

Becoming a Church Without Walls

Today marks the 103rd Anniversary of the Fourth Street Church of God. That's a long time to be doing ministry from one location and not an easy thing to pull off. Several other churches in our neighborhood are closing or have diminished in numbers significantly, while we have grown. Some Sundays we are bulging at the seams. Parking is at a premium and people who come late can't always sit in their favorite pew. At least so far, the economic recession has not effected your giving or our income; we ended last year in the black and as of last week's Council Meeting we are back in the black for 2009. Financially, we are running ahead of the same period in 2008. New faces continue to pop up among us. There is a warm and welcoming spirit here in the Family of God at Fourth Street. We have the appearance of doing pretty well. You might think we should be satisfied with where we are and what we've accomplished.

But as I shared with you several weeks ago, I believe God wants to give us more. I believe God wants to take us further, to have us experience more of His love, more of the Holy Spirit's power, more passion, more understanding of our mission in this world. I believe God wants to give us more. I said in a different sermon that although we've pretty well figured out how to be a friendly and loving church, what we need to figure out now is how to be a God-filled church, so that no one can come into this fellowship without coming face to face with His love in the face of Jesus Christ.

I've continued to ask the Lord for a clearer vision and a deeper understanding of what He wants for us here at Fourth Street. Three things rose up within me as I thought about that vision. There are three things to which I'm sure we are called. We are called to be a people faithful to the inspired Word of God; a people filled, empowered, and guided by the Holy Spirit; and a people who welcomes, reaches out, and ministers to all other people with the outrageous, unconditional, scandalous love of Jesus Christ.

In terms of being faithful to the inspired Word of God, and this may sound strange, we need to make sure that this Bible is our Bible, our rule of faith and practice, the Word by which we evaluate every other word we hear or read in this world. Paul says in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." There is a lot of teaching going on in our world that seeks to argue with or contradict the plain meaning of Scripture. There are plenty of voices that would deny God's role as creator and have no room for God's right to rule in our lives. There are

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many who doubt the truth of this Word and many who would like to think it's just a bunch of fairytales, but that's not what we think or believe.

What we believe is that this book, the Bible, is unique among all other books. It is a genre unto itself. Surely it contains works of poetry, history, prophecy, creative narrative, parables, law, and letters of a personal and corporate nature. It contains accurate observations of nature and displays an accurate understanding of human psychology. It contains all of these things and more; it is all these things and much much more. Paul writes to Timothy in II Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." **This Bible is our Bible.**

But the thing that really makes the Bible a book like no other book, is that this book is alive. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." I don't know about you, but when I read this book it speaks to me. It teaches me, rebukes me, corrects my thinking, comforts me, encourages me, challenges me, and impacts the way I live my life.

Paul calls the Word of God "the sword of the Holy Spirit." Jesus told His disciples in John 14:25-26: "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." The words of the Bible, when brought to mind and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, become the living words of God in real time. Almighty God, the Living God, can and does choose to speak to us through this book. **We are called to become, and to remain, people of the Book. We are called to remain faithful to the Word of God.**

The second part of the vision God gives me for our church is that we are to be a people filled, empowered, and guided by the Holy Spirit. I shared with you last week how the Lord met me and blessed me during my time off after shoulder surgery. I asked the Holy Spirit to speak to me through the Bible and to bring to mind things in my life that needed correction or healing. When I gave Him time and opened my heart to listen, I found Him very near. When I was home alone, I found that I was not alone. The Holy Spirit kept me company and allowed me to fellowship with Him. Whereas I may have imagined that the days would be rather long and boring, I found instead that the time went

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very fast and I was anything but bored. I felt very close to the Lord and my body healed very fast. I had such a sweet time with the Lord, that my greatest fear was that it would come to an end. One morning I prayed and asked the Lord to reveal any sin I needed to deal with. As I meditated on that request the subject of my fear came to the surface. The Holy Spirit impressed on me that such fear dishonored Him. As I continued to pray, God gave me an image of a fountain--a big fountain such as you might see in the center of Rome or in some other large city. The fountain was constantly replenishing itself with water. As I thought about the fountain, I asked Jesus to come to the fountain and to help me understand what I was seeing. Jesus came into the picture and immediately the words to the hymn, Beulah Land came to mind: "I'm drinking from a fountain that never shall run dry." In this way He assured me that if I will faithfully come to Scripture and prayer, and take the time to open my soul to the Holy Spirit, He will continue to meet me and give me living water to share with others. He assured me that He will give me to drink from an endless supply!

After the doctor cleared me to drive and I returned to pastoral visitation, I have found almost every day to be a great adventure. As God brings folks to mind, I visit them. On several occasions the Lord has provided me with perfect timing. The person I have gone to see has been away from home and gets back at the same time I arrive on the scene. At other times I have found that the Scripture I was meditating on earlier that morning, becomes the living word of God the person sitting before me needs to hear. In other situations I am looking for an opportunity to speak to a person about something God has placed on my heart for him or her, and they bring up the same subject. In fact, it is the first word that comes out of their mouths. I don't have to force the action, God is way out in front of me and I'm just a tool in His hand.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit and being led by the Holy Spirit is amazing and I'm convinced it's not just for me. I believe it is the birthright of every person who has received Jesus Christ into his or her life as Savior. If you have Jesus in your life and you want to serve Him, He will fill you with the Holy Spirit and lead you by the Spirit if you sincerely and persistently ask Him to. In Luke 11:13, Jesus says "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Jesus said, "Ask and you will receive that your joy may be full." Peter says in Acts 2:38-39: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far

off--for all whom the Lord our God will call." In Acts 5:32, Peter, with the other apostles, said "We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit who is God's gift to those who obey Him." That's why I say that being filled with and led by the Holy Spirit is the birthright of every person who has received Jesus as Savior. Receiving this blessing may begin as a simple prayer: **"Heavenly Father, I pray for what You have promised. For my sake, and for the sake of my family and for the sake of those who are lost, fill me with the Holy Spirit. Make me aware of His guidance from this moment on. In the strong name of Jesus I pray, Amen."**

I believe the Fourth Street Church of God is called to remain and to grow stronger as a people faithful to the Word of God. I believe the Fourth Street Church of God is called to be a people filled with and led by the Holy Spirit for our own sakes and for the sake of others. And, that brings me to the last part of my vision for our church. I believe God is calling us to be a people who welcomes, reaches out, and ministers to all other people with the outrageous, unconditional, scandalous love of Jesus Christ. The words I have chosen to describe the love of Jesus may seem strange or even inflammatory, but let me explain. I say that the love of Jesus Christ is outrageous. Listen to Luke 6:32-37: Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Do you see why I call His love outrageous? It's not just that we love our own family and friends, or that we love each other as brothers and sisters in the family of God; no, as good as that it, it's not good enough. The love God calls us to is a love for enemies; it is a love for the ungrateful and for the wicked; it is a love for those who persecute, cheat, and slander us. It is absolutely outrageous; it is a love that is beyond any love we can generate on our own; it is the love of God within us. It's a love that says, "whosoever will may come."

This love that we are called to love with is an unconditional love; that is to say the other person doesn't have to do anything to deserve it or to earn it. It is a love like that described in Romans 5:8, where Paul says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we

were still sinners, Christ died for us." Do you get that? While we were sinners He loved us. While we were sinners He died for us. Is the alcoholic a sinner? Is the prostitute a sinner? Is the promiscuous husband or wife a sinner? Is a drug addict a sinner? Is the practicing homosexual or the practicing heterosexual outside of marriage a sinner? Are the pornographers and molesters and perverts sinners? Are racists and thieves and murderers sinners? What is the answer? "Yes, they are sinners." Does God love them? "Yes." Did Christ die for them? "Yes." And what about you and me? Were we/are we sinners? "Yes." Does God love us? "Yes." Did Christ die for us? "Yes again." His love for all people is unconditional and our love that is now His love within us will be the same. We are called to be outrageous, unconditional, lovers.

Finally, the love we are called to love with is a scandalous love. Can I be serious about this? All you have to do is look at what Jesus did and what Jesus did--did in the community around Him. Read the gospels. When He healed lepers, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, healed withered hands on the Sabbath, the people around Him were scandalized, especially the religious people. When He was found talking with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and ministered to the daughter of a Gentile Syro-Phoenician woman, His own disciples were scandalized. His love was outrageous, unconditional, and scandalous.

Do you think God means us to love with the love of Jesus? Pretty scary, isn't it? But I don't see any way around it. The Church that Jesus calls us to be is a church without walls, a church where the outrageous, unconditional, and scandalous love of Jesus transforms and heals everyone who comes under it's influence and receives His love. As I was reading earlier from Romans 14, I noticed this word of God in verse 4: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." When God begins to work in a person's life and that person responds, that person belongs to God and it is not for us to judge him.

I believe we as God's people here at Fourth Street are called to be faithful to God's Word, filled and led by the Holy Spirit, and empowered to love with the outrageous, unconditional, scandalous love of Jesus Christ. I believe we are called to become a church without walls.

The Fourth Street Church of God

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Sermon for March 8, 2009

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II Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12; Acts
2:38-39 , 5:32; Luke 6:6:32-37

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