

“Flexible Space For Growth”

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Luke 14:15-24

Let’s consider the late 1920s for First Baptist Church Birmingham. Even though the Great Depression of 1929 was coming, this was a booming time of growth for this community of people — so much so that they had outgrown their current building and took on the enormous task of constructing a new grand, and impressive building — the one in which we now sit!

They needed more space because God had given them a big vision to serve this community.

In that season, they were all about creating something that would break the mold for what they had known to that point.

We know this because this building looks nothing like the prior building in which they worshiped. You can see a picture of the old white chapel building, right above one of this current building by the church office in the Welcome Center.

When accommodating their growth, they had the foresight not only to build for new functions like classrooms, offices, a gym, a

banquet hall, and such, but also for aesthetic beauty.

The beauty they envisioned for this sanctuary continues to be admired today by people throughout southeastern Michigan who both stop to take pictures outside, or knock on the door asking to see inside the sanctuary.

What foresight those builders had back in the 1920s!

Even more than extra space and aesthetics, I want to highlight something else about those great grandmothers and great grandfathers of this congregation.

In the dedication booklet from 1929 is a proud description of the various spaces in the building and how they would be used.

First, they addressed the Sanctuary originally called the Auditorium, and the Fellowship Hall, which was called the Banquet Hall. Then they went into detail about the west wing where are the offices and everything above and below them.

The booklet then says this:
On the top floor of this wing is the recreation room or gymnasium, which is used on Sundays as the assembly hall for the Junior-Intermediate department. The south balcony is used as a

*spectators gallery **but if more space for the Sunday School should be desired it could easily be converted into two additional rooms for classes.***

The next paragraph goes on:
You will note that we have built for the future as well as for the present needs of a rapidly growing community.

I find this particularly interesting. Here we have all of the best planners and engineers of the congregation along with great architects and interior designers putting their heads and resources together to create the very best possible building structure to serve the current and anticipated future needs of the church community.

They did all of this and at the end of the day when everything was built they knew that it would need to be changed by future generations.

They felt so strongly about this that they had no qualms about including that detail right in the inaugural dedication celebration booklet. In fact, it sounds as if they were proud of the fact that their new building could be changed.

They pulled out all the stops and partied for a week to celebrate this

amazing building structure that God led them to build while also being clear that the building was not the main point. Instead, the building was there as a resource to do God's work. And they had the humility to acknowledge that their vision was limited.

They were a people of vision, of courage, of tenacity, and humility before God and those who would come after them and move in new directions.

I see the same spirit among this congregation today. We are now planning for the future with a bold, and tenacious spirit. People are willing to step into the fray, and work against the grain because they are being called by God with a vision that is bigger than a building, bigger than any one of us. Building for the future will take courage and require great bravery, just like those in the past exhibited.

Make no bones about it, the season we are in is a difficult and uncertain one, full of many challenges. But we can draw courage from the fact that the same creative Spirit who saw past generations through their challenges will also see us through ours.

The passage I want to read for you today is a parable from Jesus about a celebration banquet.

The scene is of a village dinner table to which Jesus, an up and coming traveling rabbi, was invited by prominent Jewish leaders. He was there so that they might question him about his views on politics and theology. Specifically, he was asked about the coming kingdom that would be ushered in by the Messiah.

This had been a typical conversation among rabbis for the prior 700 years during which stories had been passed down from prophets of old about the kingdom of God that would be celebrated around the great Messianic Banquet table.

The Jewish leaders were expecting Jesus to give a typical answer about how they might all follow the law well enough to be found worthy to sit at the Messianic Banquet table. But Jesus goes in an altogether different direction.

READ LUKE 14:15-24

Certainly Jesus was giving them an answer they didn't like. Jesus essentially described those around the table as people whose lives were so distracted by following the letter of the law and making empty

and insulting excuses, that they missed the whole point of God's kingdom. As a result they would miss out on the feast.

Jesus' picture is of God's kingdom filled with all sorts of people outside of the establishment or those living what was considered the "proper" faithful life.

Jesus painted a picture of a turbulent time when everything familiar seemed to be tossed up in the air. What directed the feast was the spirit of grace extended to outsiders.

The seats around the glorious feast are empty without enough willing people to join the celebration which had been prepared with love. So, an invitation must be extended to others.

The wonderful thing about parables is that they contain great depth and breadth. You can always look at them from different angles and they can speak into different situations. Perhaps this parable holds a message for our church today.

Perhaps this story is reaffirming that we need to move beyond our comfort zones to be in relationship with people who have not been connected with a faith community.

After all, we have lots of space in our pews. We have many unfilled chairs in our Fellowship Hall. We also have many resources to offer including but far beyond this building — like wisdom and rich experiences of faith useful to young professional families.

We offer a generous and non-judgmental space for people to honestly wrestle with the tough questions of life and honestly explore how they might live a life of faith.

These resources have taken years to grow. They have been earned through hard work and great effort. They were costly!

But it doesn't help so much for me to simply say, go out there and invite people to church.

It is often uncomfortable to talk about your faith with other people or invite them when you know that they don't go to church. I get it. I feel that tension too.

However, I want to offer a couple of simple things you can do to prepare yourself to have these conversations.

1. Know your story

Think of what is most important to you about being part of this church community. It might be the fact

that we have supported Jose and his kids through the injustice of the immigration system.

You might love that someone from this congregation supported you without judgement as you matured in your faith or asked those tough questions like whether or not God exists, or why bad things happen to good people. Maybe you were asking why a good God would allow so much evil in the world?

Maybe something about the church's history connects for you — like the fact that they built a flexible church building in 1929 reminding you how we are flexible today and focused on following a new vision God is giving us for young professional families.

Whatever is most important to you about this church community, that is your story. You might write it down, or share it with someone else from your family or the church. Include why it is important to you. Get comfortable with your story.

2. Discover the story of others

Set your story aside and get curious about other people's stories. Ask people what makes them tick, what's important to them, why they do the things they do. Be curious and open asking questions to discover the world as other people see and experience it.

3. Naturally share

After you have listened and validated another people's stories, you may feel the time is right to share yours, or perhaps they initiate and ask you a question. then you naturally share your story about what moves you about being part of this congregation.

Along the way, perhaps you'll invite them to a service when we are talking about something that might interest them, or perhaps invite them to a B'Jazz Vespers concert, or a ladies painting night...

Nothing about these conversations is forced or manipulative, or even prescriptive. It's all about authentic relationships of trust and interest that naturally flow.

We are in a season of time when we want this congregation to grow. The way this happens is through authentic invitation by those of you who are now here.

We won't grow because we have a slick marketing campaign. We won't grow because we have changed the name of the church. We won't grow because we have done some masterful remodeling and have a smashingly cool and hip space.

All of these things are important along the way of growth and we must do them, just like they needed to build a new building in the late 1920s. But these things don't create the growth and are not the primary point of ministry.

No, we will only grow as we are in relationship with other people and authentically invite them to have a look at what God is doing.

This is our challenge — to have a flexible space for growth inside of us and among us that leads to conversations of grace and invitation.