

## SERMON SERIES: 5 KEYS TO A HEALTHY CHURCH

### MESSAGE #1: A NOTABLE HISTORY

I want to tell you a story that surprised us all, one not meant to scare you, only to get us all thinking about the essential elements of healthy churches. There are 5 of these, and this is the first.

Just last year, 2006, on a cold early Sunday morning on December 30, the Pastor of The Memorial Baptist Church of Greenville, NC, got the kind of phone call that terrifies everyone in a church. The call was from the City Police saying that they were responding to a neighbor calling with the news that the church was on fire.

When the fire-trucks had arrived in just moments, the lovely 1200 seat, just 15 year old Sanctuary was engulfed in flames. All was lost in a quick total 45 minutes, while the firefighters and gathering bath-robed neighbors stood helplessly by at about 3AM. The Memorial Church is the birthplace of The NC Baptist Convention and is one of the leading churches in that community, essentially being the First Baptist Church.

That morning, about 700 people gathered on the spacious back lawn to hear words of consolation from their newly called pastor of 1 month, Dr. Randy McKinney, and to just stand in horror, imaging what might become of their church!

As they stood gathered on the back lawn, hearing His comforting words, I was there watching an amazing phenomenon: **They were being the church,** even without their beautiful and beloved building! They stood shivering together in humble acceptance of these events. They prayed, they thanked God for

what they had, they reached deep into their souls and pledged to care for each other and continue their ministries.

Then a man emerged and took Randy's hand introducing himself as the pastor of the primarily black church across town. He had heard the news and could not proceed in worship. Instead he told his people what had happened, and asked if they would go with him to the Memorial Church to comfort them in Christian love as he dismissed their service early. And here they were, in Christian love, being the church!

If my church had burned, would I still be around to be the church?...And if another's church burned to the ground, would I hang around just to be the church?.....

II. Moments like these are the stuff that defines a congregation. Great and memorable events, **notable points** in the church life, these are the stuff that a real church is made of. At the beginning of this message you heard 3 scripture texts that told 3 stories so notable in the life of the New Testament Church that they are the defining moments of her life, her mission and her continuing story of influence in a community.

The first Is **THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT.**

When God's people were at their lowest, and the words of the Prophet Joel and a collection of other minor prophets were a blistering rebuke for their waywardness, God was preparing a dark time in their history as His people. We call what followed the Intertestamental period, 40 years of silence when there was no word for the Lord for the people. It seems he was giving them a taste of their own self planned lives, and anticipating a time of their return to a real appetite for God, a hunger for a word.

But in these words he was assuring them of a new day when they returned to Him again. He would send His spirit upon them all,

when we would all bear His Spirit, just as we do today as followers of Jesus our Savior.

The very presence of God would come upon his people and make his dwelling here, available for our empowered living. And our sons and daughters would PROPHECY! That means we would all have a message, and we would always be characterized by the proliferation of His word to give life and salvation!

THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT! It was **a notable moment** in the history of God's people. It defined them. It is the foundation for our experience of the Lord today. It is the gift to every believer at salvation, sometimes comforting, sometimes discomfoting. Whatever we need, the Spirit of The lord is there convicting, guiding, leading us to higher levels to serve.

We have this promise of the spirit. It is ours today!

The second is **THE PROVISIONS FOR THE SAINTS.**

The simple story in the book of Acts tells of the amazing community of faith that became a community of love to each other. The Psalmist had proclaimed that he had never seen God's people go hungry or go begging, and in this little microcosm of God's people they demonstrated how God would fulfill that assurance. The Church of New Testament Faith would love so intently, just as Jesus had done and instructed His disciples to do, that they would care for each other's needs, even to the point of selling their goods to make sure that the neediest among them had enough.

**THE PROVISIONS FOR THE SAINTS.** We still have that mark on our church as we follow the Lord faithfully. When we meet a need or give graciously as the Lord leads us, and as He instructs us, such as to tithe, we always discover that amazing truth told by real givers, that you just cannot out give God! Give what you

know you cannot afford, realizing you cannot afford not to, and it always surprises you. It just keeps on coming back to you.

*"By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another!"* Jesus said.

### The third is **THE PASSION OF THE PEOPLE.**

This was the commissioning moment in the life of the church.

Jesus said, *"A new command I give to you, that you should love one another, as I have loved you."* Now, any student of religion can tell you that this not a new command. The Hebrew children lived this mantra out in their identities everyday as good Jewish people. But it was new because Jesus was defining it himself; new because Jesus was modeling it. He was providing the grace in the heart of every believer to really live it, too.

Sometimes our Christian lives lose their luster, the excitement, any real clear sense of direction. In those moments we have in the past often been heard to call for Revival in our churches. That often has proven to be a call for some superstar to come in and get the motors revved up again, to tell the old, old story in a new, new way, to prick the conscience with enough potency to get us rebooted and remotivated to do what we know we ought to be doing all along. It is at those times I reflect on the fact that Jesus didn't get to have a Revival, ever. He just went about doing good. He was a man for others, and often that made him awfully sad as he faced so much human suffering and degradation.

It gets us down at times, too. We frequently give ourselves permission to withdraw from the front battle lines of sincere care for peoples' needs. It is just exhausting, even discouraging at times in the face of the mountain of injustice, poverty, cruelty, confusion and just plain lostness. We feel so small and so

helpless, and that doesn't make us feel good about being Christian.

Hear again the commissioning call of Jesus to follow Him; *"A new command I give unto you, that you love one another in the same way that I have demonstrated love to each of you."*

How has he loved you? He loves me by taking me seriously when nobody else does. He loves me by assuring me deep inside of my value to Him when I doubt it most. But most of all, He has dealt with me at times when I have been the stupidest fool ever to walk the face of the earth, when I have broken my word, when I have thought I could get away with something that I knew better than to do- and did it anyway- even as if this was my right, like I deserved it!

**Jesus forgives ME!** All my wrongs, the huge ones and those itty, bitty, teeny, weeny ones that He knows I try to slip by with. He forgives me with His gentle love, because He knows I can't bear the crushing misery that my sin will bring to me, not to mention to all those I love. Jesus says to me, "I forgive you, my son, I forgive you. Let's try it all over again, and this time don't be quite so foolish, so hard on yourself. Remember that I am here with you all the way. I am for you, and I know together we can do anything well."

THERE IS A PASSION IN GOD'S PEOPLE, it is to live out the kind of love that Jesus gave, to forgive each other, give each other second chances, to be lenient with others faults, and excited about His unfailing goodness to us. We have a PASSION that infects our spirits and draws us together and then sends us out to be what He alone can enable us to be.

This was a commissioning moment for Jesus' disciples, just as it is for us. We are redeemed and now we live for the chance to

bless other people like Jesus our Savior has blessed us. A PASSIONATE PURPOSE, this giving of a new command defines us.

III. Would we still be that church if our lovely building was burned to the ground? Perhaps another question is this, "Would we still be the church if we stop doing what we were originally created to do?" If we forgot or even denied our HISTORY, our NOTABLE MOMENTS that made us who we are....if we evolved into something of our own choosing, something just a bit less akin to what Jesus commissioned....would we still be the church?

### **CONCLUSION**

These questions await our answers every day, waiting for us to really be what God has called us to be. Great moments of history, such as the **sending of the spirit** upon us, those memorable acts where we **acted like Jesus** and never forgot how real it made us, and **the commissioning by the new/old command** that sent us out with conviction and willing sacrifice..... these will always make us a church.

God stands ready to work with us when we are ready to follow.