

Seek the Welfare of the City

Psalms 65:1-4; Jeremiah 29:1-7; Luke 19:41-42a

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It's not always easy being urban. Some folks can't stomach it. Some folks have neither heart nor gut for it. Some folks just don't have a love for it. As I've traveled and lived in urban centers across the United States, I've heard lots of good folks confess these anxious words about the city: "We don't go downtown much anymore, not if we can help it. We don't like it downtown; it makes us nervous, makes us feel unsafe. It's too big a mess. Too many problems downtown."

Well, since Sunday Presbyterian worship should always include the practice of confession, I need to confess to you; I mean, I dearly want to testify to you today that I *love* it downtown. I *love* approaching the exquisite skyline of this particular downtown. I *love* our Art Deco style and decor of the late 1920s and the 1930s here in the heart of our city. I *love* our sculptures and murals. Indeed, every time I behold our Flat Iron Building, I confess to you that it's like seeing it for the first time.

Today, I want to testify to you that I even *love* the mess. I personally *love* what the Social Gospel hymn writer Frank Mason North sensitively called "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life."¹ I want to testify to you today that I am even drawn to the grit of the city. I strangely/compassionately like the grit.

Please don't get me wrong: I've had my own share of anxieties about "where cross the crowded ways of life." I've had my own deep urban anxieties. When Rebecca and I were interns at the East Harlem Protestant Parrish in the summer of 1966, I started experiencing an uneasy inner churning that I had never felt before. Those unique and churning feelings were prompted by having to step over passed-out human beings as we walked to work every morning at 7:30, from our Parrish railroad flat on 2nd Avenue and 106th Street to the Church of the Resurrection on 101st.

My caring Jewish physician chuckled mercifully, after asking me where I had grown up. "Huntington, West Virginia," I said. "Well, you're having what we call 'panic attacks,'" he said. "And I've got just the thing for a seminary student who grew up in West Virginia to be able to make the transition here in East Harlem. I'm giving you some tranquilizers." Well, I took them diligently and, praise God, they worked, and I've never had to look back or waver when it comes to my love for the city. Of course, Rebecca didn't need tranquilizers; she's always been stronger. Yet I testify to you today, 50 years later, that both of us have been made stronger in our commitments to "where cross the crowded ways of life" by these remarkably formational words prophesied decades ago by Lord George Macleod, words which served as a clarion call for both the Iona Community in Scotland and the East Harlem Protestant Parish in Manhattan.

I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a Cathedral between two candles, but on a Cross between two thieves on the town garbage heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where church[people] should be and what church[people] should be about.²

Nowadays, in a similar vein, Rebecca and I are also made stronger in our commitments to “where cross the crowded ways of life,” by these haunting/riveting words by hymn writer Carl P. Daw Jr., which we have used for our Christmas card:

Friend of the streetwalker, beggar, and child,
Lifting and blessing the weak and reviled,
Welcoming those the devout turned away:
Jesus, we need your example today.

Take from us prejudice, hatred, and scorn,
Fear and suspicion of anyone born
Outside of our fences of money and race:
Help us, O God, not to shun, but embrace.

Open our hearts and our heads and our hands,
Let us experience how caring expands
Past all the labels and limits we learn:
Spirit of mercy, enlarge our concern.

Three-personed Mystery, multiple One,
Joined by diversity never undone:
May we more truly your image reveal,
Coming together to make your love real.³

Standing strongly on those moving and insightful theological perspectives about the city, I am therefore compelled, indeed driven, to testify to you today that the greatest ongoing source of strength, vision, and instruction I have ever received about urban existence in “where cross the crowded ways of life” comes from the Bible—God’s word written.

Surely the Psalmist loved the city: the city of Zion, Jerusalem, and its holy temple, that blessed center of sacred space within the city gates, where worshippers were gathered and welcomed, where vows were kept, prayers were lifted up, confessions were offered on bended knee, where guilt was robbed of its power and sins were forgiven, where God’s people were satisfied with goodness and sent forth to serve their Creator and neighbors and to work steadfastly for shalom.⁴ Yes, the power of a city’s sacred space is great.

Jeremiah, the brave, resilient, and sagacious prophet of God, also dearly loved the city. To be sure, my own all-time favorite testimony about the city comes from his Old Testament prophecy, written some 600 years before Jesus wept because of city Jerusalem's crucifying conditions. Indeed, I confess to you, reverently and expectantly, this holy day, that Jeremiah 29:7 is a most crucial, perhaps indispensable, verse for the people of God gathered here in this sacred space on 40 Church Street, Asheville, North Carolina, day by day, week after week, and year after year in "where cross the crowded ways of life": "Seek the welfare of the city... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare (shalom/peace) you will find your welfare."

In a letter brought by emissaries from Judah to Babylon, Jeremiah amazingly prophesies: "Seek the peace and welfare of all cities—even the peace and welfare of Babylon, where Jeremiah's Judean people are in exile." It is an unusual prayer of hope for one's own enemies! In other words, relate to those Babylonian city dwellers that you do not even particularly like. Seek the welfare and peace of those who are different from you. Welcome difference or diversity as a gift from God—a gift of peace and shalom. In their welfare you will find your own. No, "God's imagination" will not be bound by our "dividing walls of hostility" constructed by our conflicts and prejudices.⁵

Perhaps you are aware, from your own Sunday School and Faith Development studies, that Dr. Luke refers to the city of Jerusalem no less than 90 times in his Gospel of Luke and in his Acts of the Apostles. In Luke 19, he tells us that Jesus wept or lamented profusely because Jerusalem had chosen to puff itself up with pride rather than to pour itself out with service, that Jerusalem had failed once again to recognize, embrace, embody, and proclaim "the things that make for peace" or welfare. Jerusalem: once again "blind to its own need for repentance and forgiveness of sin;" Jerusalem, choosing violence over shalom. Yes, as one Bible teacher reminds us, Jesus weeps "with a voice of love and profound caring, of vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss...." Such was "the depth of passion present in Jesus," our Savior, rabbi and friend—passion for the city ⁶ and its precious people.

With power and authority, Luke also testifies that the Apostle Paul loved the city. Correction: *cities*. That's where the Holy Spirit led Paul with the peacemaking message of the risen Christ, whom he had persecuted so unmercifully. According to Luke the physician, Paul's method was to go to a major urban center and then to move on to another with fervor. Luke tells us that Paul never stayed in one city more than two years. That was his style of discipleship as he feverishly planted city churches wherever he journeyed.

Praise God, I've walked that expansive ancient mall at Corinth, Greece, where Paul preached and taught for 18 months, seeking the welfare of that city. Mystically, as I walked there 2,000 years after Luke's New Testament narratives were recorded, I could see Paul walking and talking on that mall. Mystically, I could see Paul also at Philippi, in Macedonia, where Paul preached his first sermon in Europe, where he bap-

tized Lydia, where he taught at the city forum, where he was flogged and put in the city slammer. Again, I could mystically imagine seeing Paul as I traversed the port city of Thessalonica, a Greek urban center under Roman rule, a city that praised many deities, where Paul labored diligently with Silvanus and his beloved protégé Timothy.

The same was mystically true in the Turkish city of Ephesus, where Paul preached in the great theater there, with its capacity for 24,000 people. Moreover, as we stood in the Areopagus in Athens, I testify that I could feel and imagine Paul there, 2,000 years earlier, teaching and debating with those pluralistic Athenian urbanites “where cross the crowded ways of life”: Paul, in Acts 17, listening pastorally and having a bold dialogue with Jews, Stoics, Epicureans, and agnostics, in a town loaded with idols, the town of Pericles and Plato.⁷ Someone has rightly called Paul a Christian Socrates, a minister to searchers, some who even mock him. Yet others miraculously believe, including a woman named Damaris and a man named Dionysius the Areopagite. Many other Athenians, through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, also come to believe that the spirit of the risen Christ (unbounded and uncontained by time and space) is alive in this world where they are and where they are going!

And I testify to you, here in this sacred space on Church Street, that we too feel those same spiritual vibrations in this pluralistic city of Asheville, 2015, in “where cross the crowded ways of life.” Not unlike Paul, Jesus, Jeremiah, and the Psalmist of old, we also love our urban center. Yes, we also live, love, and worship in a pluralistic city of searchers, strangers, secularists, wanderers, agnostics, atheists, and believers from many economic, educational, religious, theological, cultural, and philosophical backgrounds. And, by the grace of God and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we too are strangely bold to believe that the spirit of the risen Christ (unbounded and uncontained by time and space) is somehow and miraculously in our midst, where we are and where we are going.

George Docherty taught me this powerful hope about Christ’s unbounded and uncontainable risen spirit and miraculous incognito presence as we talked together in the booming city of Austin, Texas, 30 years ago. I was conducting an oral history interview with him for Austin Seminary’s faculty journal. It was focused on George’s exemplary ministry in Washington, D.C., from 1950 to 1975. The historic church he served was New York Avenue Presbyterian, located across the street from the White House. Lincoln had worshipped there a century earlier, as have many illustrious national leaders across the decades.

During the 25 years of George’s prophetic and pastoral leadership, the New York Avenue Church hosted scores of landmark racial justice and peacemaking events. Once, following a very demanding peace conference weekend during the turbulent 1960s, which featured hosts of national political figures and folk musicians, including hundreds of students who had slept at the church, George was in a state of near exhaustion.

Listen to his testimony: “Finally, at 2:30 p.m., when the last student had gone, I was about to close the church. At the door, another student confronted me. I said

somewhat gruffly, ‘And what do you want!’ He said, ‘May I have a glass of water please?’ I said, ‘Come in. There’s the water fountain.’ He satisfied his thirst and said, ‘Thank you.’ He walked to the door, put his pack on his back, and asked, ‘Where is the bus station.’ I gave him the directions and as he walked away; suddenly it all became clear to me, and I remembered an old Highland Rune:

I saw a stranger yestreen.
I put food in the eating place.
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place,...
And the lark said in her song,
Often and often and often
Goes the Christ in the stranger’s guise.⁸

Another wise mentor in the city of San Francisco once asked me passionately, “What in the world would our towns and central cities be like if all the sacred space were removed—the churches, cathedrals, synagogues, temples, and mosques?” He asked: “Is not such sacred space utterly indispensable to the health, welfare, shalom, fabric, warp and woof of our cities?”⁹

Well, surely. I mean, I knew a wonderful woman in the city of Pasadena. Depressed and suicidal, she sat every week for two years in her psychiatrist’s office located on the top floor of a building across the street from our church. Every week, she pondered the tower and the patio of Pasadena Presbyterian. For two years. Then, one Sunday morning, the Holy Spirit gave her the guiding and comforting courage to walk onto our patio beneath our church tower. And there she was greeted by an 80 year-old saint named Helen Reeves, who saw her anxious countenance. “You’re a visitor, and I have no one to sit with,” said Helen Reeves. “Won’t you please sit with me?” She did, and Helen held her quivering hand throughout the service. And the next week, and the next week, for weeks and weeks, again and again, that same anxious woman came back to the sacred space where a church tower soars over “where cross the crowded ways of life.” And, a couple of years later, she became a Deacon there. In the now famous words of Father Henri Nouwen, she became a “wounded healer” there.

Yes, both recognized and unrecognized, the ongoing miracles of the peace-giving spirit of the risen Christ happen all around us in “where cross the crowded ways of life.” And yes, I know that such miracles happen in many different venues. Christlike miracles also happen in the countryside, in the wilderness, in the suburbs, and in far-away places on both land and sea. But I want to testify to you today that I am peculiarly and temperamentally drawn to *city* miracles. Go figure. Who can explain it; who can tell you why? Well, in my own heart and mind, no one explains it more profoundly and eerily than my dear friend Peggy Shriver in her incredible poem “The Spirit of 34th Street.” Behold her magnificent and spiritually empowering urban pictures:

Doors opened with a silent scream,
 like photographs of anguish;
 the subway paused, shed cargo
 and raged on.
 She lurched aboard,
 sagged into a vacant seat,
 frail weight of her gray years
 hunched with cold.
 Numb fingers plucked at rags,
 drawn close against raw misery.
 Knuckles, cracked and swollen white,
 clutched into a plea for warmth.
 He, dark and lithe,
 swung down the aisle,
 taut jeans dancing
 rhythmically.
 With Latin grace
 he, sidling past
 her patient form,
 in one smooth gesture
 disappeared through subway doors,
 leaving in her lap,
 like folded dove wings,
 his black leather gloves.¹⁰

What can we say to this? In faith, hope, and love, we here on
 Church Street can lift up this prayer, with all our hearts, minds, and
 souls:

Breathe on us, Breath of God;
 fill us with life anew,
 that we may love what thou dost love,
 and do what thou wouldst do.¹¹

*This sermon was preached at First Presbyterian Church, Asheville, North Carolina,
 in 2015.

Notes

¹ See *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, No. 343, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life," text by Frank Mason North, 1903.

² Quoted in George W. Webber, *God's Colony in Man's World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 48.

³ Carl P. Daw Jr., "Friend of the Streetwalker" (Carol Stream, Illinois: Hope Publishing Co.), 1996.

⁴ Psalm 65:1-4. See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 135.

- 5 See John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 222-224; and Patrick D. Miller, *The Book of Jeremiah, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 792.
- 6 See Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 228-229.
- 7 See William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Series* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 142-145.
- 8 George M. Docherty, "George M. Docherty Reminisces: Presbyterian Ministry in America's Capital, 1950-1975." Oral history interview with Dean K. Thompson, *Austin Seminary Bulletin, Faculty Edition* 102, No. 4 (October 1986): 67-68.
- 9 Browne Barr, in a conversation.
- 10 Peggy L. Shriver, "The Spirit of 34th Street," in *Pinches of Salt* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 66.
- 11 See "Breathe on Me, Breath of God," No. 286, in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013) adapted.