

The Broken-Open Church: When the Church Gets Broken, the World Gets Mended

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Isaiah 58:1–14, 2 Corinthians 5:14–20, Mark 2:1–10

This past week we have been very privileged. We have listened to erudite and outstanding papers about everything Wesleyan. John and Charles Wesley have been dissected and reassembled every which way, and the remarkable story of the evangelical revival has been microscoped and analyzed once more. As we returned to these subjects yet again, I sensed some desperation, as in, “Why can’t we do today what they did then?” and “What secret of theirs have we overlooked?” And I can hear Mr. Wesley saying dryly, “Well, you haven’t yet written a paper on my horse. Surely you realize there could have been no revival without it? That horse took me out of the church’s bubble, into the real world.”

This was a wonderful week, but let’s concede that it was spent in a bubble. There’s a real world out there that wouldn’t make head or tail of most of what we’ve been talking about. The challenge as you go home now is surely how to help aspiring preachers discover what it means to minister in that world.

This sermon has been edited and updated since it was preached to allow for reference to more recent events. The substance remains unchanged.

Which Is Why Our Gospel Today . . .

Here are five friends. One is paraplegic, and the others feel deeply for him. You could say they are intercessors; they may not know what that word means, but long before they carry him with their hands, they have carried him on their hearts. That's the beginning of intercession, but it's not the end: intercession comes to life in action. So, our four faithful friends lift up their heart burden—their paralyzed mate—and bring him to Jesus.

Well, they try! The trouble is the church gets in the way.

The crowd filling every nook and cranny in that house is there to hear Jesus “speaking the word to them.” You could say that *they are doing church*, and there’s nothing wrong with that, except that when our four friends get there, everybody has their backs turned and nobody lets them in.

Nearly sixty years of ministry have taught me that having our backs turned to the world may be the church’s most practiced posture.

Which is why, on that long-ago day in Capernaum, however important it was to do church with Jesus, to listen to his teaching, and to do all the stuff churches do, *it was time for more important things to intrude*. Our four heroic saints determine that if a preoccupied church has its back to the world, the pain of the world will have to hack its way in.

You all look politely preoccupied doing church with me right now. Imagine if we began to hear the clomp of heavy boots on *this* roof, followed by the sound of pickaxes and other heavy cutting tools right above us, and bits and pieces of wood and plaster began to drop down on our heads. Some of us would begin to shift out of the way, and in spite of the congestion of a moment ago, a space would appear miraculously in front of me. We look up, and there, peering down on us, are four grimy faces covered in dust and sweat, each bearing a triumphant grin. One of them shouts down, “So you thought you could keep us out?” and then, “Watch out, preacher! Here comes some work for you!”

Real intercession is much more than knowing about the world's pain; it is about feeling it so deeply that we have to act, and we shouldn't be surprised if compassion for excluded, wounded, and hurting persons results in some damage to church property. Mother Teresa used to pray, "O Lord, break my heart so wide open that the whole world falls in." That can be painful—it can cause damage.

Let me tell you about a church I know. The Central Methodist Mission (CMM) in Johannesburg is South African Methodism's cathedral, but in my years there, our congregations were often defiant protesters, our visitors were police with guns and batons, and our incense was the scent of tear gas. This is because CMM spoke out against apartheid and gave sanctuary to people resisting its terrible oppression. Then, in the years after I left, CMM offered a different kind of sanctuary: more than two thousand refugees from Robert Mugabe's terror in Zimbabwe found refuge there. They were in every space: each night they stretched out on the pews and floors to sleep, they cooked there, they ate there, some gave birth there, others died. It was not a "nice" place anymore. It stank, and *doing* church the traditional way was difficult; CMM was *being* church in a broken-open way.¹

Two thousand refugees sleeping for years in a prestigious downtown church didn't make the Methodists popular. I struggled with the idea myself, and when I visited, it angered and hurt me to see the massive damage done to this gracious building. I could feel its agony: it was almost as if it had absorbed into its very walls the travail of its new, lost, and frightened inhabitants.

But Jesus wasn't hurt or surprised when something like this happened to *his* church. The people saw a disruption, but Jesus applauded great faith—faith that freed him to act. Neither would John Wesley have been unduly disturbed by what happened in Capernaum or Johannesburg. Once Wesley engaged the world in the wide-open air, "disruptions" like this were common. We've been reminded this week of his instruction that works of mercy should take precedence over

1 The story of CMM's long tradition of sanctuary is told in Christa Kuljian, *Sanctuary—How an Inner-City Church Spilled onto the Sidewalk* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2013).

works of piety and that if we're doing church—even if we're holding out our hands for the sacrament—when a deep human need intrudes, we should leave the bread and wine and attend to our neighbour's pain.

So, however I felt about the damage those poor people were doing to CMM, I had to reckon with this story in Mark 2 as well as Wesley's instruction, because—and here's the thing—*When the church gets broken, that's when the world gets mended.*

Let me go further: Only *when the church gets broken-open can the world be mended.*

Maybe we church people need to get real about what is more important to God, the church or the world? *I've no doubt that God's vote is for the world*, and there's some good Scripture to back that up.

- It was into the *world* that the Word came in human flesh (John 1:14).
- It is the *world* that “God so loved that God gave . . .” (John 3:16, NEB).
- It is the *world* that God in Christ is busy reconciling to God (2 Cor. 5:19).
- It is into real cities and regions and to the *ends of the earth* that Jesus sends his disciples (Acts 1:8).
- On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit blew the disciples out of their upper-room sanctuary *into the world*, and the church was born on the streets of Jerusalem (Acts 2).
- It is the “*whole created universe* that waits with eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Rom. 8:19, NEB).
- It is the *kingdoms of this world* that must become “the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15, NKJV).

So if the God we worship is a world-engaging, world-affirming God, if Scripture is about God's love affair with this messy, hostile, fallen, and broken world, then the call to engage it is a nonnegotiable. In fact, *maybe the only time we are truly being the church is when we are engaging the world*; the rest is at best a dress rehearsal and at worst playing with ourselves. That's what the prophet told us in Isaiah 58. Let me offer a simple paraphrase: God says, “this religious stuff you're doing

just doesn't move me—not until you get broken open and start doing something about my world.”

Wesley and his Methodists got close to seeing this. In a world where so many religious people pride themselves in being right, the Methodists were more concerned with being good. They put loving action ahead of religiosity—and so should we.

Two other factors made the Wesleyan revival not just a soul-saving exercise, but a nation-transforming movement. They were *location* and a *three-letter word*.

First, location: When John Wesley changed location and turned to the poor, something happened to him: in the process of regularly sharing their humble homes, their meager crust, their heavy burdens and terrible degradations—and marveling at their newfound trust in God—he found he had arrived at Jesus’s home address. When that happens, you cannot remain unchanged. The result was that this starchy high churchman got broken open himself. On the one hand, awe at the discovery that being with the poor was as much a channel of God’s grace as receiving the bread and wine at the Eucharist. On the other hand, blazing indignation at the way the comfortable looked upon the poor: “So wickedly false,” he cried, “so devilishly false, is the common objection: ‘they are poor only because they are idle.’”

When I was relocated to make my ministry among the thousands of people of a Cape Town ghetto called District 6²—where the government was determined to forcibly remove every one of them because of the color of their skin—I got broken open too. The pain of those people and their faith changed me. I was not only baptized into a community of courage and grace, but I felt a holy indignation at this trampling of God’s little people, the poor. I had to be different because I found myself located where Jesus lived.

2 District 6 was an inner-city area in Cape Town that the apartheid regime declared to be a “White Group Area,” forcibly removing some sixty thousand people of color.

There is no rediscovery of the “secret” of the Wesleyan revival without migrating the church’s priorities and resources away from institutional survivalism and relocating them where Wesley spent most of his time and energy—with “the least of these.”

And then that three-letter word: We’ve used a lot of long words this week. But the Wesleyan word that brought tears of joy to the poor of England, the word John Wesley preached in St. Mary’s Church down the road from here just weeks after his Aldersgate experience, was much simpler and far more dangerous. It was the word *all*. That word started a quiet revolution because it had social implications beyond those even understood by Wesley. The nineteenth-century political scientist Moisei Ostrogorski spoke of the political influence of the leaders of England’s Evangelical Revival: “They appeal always and everywhere from the miserable reality to the human conscience. They make one see the man in the criminal, the brother in the negro.” He declared that they had “introduced a new personage into the social and political world of aristocratic England—the *fellow man* [sic].” That fellow man, Ostrogorski predicted, “never more will leave the stage.”³ Indeed, this new honoring of *all* men and women, valuing human dignity above position and property, led to the birth of both the British Trades Union movement and the Labour Party. Two hundred years later in South Africa, Wesleyan convictions about an *all*-including God would challenge Methodists in an apartheid society shaped by Calvinist exclusionism.

Remember those days? When the whole world looked on my country with disbelief and disgust because of what we were doing to people? I have two abiding memories.

The first was that we had to choose what really mattered. We could turn our backs on the injustices that apartheid was perpetrating and go on playing church—and many Christians did just that—or we could recognize, as Jesus showed in Capernaum, that playing church while

3 Moisei Jakovlevich Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, trans. Frederick Clarke (London: Macmillan, 1902). Originally published as *La Démocratie et l’Organisation des Partis Politiques*. Quoted in J. W. Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley—The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939).

people suffered was the supreme sin of the religious. Apartheid denied the core of God's reconciling intention for all humanity (2 Cor. 5:14–21), and if we were silent, our very identity as church was at stake.

My dad used to say, “Everything begins in theology and ends in politics,” which is why, as leader of South Africa’s Methodists in 1957, he confronted the apartheid regime: “The government’s view,” he declared, “is that while one white man [*sic*] and one black man are friends, apartheid will have failed; the Church’s view is that so long as one white man and one black man are not friends, the Church will have failed. We are therefore diametrically opposed. We will not place the church at the disposal of the state.”⁴ *Convictions like that broke us open.* We had to decide, and our decision led us into nearly forty years of struggle and disruption.

The second memory is about you and your solidarity. You never left us. You recognized that our sickness might be yours too. Christians in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States—and all over the world—stood with us. When we were weak, you challenged us; when we faltered, you were there carrying us back into the struggle.

In the early 1980s, the South African Council of Churches was put on trial before a government tribunal set up to destroy it. It was a lonely time. Desmond Tutu and I were each interrogated for more than twenty-one hours.⁵ But neither can we forget the day when we heard a scraping of chairs, and into the public gallery of that tribunal came representatives of the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the National Council of Churches in New York, the World Methodist Council, the World Lutheran Federation,

4 Clifford K. Storey, address on the occasion of his induction as President of the Conference, Methodist Church of South Africa Annual Conference, October 1957, in *The Methodist Churchman*, October 1957, pp. 4 and 13.

5 Bishop Desmond Tutu, “The Divine Intention” (presentation by Bishop D. Tutu, General Secretary of the South Africa Council of Churches to the Elof Commission of Enquiry, September 1, 1982) (Braamfontein: South Africa Council of Churches, 1982). Peter J. Storey, *Here We Stand* (submission to the Commission of Enquiry into the South African Council of Churches by the Rev. Peter John Storey, President of the SACC, March 9, 1983) (Braamfontein: South Africa Council of Churches, 1983).

the EKD in Germany, and others. They had left their work all over the world and flown to South Africa, literally breaking into that tribunal and demanding to make their witness. They took the stand and declared that “when you attack the South African church, you attack the Church of God everywhere. You will not prevail.”

So many of your churches around the word allowed themselves to be broken open for us in sick, sinning South Africa, and in the end the purveyors of apartheid did not prevail. South Africa began a journey of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

But the disease was not blotted out. My South African colleague Professor Dion Forster was right when he delivered the Fernley Hartley Lecture two days ago in this church: we cannot yet talk about a post-apartheid South Africa, nor should we speak of a post-apartheid world.⁶ My country was not the last outpost of racism, discrimination, and the oppression of the poor; rather, we were the foreunners of a worldwide epidemic that is now crashing around us all. There is a global form of apartheid abroad today, and we dare not ignore it. Great democracies are being taken over by government-driven hate.

What might this gospel story be saying in the world of Trump’s wall and Boris’s Brexit? We’ve tiptoed round those issues this week, but in private conversations many have metaphorically wrung their hands in despair. Most of all I sense that too many of us see the wall and Brexit as purely political issues, to be solved by a next United States election or some miracle negotiations in Brussels. But remember, *everything begins in theology before it ends in politics!*

These and other populist movements are a backward slide into the worship of the destructive idols of nationalism, pride, and fear: of walls and drawbridges, of the arrogance of whiteness and the fear of “otherness.” We South Africans know these signs; we’ve been there, we’ve done that! We are witnessing a “re-fracturing” of humanity. These withdrawals into apart-ness—and you can add the tragic prospect of a

6 The 2018 Fernley Hartley Lecture was “An Understanding of Christian Perfection as African Christian Humanism in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,” delivered by Dion Forster, Head of Department, Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

United Methodist Church ceasing to be united—contradict the words of Paul when he says that the mandate to reconcile rather than alienate comes from God: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18–19, NIV).

If that is true, then God is pleading with us not only to introduce people to Jesus, but to be in the forefront of God’s struggle to bring divided humanity together. *If we cannot do that, we have no word for the world.* We can talk about conversion and we can talk about holiness and piety until the cows come home, but if we cannot demonstrate how alienated humans can be brought together to find one another, we are mere sounding gongs and clanging cymbals.

It follows that if we don’t see the tragic divisiveness of Trump and Brexit—yes, and the sad scandal of a looming “Sexit” in The United Methodist Church—as essentially moral and spiritual problems rooted in retrograde theology, we are as blind and oblivious as that church congregation in Capernaum long ago. Some of us who come from the countries that Donald Trump dismisses with an expletive find it hard to believe that the church in America remains more preoccupied with issues of sexuality than with the immoral abuses of power he is perpetrating. We have also waited to hear God’s church on the British side of the Atlantic say unequivocally and together, “How can you with a Christian conscience place your nationalist jingoism above one of the greatest experiments in peace-building that the world has seen, a Union that has turned the enemies of centuries into friends and neighbors, and saved Europe from war?”

So, the question this old gospel story leaves us with is whether we will continue to think our job is to keep doing church in the old, safe way while the world—that God loves more than us—goes deeper into sickness and death, or whether we might find the courage of those four faithful friends who refused to let the church remain undisturbed, or

the magnificent discernment of a Wesley who said, “It’s the *world*, not the church; that’s my parish,” or maybe we might even come to live out a paraphrase of the words of a wizened little Albanian nun named Teresa and pray, “O Lord, open up your *church* so wide that the whole world can fall in.”

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