

# “The Work of the Festival Center” by Bill Mefford

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In being asked to speak on the work of the Festival Center I wanted to do so through the lens of one of the passages for today. So, while this will not be an exegetical message on Ephesians 2:11-22, I did find the passage in Ephesians to be fruitful for reflection.

The passage begins actually tying us, as readers, to the first ten verses in chapter 2. The Greek word, *dia*, which is the first word used in verse 11 is translated in the NRSV as, “so then.” Thus, as I will focus on the work of the Festival Center through verses 11-22, everything Paul describes in the second half of this chapter emanates from the first ten verses which focuses on Jesus’ gift of salvation. Though we were, “dead in our sins, we have been made alive in Christ...for we have been saved by grace through faith.”

As the Body of Christ, this is what we share in common. We may

– we in fact do disagree on many issues, both theological and political, social and cultural, but what binds us together is nothing of what we have accomplished on our own, but rather, what Jesus has done and has so sacrificially gifted to us. So, Paul starts the second half of this chapter by speaking specifically to the Gentiles and advising them to remember that at birth they were far away – from one another and from Christ. They were estranged, but by God’s grace they have been brought near. Wesley calls this form of grace prevenient, God’s unseen love wooing us into relationship with God even when we cannot identify it as God’s grace. Thus, we see here that the missional love of Jesus is rooted in Jesus’ call on our lives.

I started at the Festival Center in February of 2020. I wanted to be sure and get there just in time for a worldwide pandemic when everything would shut down and we would wonder if life would ever be the same. To say it has been challenging is an understatement, but it has been a time I have dearly loved. We have all had to be intentional and creative in remaining connected with one another and in forging new relationships. In building new friendships among many of the people of Church of the Saviour I have loved hearing the stories of how people have come into this community. Woven throughout so many of the stories I have heard are the now visible signs of God’s grace, bringing people into the different Church of the Saviour communities, and creating space for members to not just worship together, but to also hear God’s call to utilize their gifts in life-giving ways for others, particularly people on the margins.

In hearing these stories I have constantly been reminded that who we are and what we do comes out of God’s call on our lives. When I am asked what is the vision of the Festival Center I almost always say, our call now is the same as it was

the day we opened our doors – to teach and train faith leaders to more faithfully and effectively engage in the missional work God calls into and to be a gathering place where new dreams, new calls, new works can be created and implemented. Who we were is being contextualized daily into who we are and who we will be.

One of my favorite quotes comes out Elizabeth O'Connor's book, *Servant Leaders, Servant Structures*, which was published shortly after the opening of the Festival Center. In a class Gordon Cosby was teaching at the time he told the students,

There are very few...radical alternative structures pointing the way to a new society...This is why the Christian church in so many areas of our diseased society has little impact on the quality of life in America. These mini institutions must grow out of the biblical vision. And if they grow out of that vision, they will dramatically proclaim a solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer most deeply on the margins of society. These structures will not isolate the poor while serving them. They will recognize that the poor are the true leaders and work alongside them in their struggle for a more just world. They will provide an opportunity for the privileged and deprived, the rich and the poor to be together – to break down the dividing wall of partition that separates. (p. 86)

Thirty years later, this is still our call. We live at the intersection of justice and hospitality, even when a pandemic greatly reduces our ability to open our doors to others and limits who is able to come in. And I have constantly been reminded that hospitality is not a stationary work either; it entails leaving the safe confines of our homes or faith communities, coming alongside people struggling for justice, going to where they are, showing up and being present in their space. Hospitality is about sharing with those on the margins the burdens and dreams, fears and joys until they become our own. Thus, hospitality and justice naturally result in

solidarity.

This last Friday I joined excluded workers – workers who have been left out of federal stimulus packages and who consist of undocumented folks, returning citizens, restaurant workers, sex workers, and others who are dependent on a cash-based economy – and we took over the streets in downtown DC, marching, chanting, singing and ending up in front of DC's City Hall. I was joined by several folks from 8<sup>th</sup> Day and the Festival Church and other faith communities as we followed the leadership of close to 200 excluded workers and demanded that the DC City Council exclude these workers no more. We urged, and will continue to urge, the Council to acknowledge that it is their responsibility to prioritize the needs of excluded workers in their 2022 budget. Instead of continually increasing the budget for the Metropolitan Police Department, the DC City Council must care for those who have suffered the most during the pandemic. Many of the excluded workers and the organizers who support them have been in the Festival Center for meetings, strategy sessions, art builds, and other gatherings. But by faithfully showing up we are living out the truth that we are more than a building on a corner; we are fellow participants in the struggle for the common good.

In returning to the passage, I am taken with Paul's description of the work of Jesus that has brought together two groups – in that context being Jews and Gentiles – who were once far apart.

Again, in reflecting on the work of the Festival Center this image fascinates me because of the role the Festival Center has played in bringing two sides together. So many events, classes, gatherings, and meetings that have taken place at the Festival Center over the years have brought people together who are normally far apart. One of the my favorite pictures from past years is one of Rev. Joe Deck standing at an event, which I believe is an art show at the Festival Center, and

standing with him are two Palestinians and two Hasidic Jews. They are talking with one another peacefully. It is a beautiful picture and if ever there is a time when we need that part of the world to be talking peacefully, it is now.

At the same time, peace is not always attained by standing in the middle of two opposite sides. Jesus did not bring together two sides formerly separated through passive neutrality. Often, when there is conflict, we are called to pick sides, to side with the poor and marginalized. Far too often we think peace is achieved through standing in the middle and wooing both sides into compromise. But peace cannot be separated from justice and addressing issues of equal access. Ending hostilities is about being present among those struggling to make change and sharing in the work, the risk, and the heartache alongside those directly impacted by injustice.

This weekend, in addition to the work we are doing among excluded workers, I was told by an organizer who works with street vendors of a story of a grandmother in DC, who is undocumented, and who's daughter and two granddaughters just crossed over to the US. The husband had been killed by gangs 3 years ago in El Salvador and recently the gangs started harassing the mother and her two daughters, one who is 11 and the other who is 6. They fled to the US and tragically, along their long journey, the 11 year old was raped and now is pregnant. We are trying to get them all reunited in DC and then, of course, get the little girl, and the whole family, all of the medical support and social services they need. Their long journey really has only just begun.

So, when I think of our work among excluded workers and for families like the one I described, who's story is all too common, our efforts to bring about peace makes me reflect on how US foreign policy has historically been committed to enabling US corporations to extract resources in Central America to the point of creating instability and corruption and violence, along with provoking armed coups and regime

change. I reflect on how US energy policies have produced tons of carbon emissions into the air so that Central American people are either killed or displaced. I reflect on how their farms have been swallowed up by giant, corporate agribusinesses from the Global North and how they are forced to farm on land that cannot support crops even just for them because the land has been depleted of nutrients from generations of cash crops demanded by our economies so that these farmers are forced to either escape to the crowded cities or to become economic and climate change refugees and then make the dangerous trek north to the United States. When I reflect on our work among immigrants and excluded workers I know our call is not to stand in between immigrants and immigrant-hating politicians who live in the back pockets of the same corporations that have plundered and raped these countries for generations and see if there is room for compromise.

Our goal is to be present with immigrant communities and other communities impacted by injustice and then to invite and welcome corporations and their CEOs and their workers and their shareholders and the politicians they own into liberation where their death-dealing policies are once and for all ended and their joy is found through solidarity with those once oppressed. This is how groups who are far apart can be brought together and as Paul writes, it all begins in acknowledging and responding faithfully to Jesus' love for us.

Because this is who Jesus is and this is what Jesus does, this is who we are and this is what we do.

As Paul writes to the Ephesians, Jesus is our peace, he has broken down the dividing wall. Jesus lovingly calls us into his work of deepening our awareness of God's love for us and God's call on our lives. Following Jesus in both the inward and outward journeys, creating spaces for all of us to better understand and experience God's love, and then to exercise our gifts for the benefits of others, especially alongside those

on the margins; this has defined the call of the Festival Center for the past 30 years and as we are about to begin our renovations that will launch us into the next thirty years, this continues to define us now. This is who we are, this is what we do.