

Mark 3:20-35 (NRSV)

²⁰ and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." ²³ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — ³⁰ for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

³¹ Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters^[c] are outside, asking for you." ³³ And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

Psalm 130 (NRSV)

A Song of Ascents.

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

² Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³ If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵ I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities

"The Four B's of Transformation"

Ordination Service Sermon | Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton

Mark 3:20-35, Psalm 130, Ephesians 3:14-21

- I. Most of you know that I love statistics. There are a lot of reasons behind that. As a golfer I love to see how many times I hit a green or how many putts I have taken during my round. I love to see what my gas mileage is on my car and what the average is for my favorite baseball player.

As a pastor, I was a weekly stat guy. I wanted to track how my worship attendance was doing and what the participation levels of my members were.

I set high personal goals and use them to push me to a higher level. And, as a result, I'm either very pleased or deeply disappointed.

Lately, the statistics I have been studying are very revealing. The measurements here in New York have told a story about where we are and where we need to be. At a basic level, they have given us a picture of what we need to emphasize in our future and have set the stage for the development of our Mission, Vision, and Core Values.

But those statistics are not just related to New York and, in some ways, they paint an even more stark reality:

- Did you know that over 88% of the people surveyed recognized the arches as the symbol of McDonald's, but only 54% of those same people recognized the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith?

What's the world coming to?

Oh, get with it, old man – you're losing touch with the times.

It's hard to do our work in the midst of those stark realities. A cynical church leader once said, *"Our church is looking for a great year. That year is 1961. If it ever comes back, we're ready!"*

His reason for saying this was that 1961 was a "golden year" for the church. Church attendance was at an all-time high. Church in 1961 was the right thing to do!

- II. But fifty-seven years since that golden age, church attendance is at an all-time low in the country.
 - a. 87% of Americans are either unchurched or de-churched (not attending a church in the last six months).
 - b. Our United Methodist Church has been losing approximately 1,000 members a week since 1968.
 - c. Nearly 60,000 people who are in church today will make a decision to never go back or, at the best, greatly reduce their attendance. Why? Because the services are boring & irrelevant, the people are unfriendly, they have better things to do or they have found something that is more meaningful to do with their time.

- I talked with a friend from West Virginia recently who, as a District Superintendent, closed a church that, when I was there was labeled as one of the most vital in the conference. I asked him, *“Did you ever think that you’d be doing this when you answered your call?”* I think you know his answer.

But there’s a problem. We can’t go back to the 1950’s and frankly, there are many in this room who wouldn’t want to. We’ve got to live today, now, in 2018. We’ve got to realize that we were made for this day, this time. Going back? Get over it. The 1950’s are long gone.

III. We sit and bemoan, *“What IS this world coming to?”* But I believe that we are asking the wrong question.”

The church’s question must be, *“What is coming to the world?”*

What a rare opportunity we have this morning. In this room we have persons who have just completed their confirmation journey. You all have been exploring where and how much God fits into your life. You are in the midst of trying to decide the place that God has in your world. And in this room, there are new ordinands who have completed the final step of their journey into ministry. WOW. What a rare opportunity!

Confirmands, what should the church provide for you? What are the things you need to keep your interest alive and your sense of purpose fulfilled? If you could say something to these new pastors, what would say are your hopes and dreams for the church that you long for? Today, it’s probably a shorter sermon from the bishop.

On the other hand, ordinands, What should God’s chosen instrument, the church, bring TO the world? How will we find new ways to bring Christ to this day, this time? And how will you be one of the architects for that delivery system.

We DO have some things to talk about. You both represent what is new and fresh and needed if the church is to transform the world. You both are the ones we will count on to create the pathways and possibilities. We need you to stay. And we need you to be relevant and creative. And we need you to be honest and clear about what we need. Recently I interviewed someone from the emerging generation. They said, *“It’s not that our generation doesn’t believe in God. We just don’t believe in the church.”* That statement alone represents the challenge we face.

We live, in the midst of a generation where many believe that the church has nothing to say to this world. Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth. We DO have something to say, . . . The problem is, we aren’t saying it! And perhaps we don’t know what to say.

What is it that we should be saying?

We should be, . . .

- Reminding people how much they are loved and needed.

- Calling people to be disciples of Jesus Christ.
- Quoting John 10:10, *“Jesus Christ came so they may have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”*
- That there is hope and peace, joy and purpose in the way of God.
- Calling people to repentance, faith, holiness of living, commitment, good works, an openness to the Holy Spirit, and a belief that many of God’s surprising revelations are yet to come!

I have felt for years that if the church had done what it should have done over the years we wouldn’t need a governmental welfare system. Take that same language and apply it to the concept of transforming the world. We have stopped doing what we should have been doing and turned the reigns over to the psychics, the new agers, the fads, the fancies, and the soccer leagues, . . . and we hate it, we just can’t stand it when something else is more popular and relevant than our church.

It’s a real struggled. We’re caught in between. On the one hand, we sit and bemoan the world we live in , . . . and yet we are asleep to it, afraid of what a true spiritual revival will do to us.

What will we do? What must we do?

I suggest we employ the Four “B’s” of Transformation

A. We must **BREAK**.

- a. A few years ago I saw a t-shirt that said, *“Jesus, save me from some of your followers.”*

Instead of proclaiming this wonderful message of hope to the world, the world by and large perceives Christians and the church as being judgmental and holier than thou. A pastor in my past once said, *“We’ve been judging the world and talking to ourselves when we should be judging ourselves and talking to the world.”*

So, today we have decide that we’re gonna BREAK.

- Break out of our apathy.
- Break out of our judgements
- Break out of our holier than thou attitudes.
- Break out of our lack of commitment.

If we are going to transform this world for Christ, then we have to start in this very room.

- How can we transform the world for Christ if OUR hearts are not transformed?
- How can we transform the world for Christ if OUR spirituality is so fragile?
- How can we transform the world for Christ if OUR commitment remains so weak?

Friends, we have to make a BREAK and start anew. Can this be a day of new beginnings for you.

B. We've got to BREAK. And then we've got to BUILD

It's all about building relationships, not just with people who look like us or embrace our cultural norms or subscribe to our theological persuasion. It's all about building relationships with people in this room in order to build new understandings and relationships with the world. Existing pastors, . . . you may need to employ one of these new ordinands or commissioned pastors as your mentor. And ordinands, you may need one of these confirmands to be YOURS.

Rather than trying to understand Jesus in a new context and build relationships out of those contexts, don't think that you have all the answers and don't try to make a carbon copy of yourself. Search for the ways that God is undeniably active in the world and learn from the inspiration which is found in that setting.

I speak very little language other than English. For example, I can speak a little Swahili. "Whoopi Cho" and "Naka Penda Qualie Qualie." Where is the bathroom and I love you. If I were to go to Kenya as a missionary, but refused to learn any more Swahili, I wouldn't win many people to Christ by saying, "Where's the bathroom? I love you."

Many of us make the very same mistake. We are well aware that we are, all of a sudden, strangers in a land we call home. This culture and this world is not our own. But if we are ever to reach those who live in this land, we must speak the language they speak, look closely at the ways Christ is in their midst, and express it in terms they can relate to.

We have got to BUILD new relationships and understandings.

C. Oh, we gotta BREAK, and then we gotta BUILD. But before we're done we have to BRING

When was the last time you brought a friend or a neighbor to church? Do you believe enough in what God has done for you to bring someone with you?

But it is more than that. We can't just ask, "Are we bringing people to church?" We have to ask "what are we bringing them to?"

Polls have revealed why people don't come to church. Americans, they found, said that the most boring place to be is church.

Comedian Gallagher once said, "*Growing up, church was the weekly reminder that there is something in life worse than school.*"

But God is not boring and worshipping God, when it is filled with praise and thanksgiving, is anything but boring.

Confirmands, what do you need in a worship service or a program at the church that will get you really excited about being a part of the church. Ordinands, what do you hope to do or initiate that will bring a new sense of creativity, joy and eagerness to your church.

As much as anything, we have to BRING our full selves to the work and attitude we bring to ministry.

D. BREAKING is necessary. BUILDING is critical. BRINGING is life giving. But we can't forget. We've gotta BRIDGE

Friends, this is a world of opposites. Our call is to bridge the gap between the opposites in the name of Christ.

The reality is, organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Hospice have understood this scripture passage better than the church.

We must BRIDGE the gap between

- A world that is both homeless and well-housed,
- A world that is both dying and healthy,
- A world that is both fiction and fact,
- A world that is both obese and anorexic,
- A world that is both liberal and conservative,
- A world that is both gay and straight,
- A world that is both male and female,
- A world that is both black and white.
- A world that is both young and old.

IF no one else does, we must bridge the gap between a world that is both Christian and unchristian.

And, if you're not aware, you're going to need to find a way to relate to young men and women who fit into the age category represented by these ordinands.

We cannot expect anyone to build those bridges to us. We must be aggressive in our building bridges with others.

E. Oh, I said there are four. But I wasn't quite honest. We can't quit with just four. Finally, we've got to BELIEVE

My second favorite verse of scripture, right behind Romans 8:28 ("*all things work for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purpose*") is Ephesians 3:21

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Most of you know that I am soon to become a grandfather in September. Our daughter Elizabeth sends us these amazing photographs of her ultrasounds. We are watching Holden grow in our midst. The forming of a little life and the daily series of miracles that have to take place in order for that little guy to be born. I look at those pictures and realize I couldn't do that, . . . and I believe.

Looking inward there are miracles. And looking outward the miracles continue. The psalmist once said,

*O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals^[a] that you care for them?*

I look at the stars in the heavens and I think, “I could never do that! And when I begin to think about the universe and solar system and solar system and I wonder when it all ends, what's next, I simply cry out, “I Believe.”

When my soul gets discouraged and I find renewal. When I face conflict and there is a peace that passes my understanding. When I know that I am unlovable and yet feel deep within the love of God in spite of my mistakes and failures, I simply cry out, “I believe.”

Friends, Jesus doesn't call us to walk on water. He did that very well.

- He changed water to wine,
- Multiplied loaves and fishes,
- Died on a cross.

Jesus calls us to,

- Believe in God,
- Trust in God,
- Love one another.

And when we do, we will,

- BREAK down the walls,
- BUILD the necessary relationships,

- BRING others on the journey
- BRIDGE our differences with grace and love.
- And BELIEVE with all of our hearts that God is not through with us yet.

The world is coming apart. Some say the church is as well.

But we here in New York we can take a different approach. With a focus on our mission to transform/change the world around us, and an emphasis on leading leaders to lead, and a conscious decision to boldly love God and unconditionally love others, we can set ourselves and this region we love on fire for that which is good, and right, and holy.

BREAK down the walls, New York.

BUILD the necessary relationships, New York.

BRING someone with you, New York.

BRIDGE your differences with one another, New York.

BELIEVE that God will see us through, New York

And oh, by the way, Love one another deeply. And I guarantee, we'll experience the transformation you long to see.

In the name of God who created us, Jesus who saved us, and the Holy Spirit who blesses us.

Amen.