s also a Christian, George Barna, and a market researcher. Well, he conducts a poll to determine what is bringing people to church, and his results really don’t change much from year to year. This year the poll told basically the same story that I’ve seen every year since I’ve been paying attention. Barna asks people what led them to church, the church of which they’re now a part. One or two percent will say the signs out front, or they saw the ad in the newspaper or the phone book, or the website. That’s one or two percent, but every year over 90%, over 90% interviewed report that what first brought them to church where they now attend was an invitation by somebody they already knew. 90% of people who joined the church first visited because someone they already knew invited them, they already trusted. Nothing else works like the personal invitation, someone person to person risking rejection, and inviting someone to be fed in a worship service.

When the opportunity arises, please tell your friends about the great new restaurant you visited, about the bestseller you couldn’t put down, and about the place where you meet God’s son and God’s children every week and worship – Main Street! Main Street! Invite them to come and see for themselves and everyone welcome them when they do come, literally for God’s sake and for our future faithfulness to our calling, welcome them when they come looking for God’s people here. They come cautiously asking. They come cautiously asking about the Gospel. Is it true? How will you answer? Through thoughts, words, and deed. Let us show those who come that the Gospel is true, that Christ is alive, working in our lives, growing together a family of God at Main Street United Methodist Church. Let the word go out, let our focus be fulfillment of the great commission. Amen.