

Mark 2:1-12  
September 27, '09

UNBINDING THE GOSPEL  
"BARRIERS & BRIDGES"

I WAS A FRESHMAN IN COLLEGE.

I WAS ATTENDING EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, BUT LIVING IN AN APARTMENT IN ANN ARBOR.

I DIDN'T HAVE A CAR & HAD TO RELY ON ROOMMATES FOR RIDES TO CAMPUS & ANYWHERE ELSE I WANTED TO GO.

IN FACT, EVERY MORNING, I'D LEAVE THE APARTMENT BEFORE 7 O'CLOCK & NOT RETURN UNTIL AFTER 7 O'CLOCK THAT NIGHT.

I HAD BEEN RAISED IN A LUTHERAN CHURCH & KNEW THAT THERE WAS A LUTHERAN CHURCH JUST A MILE OR SO FROM OUR APARTMENT.

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS IN SCHOOL, AS WE WOULD PASS THE CHURCH ON THE WAY TO CAMPUS, I'D GIVE THOUGHT TO ATTENDING WORSHIP ON SUNDAY MORNING.

THAT'S ALL IT WAS, THOUGH – A THOUGHT.

I COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO REALLY DECIDE TO DO IT.

I DIDN'T KNOW WHEN WORSHIP BEGAN.

I HAD NO WAY OF GETTING THERE.

I DIDN'T KNOW ANYONE.

I DIDN'T KNOW IF I'D BE WELCOME.

I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE I'D SIT.

I DIDN'T KNOW IF THE WORSHIP STYLE WOULD BE SOMETHING I'D BE FAMILIAR WITH.

THERE WERE TOO MANY UNANSWERED QUESTIONS & SO I JUST LEFT IT AS "A THOUGHT" AS I'D PASS BY EVERY DAY.

BUT THINGS JUST DIDN'T SEEM RIGHT TO ME EVERY WEEK.

I'D ALWAYS GONE TO CHURCH & SUNDAYS WOULD COME & GO & IT JUST FELT LIKE SOMETHING WAS MISSING FOR ME.

I FINALLY MADE A DECISION THAT I'D JUST CALL THE CHURCH, FIND OUT WHEN WORSHIP WAS & GET UP SUNDAY MORNING & GO.

IT WAS TWO MONTHS AFTER SCHOOL HAD STARTED.

I CAN TELL YOU THE EXACT DATE.

IT WAS NOVEMBER 17, 1968.

MORE ABOUT THAT LATER.

I WOKE UP, PUT MY SUIT & TIE ON & LEFT THE APARTMENT AN HOUR BEFORE WORSHIP WAS TO BEGIN, FIGURING IT WOULD TAKE ME ABOUT 30-40 MINUTES TO WALK TO THE CHURCH.

AS I ARRIVED, IT WASN'T A COMFORTABLE EXPERIENCE.

I REALIZED ALL THE SKEPTICISM I'D HAD ABOUT GOING WAS JUSTIFIED.

HOW DO I DO THIS?

DO I JUST WALK IN?

HOW DO I FIND A SEAT?

WHAT IF SOMEONE ELSE ORDINARILY SITS IN THE SEAT I'VE CHOSEN?

IT WAS VERY UNNERVING BUT I DID IT.

I STEPPED THROUGH ALL THE BARRIERS I'D ANTICIPATED & EXPERIENCED WORSHIP IN THIS NEW PLACE & THIS NEW HOME.

THROUGHOUT MY COLLEGE YEARS, THIS BECAME MY CHURCH HOME.

IT WASN'T EASY, THOUGH, TO DISMANTLE THE BARRIERS THAT KEPT ME AWAY.

YOU KNOW WHAT THAT'S LIKE, DON'T YOU?

WHETHER IT'S GOING TO A NEW CHURCH OR SOME OTHER NEW EXPERIENCE, IT'S DIFFICULT TO GET PAST THE BARRIERS.

IT CAN HAPPEN IN ANY NEW ENDEAVOR WE CHOOSE TO UNDERTAKE.

SOMEONE WAS TALKING ABOUT HAVING SUCH AN EXPERIENCE WITH A NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION.

HE HAD NEVER ATTENDED MEETINGS, BUT DECIDED HE'D TRY IT.

HE DIDN'T SEE ANYONE HE KNEW, SO HE JUST SAT IN THE BACK DURING THE MEETING.

WHEN IT WAS OVER, HE SIGNED UP ON ONE OF THE VOLUNTEER LISTS THEY HAD POSTED.

HE REALLY WANTED TO HELP OUT WITH ORGANIZING A NEIGHBORHOOD CLEAN-UP DAY.

HE LISTED HIS NAME & HIS PHONE NUMBER.

AFTER THE MEETING – DURING WHICH, BY THE WAY, NO ONE SPOKE TO HIM – HE WENT HOME & WAITED TO BE CALLED & TOLD WHAT WOULD BE EXPECTED OF HIM FOR THE CLEAN-UP DAY.

THE CLEAN-UP CAME & WENT & NO ONE EVER CALLED.

AS HE REFLECTED ON HIS EXPERIENCE, HE SAID TO HIS PASTOR, *"I SURE HOPE PEOPLE DON'T FEEL LIKE THAT WHEN THEY COME TO CHURCH."*

TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, OBVIOUSLY THEY DO.

THERE ARE SOME INEVITABLE BARRIERS THAT MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR SOMEONE TO COME TO CHURCH FOR THE FIRST TIME.

THAT'S WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL FOR US TO MINIMIZE THE INEVITABLE BARRIERS & DISMANTLE THE ONES OVER WHICH WE HAVE CONTROL.

WE NEED TO BE DISMANTLING BARRIERS & BUILDING BRIDGES.

ONE OF THE BARRIERS THAT STANDS IN THE WAY OF SOMEONE COMING TO CHURCH FOR THE FIRST TIME IS THAT THEY WON'T KNOW ANYONE.

THAT'S A RELATIVELY EASY BARRIER TO DISMANTLE FROM TWO STANDPOINTS.

IF SOMEONE DOES COME TO CHURCH FOR THE FIRST TIME & DOESN'T KNOW ANYONE, IT DOESN'T TAKE ANYTHING MORE THAN A FRIENDLY WELCOME TO ASSURE THEM THEY *DO*.

ONCE THEY'VE MET *YOU*, THEY *DO* KNOW SOMEONE & THEY'RE NOT ALONE.

*"OH, BUT WHAT IF I THINK SOMEONE IS NEW & THEY TELL ME THEY'VE BEEN A MEMBER HERE FOR YEARS?"*

WHEN WILL WE GET OVER THAT OLD, TIRED EXCUSE FOR NOT WELCOMING SOMEONE TO THE CHURCH?!

LET'S JUST ALL AGREE THAT IF SOMEONE WELCOMES YOU TO EASTMINSTER, YOU'LL BE ABSOLUTELY THRILLED TO KNOW THEY'RE DOING THEIR PART TO MAKE US A LOVING, CARING, WELCOMING CHURCH FAMILY!

THE OTHER WAY THAT WE CAN EASILY DISMANTLE THIS BARRIER IS TO MORE ACTIVELY & OPENLY INVITE SOMEONE TO CHURCH SO THAT WHEN THEY COME, THEY WILL, IN FACT, ALREADY KNOW SOMEONE.

THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE PARTICIPATING IN THE "UNBINDING YOUR HEART" EXPERIENCE HAD A CHALLENGE THIS PAST WEEK TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHO ISN'T INVOLVED IN A FAITH COMMUNITY.

I IMAGINE YOU HAD TWO PRIMARY RESERVATIONS IN DOING SO –

FIRST OF ALL, YOU SAID, *"I DON'T KNOW ANYONE WHO DOESN'T GO TO CHURCH."*

I DON'T WANT TO WASTE TIME DWELLING ON THIS RESERVATION BECAUSE I HOPE YOU QUICKLY REALIZED THAT ISN'T TRUE.

YOU *DO* KNOW PEOPLE WHO DON'T GO TO CHURCH.

WE ALL KNOW SUCH PEOPLE IF WE'LL JUST GIVE IT A FEW MINUTES THOUGHT.

THE SECOND RESERVATION YOU HAD IS, *"I COULD NEVER DO THAT WITH SOMEONE. IT'S TOO PRIVATE & I MIGHT OFFEND THE PERSON."*

THAT'S TRUE.

YOU *MIGHT* OFFEND SOMEONE – IF YOU GRAB THEM BY THE COLLAR & SAY, *"YOU'RE A MISERABLE SINNER & ARE GOING TO HELL IF YOU DON'T COME TO CHURCH WITH ME SUNDAY!"*

C'MON! THAT'S NOT WHAT AN INVITATION TO CHURCH IS.

AN INVITATION TO CHURCH IS AN INVITATION TO BECOME A PART OF SOMETHING THAT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE OF LIFE.

IT'S AN INVITATION TO MEET CARING, KIND, COMPASSIONATE PEOPLE.

IT'S AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN ENJOYABLE, THOUGHT-PROVOKING, MEMORABLE EVENTS.

IT'S AN INVITATION TO LIFE.

MAYBE IT REALLY COMES DOWN TO A QUESTION OF HOW MUCH YOUR EXPERIENCE IN FAITH MATTERS TO YOU.

I REMEMBER CONSCIOUSLY THINKING ABOUT THIS QUESTION AS A YOUNG PERSON.

I REMEMBER THINKING THERE WERE REALLY ONLY TWO OPTIONS FOR ME.

EITHER THE EXPERIENCE OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST & INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE OR –

- OR IT WAS REALLY STUPID & I DIDN'T WANT TO HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT.

TO ME, IT WAS EITHER ONE OR THE OTHER.

TO JUST "PLAY" AT MY FAITH WOULD BE THE MOST RIDICULOUS THING I COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE.

BUT IF I BELIEVED THIS “STUFF” – THE STUFF OF CHRISTIANITY, HOW COULD IT NOT THEN BE – BY FAR – THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE & SOMETHING I’D WANT EVERYONE TO EXPERIENCE BECAUSE IT’S TRUE!?

BELIEVING THAT JESUS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE’S LIFE IS PRECISELY WHAT DROVE THESE FOUR MEN IN MARK’S GOSPEL TO DO WHATEVER IT TOOK TO BRING THEIR FRIEND INTO THE PRESENCE OF JESUS.

AN OVERFLOW CROWD, A BLOCKED DOORWAY, AND EVEN THE PRESENCE OF A ROOF WAS NOT GOING TO DETER THEM FROM ENABLING THEIR FRIEND TO BE INTRODUCED TO JESUS.

THEY KNEW THAT JESUS COULD DELIVER HIM FROM HIS PARALYSIS.

THEY KNEW JESUS COULD HEAL HIM OF HIS AFFLICTION.

THEY KNEW JESUS COULD GIVE HIM A NEW LIFE.

YOU KNOW THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PARALYZED BY FEAR OR REJECTION OR FAILURE.

YOU KNOW THOSE WHO ARE AFFLICTED BY ILLNESS & DISEASE.

YOU KNOW THOSE WHO DESPERATELY LONG FOR A NEW LIFE.

TO WHAT LENGTHS ARE YOU WILLING TO GO TO INTRODUCE SOMEONE TO JESUS CHRIST?

WHAT WILL YOU DO TO BRING SOMEONE INTO HIS PRESENCE?

WHAT BARRIERS WILL YOU DISMANTLE TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER TO MEET HIM?

THESE 4 MEN WOULD NOT BE DENIED IN THEIR QUEST TO INTRODUCE THEIR FRIEND TO SOMEONE WHO COULD CHANGE HIS LIFE.

I TOLD YOU THAT THE FIRST DAY I EVER ATTENDED THAT LUTHERAN CHURCH IN COLLEGE WAS NOVEMBER 17, 1968.

THE REASON I KNOW THAT IS BECAUSE THE DAY BEFORE, RON JOHNSON – A RUNNING BACK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN – SCORED 5 RUSHING TOUCHDOWNS IN A GAME AGAINST WISCONSIN & THE PASTOR TALKED ABOUT IT IN HIS SERMON.

I’D NEVER SUCH A THING IN A SERMON BEFORE.

I WAS MORE ACCUSTOMED TO WALKING INTO CHURCH & FEELING LIKE I’D WALKED INTO THE FIRST CENTURY.

THE ONLY TIME WE’D GET CLOSE TO THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY WAS WHEN MARTIN LUTHER OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY WOULD BE MENTIONED!

HERE WAS A CHURCH THAT CONNECTED THE PRESENT TO THE PAST – SOMETHING I’D NEVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE!

SOME OF YOU MAY BE THINKING – “I REMEMBER HIM TELLING US THAT BEFORE.”

AND YOU’RE RIGHT.

I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT BEFORE & THE REASON I’M TELLING YOU AGAIN IS BECAUSE IT MADE A PROFOUND IMPRESSION ON ME.

WHETHER THEY KNEW IT OR NOT – WITH SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS THAT – THAT LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN WAS DISMANTLING BARRIERS & BUILDING BRIDGES.

BUT THERE'S MORE.

AFTER GOING TO THAT CHURCH FOR A COUPLE WEEKS, A MAN APPROACHED ME & WELCOMED ME BACK.

HE'D NOTICED THAT I'D BEEN THERE BEFORE.

FOLLOWING WORSHIP, HE AND HIS WIFE SAW ME WALKING FROM THE CHURCH & ASKED ME IF I'D LIKE A RIDE HOME.

THE NEXT SUNDAY HE DID THE SAME – ONLY THIS TIME THEY ASKED IF I WANTED TO GO TO LUNCH BEFORE GOING HOME.

WHEN THEY DROPPED ME OFF, THEY ASKED ME I'D LIKE TO HAVE THEM COME BY ON THE WAY TO CHURCH THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY TO GIVE ME A RIDE.

THROUGHOUT THAT ENTIRE SCHOOL YEAR, DR. & MRS. FRED KOEHLER WERE THERE FOR ME EVERY SUNDAY.

THEY WERE THERE, DISMANTLING BARRIERS & BUILDING BRIDGES.

WHAT HAPPENS HERE MATTERS.

I HOPE IT MATTERS MORE TO YOU THAN ANYTHING ELSE IN YOUR LIFE.

I HOPE YOU FIND YOUR EXPERIENCE OF FAITH WITHIN THIS CHURCH FAMILY TO BE OF PRIME IMPORTANCE TO YOU.

BECAUSE IT'S HERE THAT WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE BROUGHT INTO THE VERY PRESENCE OF JESUS CHRIST.

IT'S HERE THAT LOVE & ACCEPTANCE, KINDNESS & UNDERSTANDING ARE MORE AT HOME THAN ANYWHERE ELSE IN ALL THE WORLD.

OUR TASK AS MEMBERS OF THIS CHURCH FAMILY IS TO DISMANTLE THE BARRIERS & BUILD THE BRIDGES THAT WILL ENABLE OTHERS TO FIND THE EXPERIENCE HERE THAT WE HAVE FOUND. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport  
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