



“The Challenges of Being the Church: 1. Being ‘Downtown’ Instead of ‘Suburbia’”

Text: Matthew 5:13-16

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We’re going to spend some time this summer talking about the challenge of being a church. And we’re not going to speak in generalities. We’re going to be pretty specific because, in most cases, we’re going to talk about being *this* church – First Presbyterian Church of Evansville, Indiana. There will be some reclaiming of vision and a little re-visioning as we move through our summer Sundays. Hopefully, the sermons will initiate and instigate further conversations across the congregation about where we are heading, as God’s people at this time and in this place, as we prepare to enter our third century of witness and service to God and neighbor.

Let’s agree from the outset that we aren’t going to dodge the difficult issues. We’ll take a hard look at the challenges facing most churches in this new age, and we’ll talk about the tough challenges we face and will continue to face in *this* congregation. There are no “sacred cows” – except the ones we made into hamburgers for the picnic today.

And, most importantly, we’ll do all of that within the context of what scripture encourages us to believe and do. Whatever else we may say, we must remain true to the words and traditions of this great parade of the faithful, who struggled with what it meant to be God’s people in their time, just as we struggle to figure out what it means to be God’s people in our time.

Consider the passage from the prophecy of Jeremiah. Remember the context in which it was written. We were in exile – taken from our native land to the land of Babylon. What would be the normal tendency? To return evil for evil? To be difficult and unmanageable? To withdraw and yearn for a better day?

The Word of the Lord comes from the prophet:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take Wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

The prophet's message is to continue living. Instead of looking for ways to be malicious, look for ways to be constructive. Instead of bemoaning everything that's wrong, get up and do something about making things right. Instead of wishing for the impossible, revision a preferable alternative.

And then, comes this instruction:

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

“Seek the welfare of the city.” That is the instruction. And, if we stop and think about the logic of it, the teaching makes perfect sense. Cities are places of an incredible web of connections. When a city does not fare well, the people who call it home do not fare well. Therefore, even if we seem strangers and aliens in the city, we are to work for it to be a place where all of its people receive the blessings of God.

In the lesson from Acts, Jesus tells the disciples:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus' instruction is equally logical. Boil it down and it is simply: start where you are. The early church leaders, in the tradition of Luke's Gospel and Acts, were gathered in the city of Jerusalem. “Start in the city.” And then, like the ripples from a rock cast into a pond, let your witness move outward from the city.

So, here we are – the spiritual descendants of both Jeremiah and Jesus. And we're in the city. We have always been in the downtown, even as the downtown has changed over the centuries. We had the opportunity to leave the downtown and we rejected the lure of suburbia.

And let's be honest, being downtown has its share of challenges. The downtown has not always been a good place to be. As the downtown deteriorated, there was a lack of vision and action from civic leaders. Masterplans were created and abandoned. Inner city neighborhoods were endangered. A way forward was not easily seen.

But, things have changed. The city is regaining its vibrancy. From the Haynie's Corner Neighborhood, to the Main Street Corridor, to Franklin Street being a destination for more than one week a year – Evansville is coming back to life! The new hotels, the Ford Center, the IU Medical School are adding to the vitality of the downtown. New museums, new restaurants, new entertainment possibilities are making

the downtown a desirable destination, instead of a place to be avoided. And there appears to be no shortage of vision and action to keep the revitalization moving forward.

As a congregation, we have to be excited about all of that, because: "...for in its welfare you will find your welfare." As Evansville's downtown comes back to life, we can find new life as well. As we support and encourage the development and redevelopment of the city around us, as we join in the work where we can, we will find new life for this congregation. There is blessing in being downtown.

But there are also challenges.

There are the obvious problems that we have talked about for years. For this congregation, there is insufficient parking. Guess what? That's not going to change. So, let's not beat ourselves up anymore over the lack of a 75 car parking lot. Let's embrace new alternatives.

There are the problems inherent in an aging building. We have done significant renovation and restoration and more is on the way. But beautiful downtown churches are expensive properties to preserve and maintain. Guess what? That's not going to change all that much. We'll do what we can as we can.

But look a little more broadly.

As the downtown becomes a more attractive place to be, and as people want to live downtown, property prices are going to go up and there will be those who currently live in the downtown who will no longer be able to afford to live in the downtown. The poor will bear the brunt of the success of the downtown. Already, there are rumblings about what happens when formerly public housing is taken over by private ownership. Affordable housing is a challenge now and will increase in the years ahead.

As the downtown becomes a more desirable destination, caring for the homeless will increase. We may not currently have the challenges of homelessness on par with larger cities, like Chicago and New Orleans, where the homeless have camping villages beneath the bridges and in the uninhabited land of the city. But our shelters are nearing their maximum ability to offer services right now. On winter nights, our shelters are at capacity and there are those who are turned away. The need for feeding programs will increase. The need for compassionate medical care will increase.

And issues around equity will increase. Impartiality, fairness, justice – call it by whatever name is comfortable for you – this will be an area of increasing need. Already we see inequity in the school system. There is also inequity in the treatment of citizens, especially if they are poor, immigrant, non-white, non-Christian, or are LGBTQ. I hold this before you today, because in just a few days we will celebrate the land of "freedom and justice for all." The reality is that it is simply not true for far too many and the danger is that it will only get worse.

So, against the backdrop of the blessings and the challenges, to all of us comes the word of the prophet, speaking to a new generation in a new city:

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Seek the welfare of the city, pray for the welfare of the city, work for the welfare of the city.

Remember what Jesus told us:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:14-16)

In new ways, by new means, using new opportunities, we are called to be “light” in downtown Evansville. We are called to share God’s love with all of the people of the downtown. We are challenged to be a lighthouse of God’s love, justice, and compassion – beginning here in downtown Evansville and radiating outward to Vanderburgh County, Warrick County, Posey County, Henderson County, and then to Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, and then across the country, and then around the world.

One of the truths I’ve learned over our years together is that there were lots of opportunities for this congregation to not be on this downtown street corner. We could have moved. We could have self-destructed. We could have simply died off.

But here we are and I don’t think it’s an accident. I firmly and deeply believe that we are here because this is where God needs us to be. We are here on the corner of Mulberry and South East Second because God needs us to be a light to the downtown and God needs us to “seek the welfare of the city ...for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

That is our challenge. For now and evermore. Amen.



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