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LIBERATING LAZARUS:
THE HOMILETICAL MEDIATION OF LIBERATION FOR
CONGREGANTS AND COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the homiletical practices constitutive of liberative preaching. Specifically, the thesis lays out the biblical and theological framework for liberation preaching and, within the context of a local ministry, explores the challenges attendant to such preaching. Using the narrative of Lazarus' resurrection, this thesis will offer a framework for understanding liberative preaching in which a dialectic exists between the homiletically called congregation engaged in liberative practices and the community which is the object of that action. This thesis will posit that it is the goal of a liberative homiletic to proclaim that only when a congregation engages in liberative practices do they most deeply experience their own liberation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS	
Introduction	1
The Lazarian Challenge	2
• <i>The Lazarian Possibility of Particularity</i>	5
The Contextual Particularity of Mt. Zion	9
Preaching Communal Liberation	13
• <i>Eschatological Liberty</i>	15
Homiletical Preception Versus Reality	17
• <i>Liberation as Intention Preaching</i>	19
• <i>Congregational Assessment of Preaching at Mt. Zion (2012)</i>	20
• <i>Understanding the Discontinuity</i>	22
• <i>Congregation Survey (2014)</i>	24
A Liberative Homiletic both Concrete and Communal	27
Final Link between Congregation and Community	31
Dialectic of Homiletically Mediated Liberation	34
Application to the Universal Church	36
Conclusion	37
Appendices	
A. Contextual Summary: Quality of Life Report	A-41
B. 2012 Congregational Survey	B-46
C. 2014 Congregational Survey	C-49
D. 2014 Focus Group Responses	D-54
Sermon Transcripts	
• <i>Worship at the Cross (Ephesian 6)</i>	E-58
• <i>Dead Men Walking (Mark 5.1-11)</i>	F-68
• <i>Free at Last (Luke 4.16-21)</i>	G-80
E. A Liberative Homiletic	H-90
Bibliography	93

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In memory of my first and greatest theologians:
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INTRODUCTION

Despite it being late April, a freezing Illinois wind ripped through my jacket as I entered the church. The gray skies and chilling frost of that morning provided a paradoxical backdrop to the bright lights and warmth emanating from within the church. The melodious sounds of the more than one hundred member choir of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church resplendently filled the sanctuary as each voice raced to see whose would reach heaven's atrium first. As I made my way to the pulpit, I watched bodies tussle for space on the pews of a capacity filled room. Everywhere I looked there were men and women swaying and clapping; some with arms outstretched to heaven; some with tears streaming down their cheeks; each caught up in the rapturous moment of worship.

As the choir voices subsided with the last stanza of the worship hymn, a deacon stepped to the microphone. The congregation reverently paused as the sanctuary filled with anticipation. I slowly rose from my seat as the deacon introduced me as the morning preacher. I was keenly aware that, not only were the eyes of the congregation upon me, but behind me sat the patriarch of this ministry: Reverend Isaac Singleton, the retiring pastor of this church. For over forty years, during some of the most profoundly formative moments of social and civic unrest in Joliet, Pastor Singleton prophetically led this ministry and the Black community of Joliet. Before the theological language of liberation became common within Black churches, Pastor Singleton ideally embodied the liberative posture of the African-American preacher as he fought for social justice against systemic oppression within his community. Now, as Pastor Singleton prepared to step down from leadership, the church searched for his successor and this was the

reason I was at Mt. Zion that morning.

In a halting voice, I invited the congregation to join me in the reading of a well-known passage of scripture found in the eleventh chapter of John. As we read the text, I slowed our reading down to draw attention to verses 43-44.¹

Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.” [John 11.43-44]

Over the next thirty minutes, using all of the homiletical tools experience and seminary provided me, I proclaimed the liberating power of this narrative.² Little did I realize, as I concluded the sermon and took my seat, that this homiletical moment would profoundly shape the joys and challenges that would confront me as I eventually stepped into the office of pastor of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church.

THE LAZARUS CHALLENGE

Many preachers have a particular passage of scripture that powerfully informs their understanding and approach to preaching.³ For me, the resurrection of Lazarus is

¹ All biblical quotations in this thesis utilize the New King James translation unless otherwise indicated.

² While the Lazarus narrative is open to many possible interpretations, I understand Lazarus’ entombment as symbolic of the oppressive conditions in which many in my congregation and community exist. These conditions, like Lazarus’ death and burial, appear inescapable as they hold inhabitants trapped. Yet, upon Jesus’ arrival, Lazarus’ liberation is proclaimed. For further information on a liberation reading of Lazarus’ narrative see: Torres, Sergio, and John Eagleson, *Theology in the Americas*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976.

³ While the need to ground a homiletical approach biblically seems self-evident to me, I realize there may be some reading this thesis for whom their tradition does not require this as the place of origin for any attempt to preach or to discuss preaching. For those individuals, some modest explanation might be required. I offer the words of Dr. Cleophus LaRue when he says, “Black preaching is inextricably tied to scripture. In the eyes of the Black church, a preacher without scripture is like a doctor without a Black bag, which is to say, what one needs to get the preaching job done comes with some encounter with Scripture.” If this is true of the very act of preaching, as suggested by LaRue, it is equally true of any homiletical paradigm. A homiletical framework must be grounded in Scripture. LaRue, Cleophus James, *I Believe I’ll Testify: The Art of African-American Preaching*, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 57.

the text that shapes my vision of the principal message and essential purpose of preaching: ***To proclaim a Christ-centered liberty to those who are held captive in oppression.***⁴ This biblical narrative may be seen by some as an odd choice given the rich history of pastors and theologians constructing a liberative homiletic based on the fourth chapter of Luke.

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. 17 And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” [Luke 4.16-19]

Luke’s text concretizes Jesus’ liberative identity in his mission. Luke does not present Jesus as a theological concept or as an abstract set of moral principles distant from the lives of the oppressed. The Jesus presented is “an event of liberation, a happening in the lives of the oppressed people struggling for political freedom.

Therefore, to know him is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless.”⁵

⁴ The church, and particularly the Black church, its pastors and theologians, are called to homiletically respond to oppression within their communities. This formulation of the mission of the parish and the preacher is informed by my understanding of Black liberation theology. (For additional thoughts, see notes on Liberative Homiletics in the appendix.) However, any discussion of oppression should give an account of how that oppression is constructed. Initially, Black liberation theology constructed oppression through the lens of race. However, the socio-economic and political context in which Black liberation theology emerged has substantially changed. At the time of Black liberation theology’s birth, to be black, quite literally, was to be oppressed. Societal changes now call this link between being Black and oppression into question. While race may have once served as an appropriate conceptual instrument for understanding oppression, that time may have now passed. Definitions of oppression must be expanded to embrace all social, political and economic systems that seek to exploit or subjugate others or whose effect is a degradation of human dignity.

⁵ James, Cone H., *God of the Oppressed*, Maryknoll, NY: Seabury Press, Orbis Books, 1997 32.

It is Jesus' particularity: his Jewishness, his poverty, his ministry to the poor and dispossessed, that provides a true glimpse into who Jesus was and who Jesus is for the Christian community.

This theological paradigm that informs my preaching is understood as Black liberation theology.⁶ In its earliest construction, it asserted that the gospel is about the experience of freedom by the oppressed and that this must be the central message proclaimed by the church.⁷ As James Cone rightly articulates, "If the gospel means freedom, then the freedom disclosed in that gospel must also be revealed in the event of proclamation. The preaching of the word must itself be the embodiment of freedom."⁸ This declaration addresses the homiletical content (liberation for the oppressed) and carrier (the homiletician) positing that both are indispensable to the realization of liberation. I, like so many preachers, have been homiletically and hermeneutically influenced by Luke's understanding of the mission of Jesus.⁹ However, I also look to

⁶ For further explication of this concept, please see Liberative Homiletic in the appendix.

⁷ When one speaks of Black liberation theology, one is not speaking about a monolithic set of theological suppositions. Instead, one is speaking of the body of knowledge that has emerged after multiple generations of preachers and theologians have interrogated its pre-suppositions. Later generations of Black liberation theologians would expand the field of questions to which liberation theology sought to respond beyond that of race to include issues such as gender and sexuality which were not the primary objectives of the first generation of liberation theologians. For example, one might consider the following as examples of the evolution of Black liberation theology: Griffin, Horace L., *Their Own Receive Them Not: African-American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010; Hopkins, Dwight N., *Walk Together Children : Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010; Anderson, Victor, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African-American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, Continuum New York, 1995; Williams, Delores S., *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*, Orbis Books Maryknoll, New York, 1993.

⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 8.

⁹ My reading of a liberative homiletic in Luke's gospel is influenced by: Prior, Michael. *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology, Luke 4:16-30*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995; Bailey, James L., *Preaching the Lukan Gospel*, *Currents In Theology And Mission* 12, no. 6 (December 1, 1985): 325-337; Clifford, Richard J., and Khaled Anatolios, *Christian Salvation: Biblical And Theological Perspectives*, *Theological Studies* 66, no. 4; Matthey, Jacques, *Luke 4:16-30--The Spirit's Mission Manifesto--Jesus' Hermeneutics*, *SEDOS Bulletin* 32, no. 6 (June 1, 2000): 187-191.

John's depiction of Lazarus' deliverance for a framework for liberative Black Protestant preaching.¹⁰ The difference between the two texts is that the imagery of oppression and liberation in John's narrative viscerally reminds the homiletician that liberative preaching lives within the particular experiences of human beings who are the objects of God's liberating grace.

THE LAZARIAN POSSIBILITY OF PARTICULARITY

As pastor of a congregation of living beings immersed in a community experiencing oppression, I realize that the construction, proclamation, and experience of a liberative homiletic cannot rest in the abstract. The homiletical mediation of liberation for the people gathered within the sacred space of the sanctuary must be proclaimed in a manner that is particular.¹¹ When the Mt. Zion congregation gathered for worship on the Sundays following the grand jury decisions in both the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases, congregants were not expecting to hear a sermon on the theory of overcoming oppression, or an abstract discussion of theological anthropology and the

¹⁰ This is not meant to minimize the intersection between other non-Protestant theologies, homiletics and liberation. There is an equally fertile field of discussion regarding the interplay between Catholic theology and liberative homiletics. [See: Brown, Robert McAfee, *Gustavo Gutierrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990; Ellis, Marc H. and Otto Maduro, *The Future Of Liberation Theology: Essays In Honor Of Gustavo Gutierrez*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989.] Nor is it my intent to deny the influence of Black non-Protestant churches on the promulgation and experience of liberation preaching for the African-American community. There are rich religious traditions of preaching within the Black church that are neither Protestant nor Christian. However, the Protestant tradition represents a significant portion of the Black religious community and provides a rich context for examination of the overarching question of this thesis. The essays found in the *Special Issue on Black American Religion in the Twentieth Century* in the *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 29, No. 4, (Jun., 1988), are one of a handful of resources that speak to both the diversity of Black religious experience in America and the scope of the Protestant tradition within that community.

¹¹ By homiletical mediation of liberation, I mean that the act of preaching is the vehicle through which the Christ-centered invitation to experience liberation is extended. The act of preaching is distinct from the experience of liberation but critical to its experience.

mutating influence of manifest evil.¹² No, they were looking for the sermon to speak to a heartbroken community grieving the loss of Black life at the hands of what many of them perceive to be oppressive white power that once again was held blameless by blind, but seemingly biased, Lady Justice. The congregation gathered wondering what that “Negro from Nazareth”¹³ would have to say to a community whose memories are scarred by the all too familiar and painful moments of Black existence so tragically captured in deaths of these two men. The members of Mt. Zion gathered in those moments wondering what a gospel of liberation and social justice meant for them.

As preacher, I face the homiletical challenge of proclaiming liberation within the all too familiar reality of oppression and pain within which this community lives.¹⁴ In confronting this homiletical challenge, the Lazarus text, preached my first Sunday at Mt. Zion, is prescient. Jesus’ presence at Lazarus’ tomb prompts the preacher to extend

¹² This is not to suggest that there is not great power in homiletical moments that provide congregants with a theological, as opposed to cultural, hermeneutic for communal suffering and grief. The homiletic of lament and preaching on suffering are often underused but powerful theological gifts to the church. [See: Taylor, Barbara Brown, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998; Aden, LeRoy, and Hughes, Robert G., *Preaching God's Compassion: Comforting Those Who Suffer*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002; or Long, Thomas G., *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011.

¹³ “Negro from Nazareth” is a Christological phrase coined by the late Rev. Dr. Mack King Carter, pastor of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale, FL, who is considered one of the great Black preachers of the modern century. This language serves to conjoin Jesus’ narrative with the stories of the blacks and in doing so render visible the church’s complicity in the maintenance of systems of oppression and the reality that this complicity carries social, economic, and political repercussions for the formulation of genuine Christian theology and practice. “Jesus’ identity as the oppressed one who takes on Black suffering expresses the essence of divine identity and divine activity. Christ is Black because of how Christ was revealed and because of where Christ seeks to be (i.e. with the African-American poor).” Hopkins, Dwight N., *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999, 57.

¹⁴ There is a deep historical homiletical vein within the Black church that privileges the pursuit of peace and acceptance of suffering, along with the conditions that produce it, over a reading of scripture that calls for the active pursuit of the liberation of the community and active resistance to those institutional elements that give birth to the suffering. This homiletical response has deep roots in the history of the Black community’s introduction to and engagement with Christian scriptures. Even in slavery, a passivity toward oppression was often homiletically promulgated by those seeking to maintain oppression.

the gospel's invitation to believe that, even in the presence of hopelessness, liberation remains possible.¹⁵ A liberative homiletic calls the preacher to face oppression and death, as manifested in their community, and to speak life into the particularity of the moment.¹⁶ Jesus, while interested in the community gathered in this moment, is nonetheless particular in his message of liberation. It is Lazarus, and the very particular conditions of Lazarus' life, to which Jesus speaks. This narrative suggests that if preaching is to be liberative, it cannot do so theoretically or abstractly. It must do so with emphasis on the particular and authentic needs of congregants.¹⁷ This requires proclaiming liberty in the face of the perceived impotence, and even foolishness, of one's voice in light of the oppression a community faces. [1 Corinthians 1.20-31]

¹⁵ The liberative preachers speaks to a communal hopelessness that arise within congregants who live in a country whose actions declare that their sons, brothers, and husbands are existential dangers to be incapacitated or incarcerated. They wondered: What did this gospel of liberation and social justice mean when they live in a country that only loves Black children when they bounce a ball, dance a jig, sing a ditty, jump over a hurdle, or run down a field? What does the gospel of liberation look like in a world that has convinced itself that these same Black children are a threat when these children strive to live up to their God-given abilities in literature, art, math, science, philosophy, religion, and life? What does the gospel of liberation say to a community held hostage to the exasperated outrage of the powerful towards all things Black and/or poor? What does the gospel of liberation taste like when the powerful are deluded and their minds polluted? What does this gospel mean when the children or grandfathers of this community are callously cut down? What does this gospel mean when the sewerous thinking of the powerful and the elite erupt in declarations of how, if only our sons and fathers had been more submissive, they could have avoided tragedies they apparently brought upon themselves? What does the gospel of liberation sound like when even after the tragic lost of life by multiple young men at the hands of governmental power, members within the Black community, intoxicated with the chorus of affirmation from their white neighbors, supervisors, or overseers, feign surprise in social media, or over lunch counters, and backyard encounters when blacks finally erupt and loudly declare their frustration at the degradation and depravation that is all too constant realities in their lives?

¹⁶ Speaking of particularity prominently displayed in this narrative, I am reminded that elder preachers of the church would often say that the reason Jesus calls Lazarus by name (particularity) at the tomb is because if Jesus had only cried out, "Come forth" (a universal declaration) every dead body in that burial place would have risen.

¹⁷ Borrowing from Gustavo Gutierrez, it can be said that liberative preaching responds to the question of, "the meaning of the word of God for its contemporaries, at a certain moment of history. Any attempt to answer this question will be made in the function of our culture, in function of the problems faced by men and women of our time." It is this emphasis on understanding God's presence in the historical (or communal) context in which one is situated that is the catalyst to liberative preaching. Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *The Power of the Poor in History : Selected Writings*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004, 56.

The Lazarian suggestion of a homiletically mediated liberation seems foolish given the magnitude of what confronts so many Black churches and communities. However, this is exactly what is so visibly posited as Jesus stands before Lazarus' tomb. As preacher, if you can imagine yourself standing there as one of the grieving spectators, you can immediately see the apparent foolishness of Jesus crying out for a dead man to come forth. In like manner, the preacher is called to stand foolishly trumpeting life in the midst of death. We preach, "in the midst of a world shaped by almost overwhelming powers of domination and violence and death...we preach with nothing but a word in the midst of a world shaped by armies and weapons of mass destruction, by global technology and economy, by principalities and powers that overwhelm both by their seductiveness and their threat."¹⁸ In these moments, as preachers, we are called to do more than simply retire to the security of our sanctuaries or rest in religious soliloquies, or retreat to the safety of well-worn rhetoric. We are called to stand before the sepulchers of an oppressed community and to cry out in pursuit of an eschatologically defined liberation that gives life and hope to our people.¹⁹ Like Jesus, homileticians are to have the strength to stand, even through tears and with broken hearts. Yet, lifting our heads and voices to heaven, we proclaim life and victory. To follow this scriptural example requires the preacher to understand the experiential

¹⁸ Campbell, Charles L, and Cilliers, Johan, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel As a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012, 18.

¹⁹ To be Christian is to join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Authentic Christian identity, as found in Jesus as liberator, must affirm the humanity of poor through its declaration of, and participation in, Jesus' presence in the poor's struggle against overwhelming and stifling oppression. Jesus is one in solidarity with the suffering and oppressed. Jesus declares the contextually constructed and continuously denied humanity of the poor and oppressed fallacious. Jesus calls, through the homiletician, the Christian community into fellowship with the struggle against oppression. Failure to participate in that struggle or to align oneself with the oppressed leaves one outside of authentic Christian mission and fellowship with Jesus. Failure to homiletically mediate the congregation's call to participate in that struggle is to engage in something other than Christian preaching.

identity of their church and the construction of oppression within their community. So, I begin by taking inventory of Mt. Zion's institutional and communal context.

THE CONTEXTUAL PARTICULARITY OF MT. ZION

I serve as the fourth pastor in the sixty-seven year history of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Mt. Zion, located in the City of Joliet, Illinois, is a community of approximately one-hundred and fifty-thousand citizens. African-Americans comprise sixteen percent of the city's population which is two percent higher than their representation throughout the State of Illinois.²⁰ Within Joliet, the African-American community is residentially concentrated in an area residents refer to as the "East Side."²¹ This is the geographic area surrounding Mt. Zion from which the church draws a significant portion of its approximately thirteen hundred members.²²

While the congregation of Mt. Zion draws from beyond the East Side, it is estimated that forty to forty-five percent of the congregation resides in this area and seventy percent of the congregation, whether they live in the area or not, continues to have familial connections to this area. Not unexpectantly, the socio-economic composition of Mt. Zion's congregation mirrors that of the East Side community whose challenges give urgency and particularity to any discussion of liberation. The East Side has been the subject of many revitalization efforts in light of the disparities existing between this community and other, predominantly white, residential areas of the city.

²⁰ 2013 census data. www.quickfacts.census.gov/states/12/1238570.html. Accessed 10.26.14.

²¹ For the purposes of this thesis, the East Side is composed of those communities in some or all of the following zip codes: 60432, 60433, 60435, 60436.

²² On any given Sunday, there is an average cumulative worshipping attendance at Mt. Zion of six hundred individuals at the two morning worship services. However, the higher membership number represents those individuals who understand themselves as connected to Mt. Zion, and who often make a claim on the time and resources of the church.

The most recent codification of revitalization opportunities and obstacles is found in the *Joliet Quality of Life Report*.²³ This report was the result of a collaborative effort between the City of Joliet, several community groups and stakeholders, and a hired consultant. This report details the magnitude of challenges faced by the East Side and concomitantly by Mt. Zion's congregation, as each attempts to address the systemic issues that degrade the quality of life for East Side residents.

Furthermore, Mt. Zion's institutional identity has been shaped by a variety of factors of which communal and congregational socio-economic characteristics are but one. The historical context in which the church has evolved and the communal and church leadership provided by Pastor Singleton have all played a part in shaping the church's identity. Joliet has experienced moments of significant struggle as residents of the East Side sought to realize their liberty under the law. Mt. Zion and Pastor Singleton played an instrumental role in the advancement of the African-American community of

²³ "The Quality of Life Task Force was established to provide an action plan to improve the quality of life for residents in Districts 4 and 5 (Southeast, Northeast and Near West Side) in the City of Joliet. The Quality of Life Task Force was formed by various grass root community leaders...in order to form a plan of action in the 4th and 5th Districts of Joliet.", <http://www.visitjoliet.org/index.aspx?page=483> For an overview of the concrete disparities which constitute the manifested communal oppression to which any liberative gospel preached at Mt. Zion should respond, please see the Quality of Life Task Force Summary found in the appendix.

Joliet during the 1960's and 70's.²⁴ Pastor Singleton was one of a handful of pastors proclaiming the gospel of liberation from the pulpit and embodying it through his activism outside of the church. As a result, he led Mt. Zion's evolution into a community church with a reputation for declaring that the liberation proclaimed by Jesus could be experienced, in part, here on earth through the active struggle of Christian communities against systemic injustice.²⁵

This is the context in which this congregation has been formed. These elements of its history cause Mt. Zion to be deeply sensitive to the presence of oppression (culturally, politically, financially, racially or economically defined). The congregation's

²⁴ "One of Joliet's longest serving pastors, Rev. Isaac Singleton marched with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and had a firm hand in the civil rights movement in this area in the 1960s. Though he was raised in the South, after completing Bible school and pastoring at churches in East St. Louis and Danville, he took over the pulpit of Mt. Zion in December 1961....However, Rev. Singleton's reach goes far beyond the ministry. He helped found a chapter of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition in Joliet. When Black students faced expulsion for civil rights protests in the 1960s, he found teachers for a "freedom school" in his church. "I stood by their side," he recalled. He was one of 150 people invited to the White House in 1986 to work on civil rights issues. He has served on a variety of boards, including the Will County Regional Board of Education, the Joliet Township High School Foundation and the Joliet Region Chamber of Commerce. He also served as the vice president of the National Baptist Congress. He didn't hesitate to get involved in issues -- from accusing a health-care company of charging higher rates for the uninsured, to trying to get barriers knocked down at a housing complex, to taking a racetrack developer to task over its record on hiring minorities. His impact can be seen in the monuments placed around the city in his honor -- the street his church sits on is called Singleton Place, and the boardroom at the Joliet Chamber of Commerce is named in his honor. His commitment to his flock and the city have earned him a spot in Joliet's Hall of Pride.", Alicia Fabbre, Chicago Tribune, March 25, 2009.

²⁵ It was Pastor Singleton's and it is my belief that the kingdom of God, inaugurated by Christ, will not be fully realized until Christ's return. However, this eschatology calls for the Christian community to pursue the realization of this future hope in our present. This pursuit manifests itself in several practical ways in the life of this congregation and community. Historically, it was captured in Pastor Singleton's and the church's valiant fight for civil rights for Blacks in Joliet. More recently, it is captured in Mt. Zion's engagement with several community organizations to increase the level of economic activity on the East Side of Joliet. These efforts consist of protests over the labor practices of warehouses in the area. (We believed that the warehouses limited economic activity by over-utilizing part-time labor which precluded job stability and benefits. See: *Rally For Striking Walmart Workers Ends In Arrests*, Cindy Wojdyla, Southwide Start, October 1, 2012.) We have also engaged corporations in the area to examine their supply chains for opportunities for the church to become a provider of services to these institutions. This would allow the church to become a job creator and address the myriad of problems associated with the scarcity of economic activity in the community. This is one of the many ways in which liberative preaching is aligned with praxis at Mt. Zion.

understanding of oppression is not relegated to historical recollections or re-litigation of civil rights grievances. Instead, their understanding of oppression is concretized in their current condition and influences how congregants view their lives and the mission of the church. Oppression is an ever present reality impacting the lives of congregants and their families creating the need for a space in their lives in which their value is affirmed. For many in this congregation, the church remains the place where human dignity is acknowledged and liberation experienced. I consider it my responsibility to continue the legacy of Pastor Singleton of engaging in the homiletical mediation of liberation to the men and women who gather each Sunday to hear a word from the Lord.

PREACHING COMMUNAL LIBERATION

It is in this context that a liberative homiletic must exist and speak both practically and aspirationally to congregation and community. An example of what this type of preaching looks like at Mt. Zion is found in one of the sermons submitted during my time in the ACTS program.²⁶ For this sermon, Mt. Zion brought the community of Joliet together for a moment of shared worship. Renting out the local baseball stadium, Mt. Zion orchestrated a unique day of worship. That day providentially provided blue skies and a warm fall sun as three-thousand members of our community gathered for a day of community worship. There was singing and fellowship throughout the service. Non-profits were on hand to speak to the physical and material needs of those in attendance. The local hospital staffed a booth to distribute health information to a community suffering desperately from disparities in health and well-being. The local NAACP chapter was present to speak to the political needs of our community, and the

²⁶ This example of liberative preaching is found in the sermon, "Worship At the Cross." The transcript of the sermon is found in the appendix.

elementary and high school administrations were in attendance providing resources to families in constant need of information and encouragement regarding their children's education.²⁷

In this setting, a liberative gospel was proclaimed to the East Side community. The sermon anchored itself in the sixth chapter of Ephesians. There, Paul encourages believers, in the face of oppressive forces, to stand and trust in the power of God. The liberative sermon acknowledged that preacher and parish speak and act within a larger context that is often hostile to its effort. We worship and serve in a community unimpressed by the frequency or formality of our rituals or worship. Each week, churches gather for services while surrounded by the men and women who live within the shadows of our ornate cathedrals or humble storefronts. These members of the community look upon our preaching and worship with concern and consternation, if not outright contempt. Why? Because they wonder:

...If the God that we boldly profess is so present when we lift up our voices that we can feel him moving through the trees, and the wind, and the breeze; if the God we declare today is listening so attentively to our petition, why does this God appear so absent in our community?

There are those standing outside of this gathering, who are wondering when we get through with all of our shouting on Sunday morning, why is the God that we have all this energy about not present in the midst of the difficulties of the communities in which our churches operate? Every Sunday that we gather, we stand in the midst of the residual fragments of a broken community. Every Sunday we worship in the barren fields of our community and we struggle to produce a harvest from ground saturated with the blood of our children. Children whose lives have been callously cut short by one another or, far too often, tragically taken by those who

²⁷ This description of the other elements of this worship service is provided to illustrate that liberative preaching is never less than the spoken word but also so much more than the spoken word. Liberative preaching informs praxis and praxis shapes the preaching. The worship elements, the community involvement and the participation of other social service agencies are all constitutive elements of the mediation of liberation for this community.

swore to protect and serve them. In the midst of these tragedies our communities cry out, “Where is your God when another young life gets taken?” We stand here in worship and celebration while, our community continues to lift up their voices in lament.

We live in communities torn apart by the issues of domestic violence. Too many of our young women’s lives have been destroyed, often through acts of violence perpetrated by frustrated young men who themselves are often trapped in an endless cycle of despair. It is a despair born from their captivity to a criminal justice system that is far from just. A system that uses felonies as a tool for political disenfranchisement. Or worse yet, as a means for ensuring that this capitalist system continues to feed off of their cheap labor. A system that Michelle Alexander rightly calls the New Jim Crow. This community is wondering where is our God when injustice runs rampant in our communities.

We worship in communities where our children are failing in an educational system that is struggling under the burden of trying to educate children that arrive at school too hungry, too tired, too ill, or too traumatized to be able to function socially, intellectually or spiritually within a learning environment. “Where is your God?”, asks teachers trying to educate children who are literally walking out of war zones. I don’t just mean the war zones constituted by the streets where they live. I mean the war zones in their homes. If you listen closely, you can hear these families wondering, while we are doing all of our shouting, “Where is your God?”²⁸

These questions illustrate that the urgency of the sermonic moment is fueled by the real problems facing communities of the oppressed. The liberative homiletic directs the Christian community to identify with and struggle for the oppressed, recognizing that Christ, and thus the authentic church, is found in the midst of the oppressed.²⁹ This sermon sought to call the Christian community out of its slumber and complicity with oppression. The liberative homiletic understands that Christian identity is only present in our participation in the fight against communal injustices that seek to rob the poor of their very beingness. Now, it is relatively easy to maintain the energy and urgency of liberative preaching in an event such as this. However, if liberative preaching is to be a

²⁸ Except from Sermon - Worship at the Cross found in its entirety in the appendix.

²⁹ “Strickly speaking, the Christians are, or should be...those in solidarity with the interests, aspirations, and combats of the oppressed and the repressed of the world today.” Gutierrez, 21.

habit, and not happenstance, it must possess a resilience given the intransigence of injustice that sustains its invitation to the church to wage a seemingly non-sensical struggle against oppression in pursuit of an eschatologically constructed concept of liberation.

ESCHATOLOGICAL LIBERTY

The liberation we preach of is, “a future event [that] is not simply other worldly, but is the divine future that breaks into our social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering enabling people to know that the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God’s future.”³⁰ Liberative preaching points to an eschatological liberation that empowers the oppressed’s resistance to societal forces seeking to rob them of their dignity and humanity. Liberative preaching’s eschatology allows the congregants to visualize their future beyond the confines of their current historical context. Liberative preaching looks at both the concrete circumstances confronting the community while simultaneously lifting the eyes of the church and community to the theological horizon to glimpse a God-ordained future. The robust eschatology of liberative preaching fuels the church’s faithful and continuous identification with the oppressed and the fortitude to persistently struggle against oppression.

The eschatology of liberative preaching is only as strong as the church’s supporting eschatological practices. Unfortunately, many of these practices have largely faded from use within churches. This has weakened the ability of liberative preaching, as practiced in these settings, to offer a definition of humanity that is not

³⁰ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 146.

dependent on the very systems of oppression it seeks to uproot. The growing discontinuance of hymns, stories, folk narratives, and testimonies within worship, driven by their perceived simplicity and irrelevance to the contemporary moment, leaves liberative preaching and the church homiletically, ritually, and theologically impoverished and susceptible to emulation rather than eradication of the oppressor's systems. Robbed of an eschatological understanding of liberation, as something present but not fully realized, we have lost one of the central tools in the struggle against oppression. Gone is the sustaining power of faith that declares that present conditions are not determinative of one's humanity. In the absence of these eschatological tools, the oppressor's definition of liberty becomes the adopted *telos* of liberation efforts proclaimed within many Black churches. This acceptance of the oppressor's language and value system means a growing deafness to the truth of the divine preference for the poor.

This sermon represents how I envisioned the homiletical mediation of liberation for Mt. Zion and Joliet. This is what I believed to be my homiletical voice. I envisioned a life of preaching filled with sermons addressing the ills plaguing the community and inviting the Mt. Zion congregation to proclaim solidarity with the poor. I envisioned my preaching each Sunday filled with exhortations of eschatological hope to a community held hostage to conditions of oppression and sin. This was my mental image of my homiletical purpose and practice as pastor.

HOMILETICAL PERCEPTION VERSUS REALITY

However, this doctoral program emphasizes the importance of examining both the theory and practice of preaching as informed by measurable facts. With that in

mind, I decided to review the sermons preached during my time at Mt. Zion. In doing so, a very different picture of my preaching emerged than I anticipated. Despite my self-described liberative homiletical posture, my sermonic record did not bear out this intent. In fact, examination of the sermons preached at Mt. Zion revealed that the majority of sermons focused on issues other than liberation and social justice. Between May 2009 and June 2014, I preached approximately two hundred and seven different Sunday morning sermons.³¹ An examination of the title, text, and sermonic content of those sermons reveals the following.³²

³¹ It is important to keep in mind that the different sermons are measured by is something greater than the style of preaching. What is of critical importance is the very substance of the preaching. Micheal Pasquarello was incredibly important in my evaluation of the sermons preached. Pasquarello speaks to his perceived need for a corrective to the current focus of homiletical efforts. Pasquarello operates with the presupposition that much of the current focus of preaching is on style versus substance and that a corrective is needed where there is less focus on homiletical practices and more focus on the theological warrants driving preaching. The focus on style versus substance has caused the church to lose sight of its message and the one thing that renders the proclamation of the gospel authentic and unique. The corrective is to re-situate preaching within the triune God. In doing so, the preacher invites congregants to situate themselves and their identity in that God. In evaluating my own sermons, I was careful not to make the determination based on stylistic considerations but rather the underlying theological warrants driving the sermon. Pasquarello addresses preaching as a theological practice, and asserts that it is the theological roots of preaching, and not the rhetorical method, that gives transformative power to preaching. If I am to alter the preaching at Mt. Zion, the growth in preaching cannot rest on rhetorical changes, but rather on a closer examination and incorporation of the theological drivers animating my sermons. Pasquarello, Michael, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.

³² Event specific sermons are sermons driven by the church or liturgical calendar. This would include Easter, Advent, or Women and Men's Month, etc. Sermonic series represents those sermons which were the result of a homiletical focus on a biblical book or theological concept for a period of anywhere from a month to a year. In reviewing these sermons, the handful that were focused on social justice have been excluded from this count. Christian Ethics and Discipleship consisted of those sermons which were specifically focused on some element of spiritual formation but excluded the church's role in the community. Uncategorized represents those sermons that did not fit neatly into one of the categories above generally due to the lack of clarity around the sermonic purpose upon review.

Sermons Preached at Mt. Zion (2009-14)		
Catagory	Sermons Preached	Percentage
Event Specific Sermons	61	29.5%
Sermonic Series	73	35.3%
Discipleship/Christian Ethics	35	16.9%
Social justice	23	11.1%
Uncatagorized	15	7.2%
Total	207	

Analysis of the sermons preached during my tenure at Mt. Zion reveals that, despite an intellectual, theological, and even personal perspective that emphasized the importance of liberative preaching, this homiletical focus did not naturally manifest itself in my preaching.³³ In the absence of a topical or external impetus, the preaching at Mt. Zion appears far less radical and liberative than I imagined. Here I was, the self-proclaimed liberation preacher telling all who would listen of my inherent belief in social justice and liberation as the primary and most meaningful framework for preaching. Yet, my preaching record told a very different story. As I reflected on this discontinuity between my homiletical precepts and practices, I realized that there were several

³³ This analysis was not simply efficacious as a descriptor of the homiletical practices of the church but also offered a commentary on the type of leadership I had provided the church during this period. This became evident to me after reading Satterlee's work on preaching as leadership where he explains that there must be a vision for the ministry that is congruent with the vision Christ offers for the church in the gospel. (Satterlee, Craig Alan, *When God Speaks Through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission*, Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008) If one accepts this description of preaching as leadership, then my underwhelming level of social justice preaching also spoke to an underdeveloped level of pastoral leadership on social justice issues. This consideration meant there was far more at stake in this analysis than simply the homiletical categorizations presented.

possible drivers behind the discontinuity.³⁴

LIBERATION IS INTENTIONAL PREACHING

I believe that the sermonic pattern resulted from a failure to realize that liberative preaching must be deliberate and does not emerge in one's preaching casually or unintentionally. In this regard, I confront the same difficulty that often frustrates the efforts of the congregation to faithfully live out the call to struggle against communal oppression. While we often aspire to do good, aspirations are simply not sufficient. While we desire to work actively to mitigate economic, educational, or health disparities in our communities, or to struggle against the overwhelming levels of domestic abuse or child exploitation or any of the multitude of issues before us, one should ask: Does a critical review of our actual performance show a similar discontinuity? Does our preaching or our actions live up and bear out our intentions?

I envisioned my preaching as compelling the congregation and community to move beyond the rhetoric of liberation to engage in the difficult work of bringing forth liberation for this community. Yet, like the very ones I sought to persuade, I allowed myself to believe that maintaining this desire for my preaching counted as actual success. Even if one adopts liberation as the theological paradigm shaping their homiletical practices, the preacher is still required to engage in explicit and intentional

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, while speaking of prophetic preaching, makes an observation equally applicable to liberative preaching. Brueggemann says, "prophetic preaching undertaken by working pastors is profoundly difficult and leaves the preacher in an ambiguous and exposed position. The task is difficult because such a preacher must at the same time speak truth while maintaining a budget, a membership, and a program in a context that is often not prepared for such truthfulness. Indeed, given the seductions and the accommodation of many congregations, not to mention larger judicatories in the church, such venues are often not readily venues for truth-telling.", Brueggemann, Walter, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching An Emancipatory Word*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, 1.

practices that give life to their homiletical intent.³⁵ My liberation homiletic, without works, was (if not dead) on life support. Now, the remedy to this dilemma would appear self-evident: I needed to more actively develop explicitly liberative sermons and make issues of social justice a larger part of the homiletical diet at Mt. Zion. Yet, additional analysis of the congregation further complicated this emerging snapshot of homiletical life at the church.

CONGREGATION ASSESSMENT OF PREACHING AT MT. ZION (2012)

In 2012, as part of the church's strategic planning process, a congregational survey was distributed to assess members' perspectives on church leadership and the direction of the church. The survey sought to understand congregants' views on a wide-range of topics, including an assessment of my preaching and the overall teaching and preaching needs of the congregation.³⁶ Several of the questions touched upon the impact and effectiveness of liberative and social justice preaching. For example, the survey revealed that the congregation believed the church did an adequate job in responding to the immediate needs of individuals seeking help from the church and perceived the church as a place where the community knew it could come in times of need and receive help. Most often this help was emergency financial aid (providing support for those facing eviction, meeting the clothing or food needs of families with children). These survey responses were consistent with my perception that the church

³⁵ One of the ways in which this is accomplished is to remember that liberation theology, and thus liberative preaching, is, "not a theology about liberation which is then content to leave all the other theological themes to traditional theology. On the contrary, it is convinced that its insights have bearing on every single doctrine of the Christian faith..." This perspective invites the preach to consider liberative preaching beyond the restrictive paradigm of social justice issues and to explore bringing a liberative lens to every aspect of one's preaching. González, Justo L, and González, Catherine, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980, 20.

³⁶ The survey (with the questions most relevant to this thesis) has been provided in the appendix under Congregation Survey 2012.

understood the practical ways in which a liberative gospel is practiced. Additionally, seventy-six percent of the congregation was satisfied or very satisfied with the church's efforts to get the congregants more involved in social, political, or economic issues as a part of their understanding of their faith. When assessing the Pastor, eighty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that my preaching and teaching helped them to understand and act on issues of social justice.

Initially, I was pleased with this measurement of liberative homiletical and teaching effectiveness in the eyes of the congregation. I accepted that not everyone would respond favorably and understood that some in the congregation saw either our performance as an institution, or my performance as a pastor, on issues of social justice unacceptable. However, in light of my review of the sermonic history of the church, I returned to examine all of the responses to this survey again. Beginning with the unfavorable responses, I noted that fourteen percent of the congregation were not convinced that social justice was an issue that my preaching and teaching adequately addressed. In subsequent conversations with some of these respondents, they expressed that not enough preaching time was spent on issues confronting the African-American community in Joliet. Specifically, comments shared included, "Pastor should preach more on the importance of voting" or "Pastor does not do enough to address the shootings that are occurring on the East Side."³⁷ Some who were satisfied with the level of preaching on social justice issues indicated that they did so because they believed that the focus of preaching should be on the individual needs of the

³⁷ As part of this thesis process a small percentage of the congregants who submitted a 2012 survey response were interviewed to gain additional insight on their perspectives. The comments quoted are from those who indicated that they may have responded unfavorably to the questions regarding preaching on social justice issues.

congregants. They did not perceive Sunday morning as the time to preach on broader communal concerns.³⁸ It turns out that all of the responses to the survey provided important insights into how congregants ultimately internalized sermons and the teachings relative to their communal or social relevance.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCONTINUITY

I also re-examined the responses that suggested a favorable perception of my preaching on social justice. These responses were inexplicable in light of the few sermons actually preached on liberation. Was it possible that issues of liberation and social justice were not important to the congregation?³⁹ This might explain their satisfaction with the relatively small amount of homiletical attention paid to the topic. However, this conclusion was inconsistent with the rich historical record, the level of human and financial resources dedicated to social justice issues, and the involvement of Mt. Zion members throughout the Joliet community in fighting systemic injustice. As I continued to search for other explanations for this discontinuity, I considered the

³⁸ Another insight from this survey was found in the responses to the questions surrounding ecumenical involvement. Twenty-six percent of respondents suggested that I did not spend enough time engaging in or encouraging ecumenical participation. While this response could be understood as a reflection of the desire of a few to return to the days when the church was more deeply engaged in denominational life, it should not be ignored that this may also be a reflection of a dissatisfaction rooted in the perception that the church has become more insular in its teachings and practices. This insularity is often symptomatic of a religious community that does not hold the liberation of the poor as an explicit theological principle.

³⁹ Such an assessment, if true, would reflect the concern raised by Brueggemann in *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*. There he describes the phenomenon of congregations that have embraced the dominant (and oppressive) narrative and have little desire for the preaching of a counter-narrative as embodied in a liberative homiletic. In these environments, the preacher must, “keep deciding in pastoral ways about the means and pace for advocating this [liberative] narrative in such a contested environment where in the listeners have no zeal about the contestation and do not want the dominant narrative placed in question. The preacher must be continually aware of the many and deep ways in which the dominant narrative is defining for her life, so that no one of us is immune to the contradiction that is to be faced. The preacher must remember that when the congregation (or some part of it) is deeply and convincingly embedded in the dominant narrative, prophetic preaching that advocates the counter narrative sounds like unbearable nonsense...From the perspective of the dominant narrative, advocacy of this alternative narrative sounds as best like foolishness.”, Brueggemann, Walter, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching An Emancipatory Word*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, 6.

influence of my teaching and preaching on social justice issues occurring in contexts other than Sunday mornings. It was possible that congregants were evaluating my preaching performance on liberation from the teachings in Bible Study or my communal involvement. While this offered a partial explanation of the congregational responses to the survey, another piece of the puzzle came to light as I examined the results of a second congregational survey distributed in the fall of 2014. The results of both surveys, along with the feedback provided by a series of focus groups facilitated by the Parish Project Group (PPG), ultimately challenged my definition of liberative preaching.⁴⁰

CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY (2014)

In 2014, another Congregational Survey was distributed at Mt. Zion. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the perceptions and expectations of congregants of the preaching moment.⁴¹ This survey was designed to provide myself and PPG with an understanding of whether those expectations, however they were formed, were being met. As expected, the congregation considered the preaching moment the cornerstone of their worship experience. The centrality and priority of the sermon is difficult to overstate for the congregation. While other elements of the worship

⁴⁰ The Parish Project Group was a group of approximately seven members of my congregation that provided assistance in sermon development and feedback on sermon execution. This structure, a unique element of the ACTS program, was of tremendous benefit to me as a preacher. Their insight has helped both in sermon construction and execution and their evaluation and feedback was invaluable.

⁴¹ The complexity of evaluating the experience of liberative preaching was first brought to my attention through the feedback of the PPG as they reviewed my initial thesis proposal. The PPG was concerned that a discussion of the experience of liberation presupposed that this was what the average congregant comes looking for or that the congregant understands their needs from preaching in a way that can be categorized as liberative. For many of the members of the PPG, they were not sure how people would respond to the simple question: What are you looking for from the preaching moment? As such, the PPG suggested that we begin with a survey of the congregation that sought to capture their expectations of the Sunday worship experience.

experience have their place and importance, they are secondary to the role of the sermon in the eyes of congregants. Furthermore, the survey results suggest that congregants' expectations of the sermon are profoundly influenced by internal considerations. An overwhelming number of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their evaluative lens for the sermon was governed by the ability of the sermon to speak to the events of their lives or to connect with them personally. When examining their weighted responses, the connectedness of the sermon to communal need or world events consistently ranked as a lower priority than personal concerns. These results are confirmed by the responses of the focus groups. Immediately following Sunday sermons, small groups of congregants gathered to discuss their expectations and experiences of the sermon. Occasionally, issues related to social justice arose in the conversation. More often than not, the individual expectations and congregant evaluations of the sermon were shaped by deeply personal needs. This is not to say that congregants were unconcerned with communal needs. Rather, their concern, interest, and receptivity to communal issues was deeply connected to the personal issues and encounters they arrived at the sermonic moment with and for which they sought relief.

Examination of the feedback from the 2012 and 2014 Congregational Surveys, in conjunction with the sermonic history under my tenure, produced an important insight. Congregants evaluated sermons based on the sermon's ability to respond to congregant needs as concretized in their life experiences. What the data suggests is that congregants use the practical experiences of their life as a lens through which the sermon's message is encountered and understood. While I saw liberative preaching as

sermons heavily emphasizing social justice issues, congregants internalized sermons differently. Their satisfaction with the level of liberative preaching could not be evaluated relative to what appeared to be a paucity of liberative sermons. Rather, congregants experienced the homiletical mediation of liberation through the lens of personal (rather than communal) experiences. From the congregants' perspective, the preaching at Mt. Zion was liberative when it addressed the personal experiences of oppression congregants arrived with at church and to which they looked to the sermon to address.

Before connections between the gospel and the community could be effectively made, connections between the liberative effect of the gospel and the individual must be made.⁴² For example, discussion of institutional oppression in this community's experiences with the criminal justice system are conflated with the moments where individuals are seeking relief from the personal encounters with the criminal justice system. The mother whose child is imprisoned will hear a sermon on the systemic injustices within the criminal justice system through the pain of this more immediate experience in their child's life. Sermons that provide the individual with an encounter with the liberative power of the gospel precedes (and at times is a proxy for) sermonic treatment of social justice issues. Now, this is not to say that preaching about moments

⁴² Given Henry Mitchell's work, this observation now seems self-evident. If, as Mitchell declares, the preacher must preach out experience, it stands to reason that listeners will hear the sermons in light of their experiences. Mitchell emphasizes the degree to which all of one's humanity is impacted by the moment of proclamation and how the preacher must speak from the entirety of their humanity. We are all God's creation and are constituted by many different experiential elements that provide the places of connection for us with others. Good preaching finds or creates these connections between ourselves and God's word through the shared moments of human existence. It does so with the purpose of moving individuals to points of change and action in their lives. We preach that people might grow and apply scripture to the lives they live. Mitchell's assertion implicitly affirms the listener's experiential hermeneutic for the homiletical moment and the conclusions born of the congregational surveys. Mitchell, Henry H., *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008.

of personal liberation is sufficient when one is crafting a liberative preaching experience within a congregation. One must be able to move beyond individual needs to communal needs. However, preaching must be grounded in an understanding of the concrete needs of the congregants and then the community. While I placed great emphasis on preaching to communal needs in evaluating my success (or rather failure) at liberative preaching, I had underweighted the importance of preaching a personal liberation to the men and women who sat before me each Sunday.⁴³

A LIBERATION HOMILETIC BOTH CONCRETE AND COMMUNAL

My desire was to preach a liberating gospel. The challenge was that the preaching record during my time at Mt. Zion did not appear to reflect that desire. The first response would be to craft more sermons with a social justice emphasis driving the sermonic purpose. The complication was that the congregation brought an interpretive lens to the preaching moment that suggested that the homiletical experience of liberation at the individual level was a higher priority. It could even be said that for some congregants it is a pre-condition to a communal experience of liberation homiletically. Upon reflection, this was consistent with the Lazarus narrative that framed my homiletical work at Mt. Zion. The Lazarus text spoke to both communal and individual

⁴³ This insight might be obvious, but I confess it was not for me. At first blush, it would seem evident to assert that congregants gather on Sunday mornings (or whatever day they engage in worship) in churches throughout the United States with expectations of the homiletical moment that are profoundly personal and deeply anchored in their experiences. The ubiquitous affirmation of this assertion is evident in the wide array of homiletical models positing that homiletical effectiveness is grounded in the homiletician's ability to make connections to the lived experiences of the congregants. Such assertions would be intellectually bankrupt if not for the pre-supposition that congregants first present themselves with expectations also concretized in their lived experiences. This common element of many homiletical models suggests that not only should there exist points of intentional commonality highlighted in the preaching moment but that congregants come with an interpretive lens grounded in the particularity of their lives. However, one might be surprised at how often preachers project needs upon the congregation without immediate regard to the particularity of the beings arrayed on the seats before the pulpit every Sunday.

needs. Lazarus' need for freedom from the tomb is paramount in the text. Yet, the needs of his sisters (and the community as reflected in Jesus' prayer) are also evident. The needs of Lazarus are not subsumed by communal needs and communal needs are not sacrificed for the sake of Lazarus. Both needs are necessarily met by the liberative proclamation of the gospel.

If I desired to engage more effectively in a liberative homiletic, the first step was to craft sermons that spoke to the personal experience of liberation. Borrowing the Lazarus imagery, as preacher I am called to stand before the tomb and to proclaim a gospel that calls the individual from death unto life. Before speaking to the need for the congregation to address communal oppression so evident in the life of this community, I needed to speak to the personal need for liberation of the individuals before me. My attempts at liberation preaching would only be impactful if congregants saw the gospel's power to first liberate them. Only then would they be willing to make the broader connections to the need for liberation within the community. I began by crafting sermons that I believed to be more explicitly liberative at a personal level.

An example of this model of liberative preaching, which would serve as a better foundation for liberative homiletic, is found in the sermon entitled, "Dead Men Walking."⁴⁴ Utilizing Paul Wilson's, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, as the homiletical model, I addressed the first critical need of liberative preaching at Mt. Zion: anchor the message of liberation in the particularity of the individual's life.⁴⁵ The goal was to

⁴⁴ The transcript of the sermon preached as part of the requirements for the ACTS program is found in the appendix.

⁴⁵ Wilson, Paul Scott, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999.

suggest that the possibilities presented by the gospel were intended to invite the individual into a life of liberty and freedom even if that freedom did not seem possible given the magnitude of the obstacles confronting the individual. Like Lazarus, the gospel meets the individual resting in their condition and calls them to a new way of life. To accomplish this goal, this sermon was grounded in the fifth chapter of Mark detailing Jesus' encounter with the Gadarenes Demoniac.⁴⁶

Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones. [Mark 5.1-5]

While much of the attention has been focused on the homiletical intent of the preacher and the interpretive lens of the congregant, this would be an appropriate place to add an additional element for consideration: the efficacy of the sermonic model used in one's preaching. Wilson's model lent itself well to this project. The model asks the preacher to understand and construct the sermon with four primary thoughts in mind. First, the preacher is called to describe the scene unfolding in the text to uncover what is distinctive or even problematic within the text itself. In doing so, the model invites the preacher to attend to the particularity of the text. Secondly, the preacher is asked to make connections between the text and the lived experiences of the congregation. Thirdly, the preacher is called upon to understand and describe the activity of God in response to the conditions or challenges the text presents. Finally, the model invites the

⁴⁶ Some english translations render the underlying greek as "Garasenes". Consiste with the other biblical references in this thesis, I have used the NKJV's translation of this word.

preacher to share the ways in which congregants can participate in the gracious activity and victory of God within their life as described in the text.⁴⁷ The model's requirement that the preacher to be attentive and disciplined in describing the textual context is particularly helpful for liberative preaching. Just as the scriptural text is foregrounded in page one of the model, the preacher is reminded that the congregational text (the congregants and their lives) must also be the starting point for a liberative homiletic. There can be no effective liberation preaching where the text (scripture or congregation) is not the starting point.

Additionally, the second page of Wilson's model asks the preacher to bridge the chasm between the contemporary and the biblical moment. In this sermon example, I sought to render the condition of the demoniac relevant to the congregation to help congregants understand why they should be concerned with the events unfolding in the text. It was difficult for some congregants to see the similarities between their lives and that of the man struggling in this narrative. This difficulty anticipates the struggle congregants have in making connections between their personal struggles and the communal issues to which liberative preaching ultimately seeks to respond. Few have experienced (or will acknowledge) the kind of desperateness embodied in the life of this demoniac. Wilson's model allowed me the homiletical space to clearly and specifically detail how the conditions of this man's life resonated with the conditions of our lives. This sermon provided the listener with the ability to relate directly to the events of the text and created the conditions where congregants could vicariously participate in the

⁴⁷ Wilson also provides the homiletician with rhetorical instructions designed to assist in unifying the four pages of the sermon through utilization of thematic or illustrative tools throughout the sermon.

demoniac's delivery and victory. If the experience of liberation for the individual is a prerequisite for the call for the congregant's participation in communal liberation, this stage in the sermonic model is essential.

The final two sections of Wilson's model and this sermon were designed to illuminate the activity of God in the text. In doing so, the goal was to provide the congregant with a glimpse of how they might experience that same gracious activity in their lives. This provided the sermonic moment to express the grace of God both in the text and as present in the life of the individual. Ultimately, this is the foundation of liberation preaching. It is seeking to provide a glimpse of the liberty that God has proclaimed for the oppressed; to anchor that liberty in the victorious work of the cross; and to call the individual to begin living into that gracious liberation now.

Prior to the survey and sermon analysis, I would not have termed this a liberation sermon because it spent very little time addressing the greater systemic ills that confront the Joliet community. However, I have come to understand that this sermon is a constitutive element of a liberative homiletic. Absent sermons that speak concretely of liberation within the lived pain of congregants, sermons focused solely on communal change will not resonate with the congregation as one would like. Any attempt to elevate the level of liberative preaching in the church must first free congregants from their Lazarian tomb.

FINAL THE LINK BETWEEN CONGREGATION AND COMMUNITY

Liberative preaching must navigate the tenuous space between individual and communal liberation. Individuals often require that liberation first be presented within the context of oppression they have experienced. As one experiences a homiletical

mediation of personal liberation, one becomes open to the invitation to join in making liberation a reality for the community around them. Concomitantly, it remains the task of the preacher to ensure that the congregant does not become so myopically focused on their personal experience of liberation that they lose sight of the systemic oppression that exists around them. It must not be left to the congregant to make the connection between their individual experience of liberation and the need to participate in the fight for communal liberation. The preacher must speak explicitly of the link between the congregation and the community's experience of oppression and opportunity for liberation. Having spoken to the individual experience of liberation in the previous sermon, the third sermon presented in this thesis turned the attention of congregants from their personal concerns back to those of the community.⁴⁸ Liberative preaching must speak to the needs of the individual and the community and it must also make the link between the two explicit. This sermon utilized the text of Luke 4.16-21 to assert that Mt. Zion's mission was identical to that of Jesus as expressed in his reading of the Isaiah prophecy in the synagogue.

Luke begins his depiction of this inaugural event in Jesus' ministry by indicating that the Spirit of the Lord which rests on Jesus provides the power for Jesus' proclamation. It is under the anointing of the Spirit that Jesus preaches. Luke, in the

⁴⁸ The emphasis on communal liberation is not without its challenges. Yet, these challenges are unavoidable if one takes the call to truly preach a liberative gospel seriously. Kenyatta Gilbert, in his work, *The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching*, suggests that too few preachers have taken these challenges seriously. He responds by advocating trivocal preaching. This is defined as preaching that occupies the space of priest, prophet and sage. He pulls from the many practical streams of African-American preaching, leveraging theologians such as Henry Mitchell and Cleophus LaRue and providing many practical steps for the preacher to shape one's preaching in the manner suggested. This work is a useful tool for understanding, within the larger historical framework of preaching within the Black tradition, how one navigates both the challenges and opportunities presented by the context in which many Black churches exist. Gilbert, Kenyatta R., *The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

book of Acts, will describe the birth and mission of the church as empowered by the same Spirit. This provides a point of connection between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the church. Jesus' reading of the Isaiah prophecy indicates that Jesus' focus is on outsiders to the religious community. He begins by naming the poor which lends an immediacy and materiality to this good news. Jesus continues by proclaiming release for the prisoners. This term carries significant meaning for an African-American community struggling under the burden of incarceration rates that have devastated families and individuals essential to the long-term well-being of this community. Jesus speaks of the blind, reminding listeners that he has come to those who are unable to see the work of God being performed in themselves or others. Referring to each of these groups points to the restoration of societal outcasts.

This is not the only occasion in Luke's writing where his language points to the dispossessed or centers on issues of class. Luke's narratives betray particular sensitivity to these issues. It is a mistake to spiritualize one's interpretation of this passage to such a degree that its spiritual meaning is bifurcated from its considerable commentary on societal issues.⁴⁹ Evidence of the viability of this homiletical approach is found in the language of captives which may be a reference to those held in debtor's prison. The release mentioned might well be an allusion to release of the captives in

⁴⁹ A hermeneutical approach which only spiritualizes Luke's text renders passages such as Luke 4.16-21 devoid of the power to speak to oppressive communal conditions. Such an interpretive lens constrains the language of the poor to spiritual poverty and restricts concepts such as poverty of the spirit. [Matt 5.3] (An example of such a reduction of the concept is seen in Metz, Johannes Baptist, *Poverty of Spirit*, New York: Paulist Press, 1998.) This reading ignores that Jesus is speaking to the reality of material poverty and allows the church to appropriate Jesus' message while ignoring the social justice issues attendant to poverty. Similarly, the powerful language of liberty to the captives, when overly spiritualized, only speaks hope to those who are captive to sin while ignoring those captive to systemic societal oppression. Such interpretations fail to fully explicate the power or relevance of Jesus' message to the Christian community. (See: Hendricks, Obery M., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of the Teachings of Jesus and How They Have Been Corrupted*, New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006.)

the jubilee year. Such a reading suggests Jesus' ministry be understood in light of real and material liberation for the oppressed as embodied within elements of Jewish history and practice. This would call for the liberative preacher to allow those practices to inform the application of this text to their context. The Lukan text speaks to the mission of Jesus, and this sermon linked this liberative mission to the mission of this church. Having preached to individual liberation, I sought to connect that experience to the larger mission of a church in pursuit of the liberation of its community. Having preached to community need, I now preached to individual liberation through which communal liberation is understood and appropriated. The final step was the linking of the work of the church directly to the liberation of the community.

THE DIALECTIC OF HOMILETICALLY MEDIATED LIBERATION

Having spoken sermonically to the liberative needs of the community and congregants, and having explicitly made the homiletical connection between the two, the liberative homiletic remains incomplete. While I was ready to renew my efforts at liberative preaching, as I returned to my biblical touchstone - the eleventh chapter of John - I was troubled by the conclusion of the narrative. Jesus first mentions the crowd in his prayer, indicating to the reader that Jesus has not lost sight of the crowd in this miraculous moment. Jesus speaks to Lazarus, calling him by name from the tomb but then again speaks directly to the crowd. This forms an *inclusio* consisting of the first mention of the crowd, then Lazarus, and then the crowd again. The individual and the communal are joined as Lazarus emerges from the tomb. However, the connection is not what I expected.

And he [Lazarus] who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go." [verse 44]

Lazarus has been liberated from the tomb by the power of Jesus' call on him but, Lazarus is not yet free. Jesus calls upon the community to participate in the liberation of Lazarus. It is the community's freeing of Lazarus that creates an awkward moment for my liberative thinking. The efficacy of this biblical narrative as a liberative framework guiding my preaching was rooted in the idea that those liberated (Christians) are called to liberate others (community). Just as Jesus spoke liberation to Lazarus, in the first phase of liberative preaching, the preacher is called to speak liberatively to the members of the church. The second phase links the congregants' experience of liberation to the community's need for liberation. The third step is the proclamation that given God's liberation of congregants, and having established the link between their liberation and that of the community, the congregation now is called into active pursuit of the realization of liberation of the community. However, the entire model is jeopardized by the conclusion of the Lazarus narrative. How could the very community which, according to this homiletical framework, the church has been called to liberate, now be responsible for liberating the liberator?⁵⁰

The liberty that we strive for as a Christian community is grounded in our eschatological construction of liberty. We seek a liberty guaranteed by Christ's victory

⁵⁰ The liberative homiletic as understood in the Lazarus framework calls the preacher to homiletically reprise the role of Jesus in the text, calling individuals out of their bondage to oppression. The congregant was understood as Lazarus. They were trapped by oppression and called into a new life. Once freed, they were then called to struggle for the liberation of the community/crowd. However, the Lazarus text introduces the community as the final agent, and not object, of liberation. The text introduces the reality of a dialectic between congregation and community. The conclusion of the Lazarus narrative suggests that both the community and the congregation are simultaneously both subject and object of God's liberative desires.

at the cross to be consummated by Christ's return. It is our confidence in that victory that allows us to pursue the realization of an eschatological liberation now. This is our now and not yet. To be authentically Christian is to experience this eschatological liberty and to participate in the struggle to bring it into reality. However, congregants are never fully liberated outside of their participation in the liberation of others. While homiletically addressing their individual needs provided the entry point for the congregant into the experience of liberation, preaching to individual need is the call for the congregant to exit the grave. This is liberation incompletely experienced. The participation of the church in the struggle for communal liberation represents the community's removal of the church's grave clothes. It is the removal of the remnants of oppression as embodied in the church's self-interest. As the church moves beyond those interests and seeks the liberation of its community, the church more fully experiences its liberation. This is the telos the liberative homiletic seeks and represents the dialectic of homiletically mediated liberation.

While I envisioned liberative preaching as encouraging the congregation to help bring about liberation for its community, it had not occurred to me that our involvement in the realization of this eschatological reality is as much about our liberation as that of the community. The ones that I saw as object of our Christian mission were, in fact, the ones that were allowing us, through our identification with their struggle, to experience our liberation. This community, for all of its ills and problems, is a part of God's plan to allow all of creation to walk in liberation. This means that my preaching and my service must continue to help congregants understand that while we might be important to the well-being of our community, they are as important to our living in liberation as the

crowd was to Lazarus walking free from the tomb.

APPLICATION TO THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

One might wonder how the learnings of this project applies to those who find themselves in congregational contexts which differ from that of Mt. Zion. Can the insights which emerge within this thesis have applicability to churches in contexts where socio-economic deprivation is not a communal experience? Can the pastors of wealthy or white churches find value in liberative homiletics? I believe the answer is: Yes!

There are three reasons why I believe in the larger applicability of the lessons of this thesis. First, while oppression is understood primarily in socio-economic terms for Mt. Zion and churches which serve similar constituencies, this is not the only form of oppression that Mt. Zion confronts and to which the liberative homiletic speaks. Oppression can be understood as any of the manifestations of evil that diminishes our experiences of human flourishing and dignity. Any of the lived realities that constrain the opportunities for individuals to express their divinely gifted capabilities constitutes an experience of oppression. The church's goal must be to live in vigorous pursuit of the eradication of any of these forms of oppression. While I live for the day when oppression is annihilated, I cannot think of any church where oppression, in some form, is not a present day reality. It is the liberative homiletician's work to speak out against oppression in whatever form it might exist in whatever community we are called to serve.

Secondly, the liberative homiletic understands that humans are social creatures and that human flourishing occurs within community. It holds as a fundamental pre-supposition that all of humanity is connected to one another. As such, it is the call of the

church to work towards the eradication of injustice where ever it is present. This means that even for those churches where oppression as described within this thesis is not present, that church is still called to participate in the fight against oppression. To be a Christian church means that one cannot ignore injustice in any community. In many ways, this was the indictment Cone and other black liberation theologians raised against the universal church. Just as the church cannot be authentically Christian if it does not identify with and work for the liberation of all, preaching is not authentically Christian if it does not give voice to the gospel's message of God's desire for the liberation of all creation.

Finally, any preacher desiring, in any context, to proclaim the gospel's story of liberation is helped by understanding the dialectic of liberative homiletics. The need to connect to the liberation of the individual, while concomitantly linking that individual experience of liberation to the larger needs of the community is essential. The preacher, in any context, is also greatly benefitted in their preaching by maintaining the dialectic of liberation. Whether for their congregation, or their own preaching, it is of great benefit to remember that we are not only agents of liberation but also objects of the liberation.

CONCLUSION

What began as an exploration of the theological underpinning of my homiletical practices evolved into much more. I continue to believe in the power of Black liberation theology to provide a theological framework for the mission of the church and the preaching that supports that mission. It is my belief that the scriptures disclose that God has chosen the poor and the oppressed to be recipients of God's gracious liberation.

However, a review of the preaching at Mt. Zion under my leadership exposed the disconnect between my homiletical precepts and praxis. While my embrace of Black liberation theology was sincere, it did not appear to exercise sufficient influence on my sermonic focus as evident by a simple review of the sermons preached during my tenure. This was an alarming discovery for me and I immediately sought a remedy. My first reaction to this realization was to exert more intentional effort to preaching to communal needs as represented by the sermon, *Worship at the Cross*.

However, the observed lack of liberative preaching (as defined by preaching that focuses on communal liberation from system injustices) was further complicated by the feedback from the congregation through the two congregational surveys and the responses of focus groups. These instruments provided insight on the congregation's assessment of my preaching. The congregation offered both explicit and implicit affirmation of their satisfaction with the level of liberative preaching occurring at the church. In spite of what appeared to be a paucity of liberative preaching, a significant portion of the congregation felt that the level of liberative teaching and preaching was sufficient. Searching for an explanation of these responses allowed me to internalize an important truth. The congregation was defining liberative preaching by more than simply the focus on communal issues of liberation. This is not to suggest that preaching to communal liberation was not important to congregants. Rather, reflection on their feedback suggested that congregants encountered and assessed preaching through the hermeneutical lens of personal interest and experience. Congregants arrived at the preaching moment with a particular need for the experience of liberation rooted in the concrete moments and experiences of oppression in their lives. When preaching

speaks to the call for liberation in these personal places of their lives, this too is liberative preaching.

The first stage of liberative preaching is to preach to the liberation of the individual. (This is attempted in the second sermon included, *Dead Men Walking*.) This perspective is affirmed by the Lazarus text. In that text, Jesus (as proclaimer of the good news) speaks first to Lazarus' particular need for liberation. However, the Lazarus text also encourages the preacher to avoid the temptation of allowing liberative preaching to be myopically anchored in individual needs alone. Such preaching, while important in the homiletical life of the church, is incomplete. The preacher must continue to proclaim the importance of a congregation remaining sensitive to the needs of the community. In the age dominated by prosperity gospel, this realization seems to have been lost. The liberative preacher understands that it is through the lens of the congregants' personal experience of liberation that they make more significant connections to communal needs. The liberative preacher is called upon to continue making explicit the connection between personal liberation and communal liberation. Ever mindful of the Luke 4 text, the preacher persistently brings the congregation's attention back to the mission of the church as expressed by Jesus. The church is called to be liberated through its pursuit of liberation for others.

The final insight emerging from this evaluative process was that liberative preaching must avoid the temptation to believe that the congregation serves only as God's agent of liberation and that the community exists solely as object of those liberative efforts. Such a posture fosters a religious arrogance as preacher and church can be led to believe that they exist solely for the benefit of the community and that the

community exists solely as the recipients of the church's gracious activity. Again, the Lazarus text is instructive. While it is true that the church is an agent of change for its community, the church is also beneficiary of its activity in its community. It is the community, and the church's service to that community, that provides the church with the deeper experience of its own liberation. While the congregation is constituted by those who have been freed from the death and bondage of sin, the congregation only fully experiences its liberation when it is actively engaged in the liberation of its community. In this regard, it is the community which is agent of liberation and the congregation which is object of that liberation. This sense of mutual dependence insures that the church and the community are viewed, by the church, as partners in the other's liberation. This is the dialectic of a homiletical mediation of liberation that drives liberative preaching.

Armed with this deeper and broader understanding of liberative preaching, a preacher is enabled to engage in their homiletical praxis with a richer and profoundly transformative perspective. Lazarus' story provides the homiletician with a framework that helps to guide preaching and service in the church in a manner that benefits both congregation and community life. This is the true goal of preaching and the hope that I bring to Mt. Zion and the Joliet community each day.

APPENDICES

A. CONTEXTUAL SUMMARY: QUALITY OF LIFE REPORT⁵¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary presents key points of an action plan for improving residents' quality of life in the Fourth and Fifth City Council Districts of the City of Joliet. The East Side is the historic core of Joliet. It saw the arrival of French voyagers in the 17th Century, the first mills and kilns in the 1840s, and the construction of downtown Joliet with many of the city's historic buildings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From the 1940s to the 1970s industrial businesses with well paid labor made the East Side boom.

Industrial salaries built the solid housing stock and vital residential neighborhoods that still make up most of the East Side. Industrial jobs also attracted waves of immigrants from Europe, the American South, and Latin America, contributing to the rich ethnic mix among the East Side's current 80,000 residents. But in the 1970s and 1980s the East Side was caught up in the contraction of heavy industry that devastated so many Midwestern American communities; unemployment rose to 26% and left social problems in its wake. For the last 20 years determined actions by City Government, community institutions and organizations, and individual families have steadily improved conditions in the East Side. The results of this process are an interlocking pattern of assets and challenges that affect residents' quality of life.

ASSETS AND PROBLEMS

The East Side of Joliet is the home of approximately 80,000 residents and contains assets that ideally could provide the foundation for a prosperous way of life: median home values that rose nearly 45% from 2002 to 2005, aggregate annual buying power in excess of \$3.4 billion, surrounding industrial corridors that have added some 8 million square feet of plant space per year since 2002. The area also enjoys a rich base of social capital that includes: a junior college and the presence of two universities, the offices of municipal and county government, and cooperative networks of business managers, social service agencies and community organizations.

Yet these communities are still recovering from the loss of thousands of well-paid industrial jobs during the 1980s. The area's current unemployment rate of 8.5% is more than 50% higher than the overall rates of Joliet or Will County, and jobs that do not pay a living wage are growing faster than jobs that do, leading to rising numbers of working poor families reported by more than 20 East Side social service agencies. More than 15 years ago major retailers followed jobs away from the East Side, leaving heavily trafficked commercial streets with ample space for development, and \$250 million per year in lost buying power as residents are forced to leave the neighborhood to find convenient or discounted shopping options for a variety of important goods and

⁵¹ The following summary is designed to provide some concreteness to the discussion of oppression presented throughout this thesis. Below are excerpts from the Joliet Community Quality of Life Report. This report was designed to both identify the challenges confronting the community in which the church exists and provide potential solutions. The excerpts below focus on the the challenges facing the community in several critical areas. For a more expansive examination of both the challenges and the recommendations presented as potential remedies, please see report in its entirety which is located on the City of Joliet's website at <http://www.visitjoliet.org>.

services. Social problems also followed job losses, and while problems in school performance, drug dependency, and crime have been declining for more than ten years, these problems remain prevalent in some neighborhoods.

KEY FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS

Housing

The housing market of this community and the entire City is unique and complex, showing strong appreciation yet still providing affordably priced options in comparison to the rest of Will County. Area residents value home ownership, which they see as crucial to the maintenance of property, commitment to neighborhood improvement, and the economic advancement of individual families. Today about 62% of East Side residents own their own homes. But the community's hopes of increasing home ownership are challenged by a combination of trends.

- Between 2000 and 2005, Joliet's median household income rose 3.5% per year while city properties appreciated at 8.9% per year. Consequently more households are priced out of home ownership.
- Between the 1990 and 2000 censuses, 12 out of 18 East Side census tracts experienced a net loss owner households.
- The rate of property abandonment in the East Side (1.4% of properties) is much higher than the overall rate for Joliet (.9%) or Will County (.5%).
- More than 40% of households moving into the East Side rent, rather than buy a home.
- The East Side housing market is imbalanced, with the demand for housing priced for households earning less than \$50,000 per year being met by rental housing and a deficit of homes for households earning above \$50,000, particularly those earning between \$50,000 and \$125,000 (homes priced between \$132,500 and \$331,249). Consequently, some households are "under housed," meaning they do not have options to step up to a higher- priced product and therefore would need to move out of the East Side as they become more prosperous.

Recreation

The analysis of recreational facilities and their utilization demonstrates that:

- There is a very low level of participation by East Side residents in Park District programs and facilities located outside of the East Side.
- The network of mini parks and neighborhood parks owned by the Park District and the City does not provide as much play space as former NRPA guidelines recommend or as the City requires in new housing development projects. However, existing playground equipment for young children (ages 0-11) is generally in good condition, and additional play space owned by other government agencies or not-for-profit organizations could compensate for much of the deficit of play space.

- Neighborhood and community level parks are not well developed with ball fields, courts, swimming pools, or other desired recreational facilities. The most significant recreational issue expressed by residents and community leaders is the lack of a pool and recreational center within the East Side. In light of community concerns and issues regarding access to facilities and anticipated population growth, a proposal to build a pool and recreation center in the East Side should be thoroughly considered in a master plan for recreation in the East Side. Newer developing areas are better served with park facilities because the City's subdivision approval process requires developers to provide or pay for such facilities.

Transportation

- The East Side is a community with major geographic and transportation assets that can be leveraged to enhance residents' quality of life. However, challenges are entailed in utilizing these assets to their full potential:
- The East Side is surrounded by job sites, shopping centers, recreational and educational opportunities, but residents need efficient transportation access to these assets in order to use them. This access is problematic for households that do not own a car for every adult.
- The East Side enjoys public transportation services including Metra and Amtrak rail lines to Chicago and ten Pace bus routes. However, these services need to be enhanced and supplemented with non-conventional transportation alternatives in order to provide practical options to car travel.
- The East Side and adjoining districts of Joliet contain many destinations that youngsters and adults could reach by walking or biking, to the benefit of the travelers and the community. But the pedestrian and bicycle routes need to be studied and improved to ensure safe and frequent use.

Retail Market Assessment and Development

Assessment of retail development based on three key points:

- There is considerable unmet retail demand in the East Side, estimated at more than \$400 million per year, for a number of key consumer categories. Several distinct retail shortages are apparent – particularly a large grocery store, a produce market, coffee shop, sit-down restaurants, and general house wares – as well as banking and medical services.
- Many sites with substantial retail potential could be developed to capture retail opportunities: These include sites currently vacant, occupied by extraneous industrial uses, or not yet annexed by the city. An assessment of these properties shows that there are ample opportunities for small-scale, mixed-use, infill development on major corridors and at major intersections throughout the East Side, as well as several areas where large-scale retail development could occur once the land was made

suitable for development.

- Neither City programs nor business organizations are focused on the economic development of the East Side as a primary mission. This lack of focused support impairs business retention and business attraction in the East Side. Furthermore, many interview respondents, particularly those that own their own businesses, felt there was a shortage of small business assistance available in the East Side. Barriers are even higher for would-be entrepreneurs for whom English is not their first language.

Industrial Development & Employment

The protection and growth of well-paid industrial jobs has long been a prime concern of Joliet residents and public officials. Stakeholders are properly concerned that the during the last ten years the greatest job growth in Will County has occurred in sectors with the lowest paid jobs and that virtually all social service agencies in the East Side report a need to serve increasing numbers of working poor households. However, research by County institutions has identified steady job growth in four fields that pay salaries above the County's mean household income: medical services, construction, some segments of manufacturing, and logistics.

The growth of the logistics (freight movement) industry is particularly significant because logistics is the basis of the world's new industrial economy structured around supply chains, because Will County has a uniquely advantageous location for logistics operations, and because logistics careers lead to well-paid employment. The City is positioning Joliet and the East Side to reap major benefits from the new logistics-based industrial economy through its proposed development of more than 12,000 acres of industrial parks per the South Side Comprehensive Plan. An extensive system of employment training and placement services, coordinated by the Workforce Investment Board of Will County, is serving thousands of East Side residents annually. Yet, the workforce of the lower-income neighborhoods in the East Side will require further targeted assistance to benefit from planned development and existing services because significant percentages of workers in these neighborhoods have deficits in regard to education, income, transportation, and criminal background.

Land Use

A basically sound pattern of major commercial streets and residential neighborhoods exists in the East Side, and most major infrastructure improvements to support existing land use patterns have been made by the City's Neighborhood Improvement Plan (NIP). However, some existing land use land uses and infrastructure conditions need to change to facilitate the housing, recreation, transportation, retail, and industrial proposals of the QOL Plan, principally:

- Vacant, obsolete, or low-intensity industrial properties are located in proposed commercial corridors where they impede the assembly of land for desirable new retail and mixed use development.
- Extensive land areas coming into new use or soon to be annexed to the city (including the USX and prison sites) provide opportunities for well-

planned developments that should meet some of the East Side's needs.

- The management of Silver Cross Hospital has proposed the relocation of that institution outside of the city limits. This relocation would have major impacts on opportunities and property values within the East Side.
- Modest investments in street design, trails, and public art could enhance distinctive neighborhood and commercial district identities.

Human Capital

More than 80 community and faith-based organizations and public agencies offer a range of human service programs for East Side residents. These organizations strive to integrate their work through collaborative efforts coordinated by the United Way of Will County, the Social Services Council, and other networks that focus on more particular areas of service. Most human services agencies report increased needs for their help in recent years, attributed in part to the stresses experienced by households in which the adults work for less than adequate wages.

Representatives of approximately half of the human service organizations that responded to a survey for the Plan felt that their programs were not well-known in the community. This impression of limited awareness was confirmed in community meetings in which dozens of residents cited community needs for services that are provided through existing agencies. Levels of awareness may also be related to limited leadership by East Side residents in human services organizations. Some 40% of the agencies that responded to the Plan's survey reported that 35% to 90% of their clients were East Side residents, but only a few responding organizations drew as many 15% of their Board Directors from the East Side, and a quarter or respondents had no Directors from the East Side. Despite the coordinated work of some 80 agencies, interviewed directors of human service agencies as well as residents in community meetings repeatedly identified several gaps in service, which were services related to domestic violence, youth development, and mental health.

B. 2012 CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY

I. CHURCH PARTICIPATION

1. How long have you been a member of this church?

A. 1 year or less (3%) B. 2-4 years (8%) C. 5-9 years (1%) D. 10-19 years (12%) E. 20 Years or more (73%)

2. How long does it take you to get to church?

A. 5 minutes or less. (17%) B. 6-10 minutes. (25%) C. 11-15 Minutes. (17%) D. 16-30 minutes (32%) E. 31 minutes or more. (5%)

3. How frequently do you attend worship services?

A. 1-2 yearly. (0%) B. once a month. (1%) C. 2 times a month. (11%) D. 3 times a month (17%) E. 4 times a month or more. (71%)

4. How many ministries do you actively participate in?

A. None (6%) B. 1 (17%) C. 2 (26%) D.3 (23%) E. Four or more. (28%)

5. During the last year, have you invited someone to join you in worship?

A. Yes (77%) B. No (23%)

6. If you answered yes to Question 5, how many persons have you invited to church during the past year?

A. 1 (8%) C.2 (11%) D.3 (19%) E. 4 or more. (55%)

7. What is your racial/ethnic background?

A. White (1%) B. Hispanic (1%) C. Black (96%) D. Asian (0%) E. Other (2%)

8. What is your marital status?

A. Single/Never Married (18%) B. Married. (40%) C. Widowed (19%) D. Separated (9%) E. Divorced (14%)

9. What is your gender?

A. Male (16%) B. Female (83%)

10. What is your age?

A. 19-30 (7%) B. 31-45 (7%) C. 46-60 (21%) D. 61 or Over. (64%)

II. TASKS OF THE CHURCH

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the church in the following categories:

1. Provides Christian Education for children and young adults

A. Very Dissatisfied (4%) B. Dissatisfied (24%) C. Satisfied. (53%) D. Very Satisfied (19%)

2. Provides financial or material support to persons in need in the congregation and the community.

A. Very Dissatisfied (1%) B. Dissatisfied (19%) C. Satisfied. (46%) Very Satisfied (34%)

3. Encourages members to be engaged in social, political, and economic issues as a matter of faith.

A. Very Dissatisfied (1%) B. Dissatisfied (23%) C. Satisfied. (55%) D. Very Satisfied (21%)

4. Provides care to families in crisis (the sick, shut-in, and/or the bereaved).

A. Very Dissatisfied (5%) B. Dissatisfied (23%) C. Satisfied. (42%) D. Very Satisfied (30%)

5. Helps members understand Christian stewardship (tithing of time, talent, or treasure).

A. Very Dissatisfied (8%) B. Dissatisfied (17%) C. Satisfied. (52%) D. Very Satisfied (23%)

6. Supports the global mission of the church.

A. Very Dissatisfied (16%) B. Dissatisfied (26%) C. Satisfied. (48%) D. Very Satisfied (10%)

7. Participates in ecumenical activities.

A. Very Dissatisfied (18%) B. Dissatisfied (31%) C. Satisfied. (41%) D. Very Satisfied (10%)

III. QUALITIES OF THE SENIOR PASTOR

1. Effective Preacher

A. Strongly Disagree (0%) B. Disagree (1%) C. Agree (19%) D. Strongly Agree. (80%) E. Undecided (0%)

2. Effective teacher

A. Strongly Disagree (0%) B. Disagree (1%) C. Agree (21%) D. Strongly Agree. (78%) E. Undecided (0%)

3. Assist members in developing their spiritual life.

A. Strongly Disagree (3%) B. Disagree (6%) C. Agree (23%) D. Strongly Agree. (57%) E. Undecided (11%)

4. Effective planning and leading worship.

A. Strongly Disagree (0%) B. Disagree (0%) C. Agree (41%) D. Strongly Agree. (58%) E. Undecided (1%)

5. Helps members to understand and act on issues of social justice.

A. Strongly Disagree (0%) B. Disagree (6%) C. Agree (33%) D. Strongly Agree. (53%) E. Undecided (8%)

6. Actively participates in ecumenical activities and encourages the church to do the same.

A. Strongly Disagree (6%) B. Disagree (8%) C. Agree (28%) D. Strongly Agree (46%) E. Undecided (12%)

7. Encourages members to understand their faith in practical terms.

A. Strongly Disagree (0%) B. Disagree (1%) C. Agree (33%) D. Strongly Agree (64%) E. Undecided (2%)

C. 2014 CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY

2014 Congregational Survey - Responses (Raw Score)					
Agree/Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree/Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am satisfied with the preaching at my church.	175	36	12	8	0
The events of my week shape my expectations of the Sunday sermon.	119	67	28	5	12
The sermon is relevant to my life.	187	36	3	3	2
I understand how to apply what is preached on Sunday to my life.	176	47	5	1	2
I have changed my actions because of the preaching	134	72	20	4	1
I have changed how I understand things in my life because of the preaching.	156	65	6	2	2
I have found the sermon helpful during difficult moments in my life.	197	24	4	3	3
I expect the sermon to speak to my personal needs.	156	50	13	7	5
I expect the sermon to speak to the needs of the community.	112	71	13	24	11
I expect the sermon to speak to world events.	96	48	48	12	27
I expect the sermon to help make sense of my life.	166	38	20	5	2

2014 Congregational Survey - Responses (Weighted - Sorted by Score)					
Agree/Disagree	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neither Agree/Disagree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
I have found the sermon helpful during difficult moments in my life.	985	96	12	6	3
The sermon is relevant to my life.	935	144	9	6	2
I understand how to apply what is preached on Sunday to my life.	880	188	15	2	2
I am satisfied with the preaching at my church.	875	144	36	16	0
I expect the sermon to help make sense of my life.	830	152	60	10	2
I have changed how I understand things in my life because of the preaching.	780	260	18	4	2
I expect the sermon to speak to my personal needs.	780	200	39	14	5
I have changed my actions because of the preaching.	670	288	60	8	1
The events of my week shape my expectations of the Sunday sermon.	595	268	84	10	12
I expect the sermon to speak to the needs of the community.	560	284	39	48	11
I expect the sermon to speak to world events.	480	192	144	24	27

2014 Congregational Survey - Responses (Cumulative Agree, Neutral, Disagree - Weighted Score)			
Agree/Disagree	Agree/Strongly Agree	Neither	Disagree/Strong Disagree
I expect the sermon to speak to my personal needs.	1081	12	9

2014 Congregational Survey - Responses (Cumulative Agree, Neutral, Disagree - Weighted Score)

I understand how to apply what is preached on Sunday to my life.	1079	9	8
I am satisfied with the preaching at my church.	1068	15	4
I have changed how I understand things in my life because of the preaching.	1040	18	6
I have found the sermon helpful during difficult moments in my life.	1019	36	16
I expect the sermon to speak to world events.	982	60	12
I have changed my actions because of the preaching.	980	39	19
I expect the sermon to help make sense of my life.	958	60	9
The sermon is relevant to my life.	863	84	22
The events of my week shape my expectations of the Sunday sermon.	844	39	59
I expect the sermon to speak to the needs of the community.	672	144	51

2014 Congregational Survey - Responses (Percentages)

Agree/Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree/Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am satisfied with the preaching at my church.	75.8%	15.6%	5.2%	3.5%	0.0%
The events of my week shape my expectations of the Sunday sermon.	51.5%	29.0%	12.1%	2.2%	5.2%
The sermon is relevant to my life.	81.0%	15.6%	1.3%	1.3%	0.9%
I understand how to apply what is preached on Sunday to my life.	76.2%	20.3%	2.2%	0.4%	0.9%
I have changed my actions because of the preaching.	58.0%	31.2%	8.7%	1.7%	0.4%
I have changed how I understand things in my life because of the preaching.	67.5%	28.1%	2.6%	0.9%	0.9%
I have found the sermon helpful during difficult moments in my life.	85.3%	10.4%	1.7%	1.3%	1.3%
I expect the sermon to speak to my personal needs.	67.5%	21.6%	5.6%	3.0%	2.2%
I expect the sermon to speak to the needs of the community.	48.5%	30.7%	5.6%	10.4%	4.8%
I expect the sermon to speak to world events.	41.6%	20.8%	20.8%	5.2%	11.7%
I expect the sermon to help make sense of my life.	71.9%	16.5%	8.7%	2.2%	0.9%

Rate the relative importance to you of these elements of the worship experience (5-Highest and 1-Least)

	5	4	3	2	1
Sunday Sermon	153	53	15	10	0
Altar Call/Prayer	42	108	31	28	22
Fellowship or Community	22	31	112	46	20
Ministry through Music	10	35	31	103	52
Serving During Worship (I.e. ushering)	4	4	42	44	137

2014 Congregational Survey - Responses (Cumulative Agree, Neutral, Disagree - Raw Score)

Agree/Disagree	Agree/ Strongly Agree	Neither	Disagree /Strong Disagree
The sermon is relevant to my life.	223	3	5
I understand how to apply what is preached on Sunday to my life.	223	5	3
I have changed how I understand things in my life because of the preaching.	221	6	4
I have found the sermon helpful during difficult moments in my life.	221	4	6
I am satisfied with the preaching at my church.	211	12	8
I have changed my actions because of the preaching.	206	20	5
I expect the sermon to speak to my personal needs.	206	13	12
I expect the sermon to help make sense of my life.	204	20	7
The events of my week shape my expectations of the Sunday sermon.	186	28	17
I expect the sermon to speak to the needs of the community.	183	13	35
I expect the sermon to speak to world events.	144	48	39

D. 2014 FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

After Sunday morning sermons on two separate Sundays, three groups of ten to fifteen members of the congregation gathered to discuss their experience of the sermon. They were asked to discuss what they expected from coming to church and specifically, what were their expectations of the sermon. They were also asked to discuss whether their expectations were met. Below is a summary of comments provided by the focus group members.

1. PERSONAL/SPIRITUAL EDIFICATION

- I am looking for a spiritual blessing and encounter to give me the strength to face the upcoming week.
- I come expecting to hear a word from God that speaks to me. The songs and fellowship are great, but I need the Word. I want my soul to be fed.
- I expect to grow in my knowledge and understanding of the word through the good sermon and fellowship.
- I expect to be convicted and encouraged through the sermon. I expect to gain wisdom and insight on my life.
- Some spiritual knowledge or clarity. Hear a word from God that connects spiritually to my life in a practical way.
- Looking for Spiritual renewal. Also came with intent of fellowshiping. That God would give a word to the man of God to give me.
- Something to help my spiritual growth and personal relationship with God.
- Some inspiration and motivation to keep on overcoming obstacles in my life. Important that the word have some practical application to my life.
- Expect to gain a clear understanding of the word and how it applies to my life.
- Need some spiritual fuel to be successful throughout the week.
- To be uplifted and strengthened in a way that will help me get through the next week given all that I am encountering in my life.
- To hear the Word in order to be a better person and have a right attitude toward the people of God. Hearing the Word uplifts me.
- Each day is draining. Need fuel to live. Bible study through the week is like mid-week fuel/meal. The Sunday sermon is the main meal. I expect to get refueled/refilled for the week to be sustained throughout the week.
- To give thanks for God getting me through the week. I come to worship and get support from the scriptures/sermon to get what is needed for the week. To be refueled/ filled.
- On Sunday mornings when I get to church, something (be it Pastor or someone sitting next to me) is going to prick my heart with something that will make me stronger than when I came through the doors.

- My expectation is that the sermons will always enlighten and grows us in wisdom and revelation knowledge.
- The sermon provides practical application of the text to my life. It explain the kind of relationship I have with God and how I can overcome the problems I face. I know God is not dead and Pastor breaks it down clearly.
- God can minister to you in your deepest need if you have the faith of a mustard seed. Thankful for his healing and delivering power. Not taking my eyes off Jesus but learning to work and wait on God.

2. SPEAK TO A SPECIFIC PERSONAL SITUATION

- Was bogged down today with situation that recently occurred at a family member's funeral. Also experiencing ankle pain. I came expecting healing from emotional and physical pain.
- I can always expect the Pastor to say something that is going to speak to me personally and that will affect me from a spiritual aspect. It's a given that the Pastor will say something positive that is going to make me feel better about myself or whatever situation that I am going through. Sermon was uplifting and spoke specifically to a current situation that I am dealing with now.
- I remain prayerfully focused on God and expect to get guidance for myself and my family. I am looking to get an understanding of what I went through during the week.
- I got a call about a trip, but didn't have money. Before I got sick, I would always loan money to friends and family if they needed something. But now no one offers me anything. Looking for answers in the sermon.
- I'm dealing with eye sight issues and was afraid to take action. I got the encouragement I needed from the sermon to act.
- I've had issues with the job, finances, granddaughter sick and I needed a word. I got it today. I always believe there is something in the message for me.
- Last week I got a phone call and could have lost everything when my son forgot to give me the message. Sermon reminded me that God knows and is always there.
- Having problems with my 24 year old son. Praying for the patience to understand because he has been so disrespectful. It was on my mind during the sermon. After the sermon I was lifted up and got some relief and I know what to do and to expect. I know that things won't immediately change. But I have hope about what is possible. I am just relieved and happy.
- Depending on God's intervention on health issues I am facing. Was looking to hear some encouragement. I waited and listened to God and he told me to go to Northwestern. I am so happy that I was obedience. The sermon encouraged me.

- Heard bad news this week. Looking for some spiritual up lift. Sermon reminded me that God wants to free me from what holds me back. God does not want me to grow satisfied but to expect more and to actively pursue more for my life. Can't just sit there and wait. God wants action.
- Been tested in my obedience and faithfulness. I realize that I have been sitting, waiting, and not doing what God has told me to do. I have a role to play in my own deliverance.
- A sermon from Pastor Latimore is like he knows my story and like he talking to me. Leaving to go to church just ready to hear Pastor and expecting a word and expecting the word to directly impact my life.
- God would give me a word to help with my marriage because my husband came to church. Dealing with children and received a word about being patient with them. Every Sunday Pastor re-enforces what I can do in my situation. It makes me be stronger.
- Had medical problems that were causing lots of pain and wasn't asking God what to do. Come to church sometimes not realizing that we are looking for guidance through Pastor's sermon. When we hear his sermon we realize God is talking to us about our lives and problems.
- Week went well until last night but the word today told me to hold on and that change will come. God and I are the solution. There are things I have to do but the message also told me to trust God to work it out.
- Issues with family members are weighing me down. Trying to stay encouraged and trust God. I had surgery on my leg and the first week I could barely walk. Looking for the sermon to speak to me.
- In order for me to make it, I must believe. Especially since my husband passed back in 1992 and with the help of my church family I believe God has my back.
- Sermon made me realize that delayed is not denied. It may not happen quickly but change can come. It seems like pastor speaks directly into my life a lot of times.
- Made me think critically about my relationship with God and evaluating the actions of my life. The sermon is touching my life situation. Always seems to touch my experiences.
- I'm just like that man sitting by the water waiting for the water to be troubled. I put myself in his place. My week was unbelievably full. Scripture had me take a look at me and I don't want to wait too long to make a change.

3. FELLOWSHIP AND COMMUNITY

- The love and warmth of fellowship with others is important to me. Most of my week I am alone and the fellowship on Sunday's sustains me. It gives me the ammunition I need to deal with the world and issues at work.

- To fellowship with church family and receive the word in a way I can relate.
- To fellowship with fellow believers, to worship God for who He is and what He stands for in our lives. I feel drained during the week from people, situations, etc. Expectation also is to be refilled to make through the next week.

4. SPEAK TO COMMUNAL NEEDS

- Last week the election is what my mind was on. Needed to strengthen my belief and faith. To believe in spite of what I saw in the results.
- Sermon helped me to understand that regarding the election results, if we trust, believe, and are willing to work, we can overcome any obstacle. Where I am right now is where God has me even though it may not look so rosy. But I do not have to remain here.
- The sermon challenges us to move on. Made me feel good but encouraged me to move on. Why do some people hear what Pastor is preaching but still won't change, yet some are changing for the better. Must remember that maybe Pastor is planting the seed and change will come later. Brother had to go through something before he would change his ways.

5. NO EXPECTATION

- When I attend church, I don't come focusing on any certain thing – having a focus on one thing could lead to me missing the whole point of the sermon. By being open minded, you're able to receive what God wants you to know through the pastor's sermon.

E. SERMON - WORSHIP AT THE CROSS⁵²

INTRODUCTION

If you know that God has been good to you, now is the time for you to lift up your voice in thanksgiving unto God! For there are many of us present on this day that know the only reason we are here is because of the goodness of Jesus and all that he has done for us. I wish I had some worshippers in the house that were willing to testify that it is simply by the grace of God that we are here this afternoon! Let us give thanks to God who has gathered us together on this day. Let us give thanks to a God that thought enough of us to wake us from our slumber this morning! As the saints of old would say, "I am so grateful that my bed was not my cooling board and my bed sheets were not my winding cloth." What that means is, I am glad that Jesus woke me up this morning, started me on my way, and put me in my right mind. I don't know about you, but I am grateful for what God has done for us! If you are grateful to God, let the angelic host hear your praise.

My brothers and sisters, I want to share some reflections on a familiar passage of scripture found in the letter Paul writes to the church at Ephesus. This is a book that we have been studying over the last few weeks at Mt. Zion. The passage we are looking at this afternoon is found in the sixth chapter of Ephesians and the tenth verse. And the word of God declares the following to us:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.
11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly

⁵² This is the transcript of a sermon delivered at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. The sermon has only been edited in places to improve readability. The sermon reflects the sermonic moment as spoken word and accordingly does not always follow the conventions of written discourse.

places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. [Eph. 6.10-13 NKJV]

We have assembled today under crystal clear blue skies. The warm rays of a lingering summer sun shine brightly on us. The rapturous and joyous sounds of unified worship have filled this place, transforming Silver Cross Stadium into heaven's atrium and filling the sky with the sound of our praise to such a degree that I believe the angelic hosts are looking over heaven's bannister and listening to our worship with rapt attention. I encourage you, for just a moment, to take a good look around you. Look to your left and your right. Look in front of you and behind you. Witness the breadth, the depth, and the richness of God's kingdom. All around you are men and women of different denominations, churches, and backgrounds. All around you are men, women and families from different parts of this city and region. All of them have gathered here today just to participate in this moment of worship. And while you might be sitting next to someone who is not a part of your local church, I want to assure you that whether they belong to your church or not, they are a part of the kingdom of God. Today, unlike any other Sunday, you are in the midst of a magnificent picture of the kingdom!

I want you to take a look and see what church really looks like. I don't mean what a particular ministry looks like but rather what the genuine church looks like. For what makes this monumental moment meaningful for us is not simply the diverse particularity that is present in this place. Rather it is the universal truth to which our presence gives testimony. That truth is that which unites us is greater than all of our differences. Each of us stands here wrapped in the common cords of a shared experience. That experience, to which many of us would gladly testify, is that we are the children of God!

We are simply sinners saved by grace. You might not know my name. You might not know where I worship. You might not know where I am from. But here's what I want you to hear clearly this afternoon: I am a sinner saved by grace and we are united under the blood of Jesus!

Look and see living testimonies all around you. You are surrounded by a resounding truth presented to you in the lives of the men and women around you: Jesus still saves. Is there anybody here willing to testify that they are a living witness that Jesus still saves? I want you to know this afternoon that Jesus still saves anybody! Jesus still saves anytime! Jesus still saves anywhere! Jesus still saves! If you don't hear anything else that's said to you in this place on this day, hear me clearly, Jesus Saves! If you came here looking for hope; if you came here looking for victory; if you came here looking for deliverance; if you came here looking for a way out; I have the answer for you today. The answer is found in a man by the name of Jesus. There are some of us who have gathered here under these skies to proclaim with all of our voice and our power that we are not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are some of us who have gathered here to let the world know that we are here by the power of a living God. We came to let the world know that Jesus still saves! Because of the power of the blood of Jesus, we stand here unified as the church. We stand here united in the blood of a risen Savior.

But, even as we have gathered in this stadium, while the sound of our praise is still echoing in the air, if you listen carefully, you can detect the aggrieved and agitated murmurings of the community that lives in the shadow of this place. Even as we stand here and worship, there are men and women who live within the shadow of the

celebration, who look on us from a distance with concern and consternation, and dare I say, outright contempt. As we lift our voices in reckless abandonment, you can hear the cries of the men and women of our community growing louder and louder with each passing day. They watch not only this celebration but every celebration that occurs at our local ministries every Sunday. They watch our tongue talking, Holy Ghost filled, sanctified selves at our jobs and in our neighborhoods. They watch from a distance and they wonder to themselves: If the God we have gathered here to worship today is so worthy of our adoration and exaltation; if the God that we boldly profess is so present when we lift up our voices that we can feel him moving through the trees, and the wind, and the breeze; if the God we declare today is listening so attentively to our petition, why does this God appear so absent in our community?

There are those standing outside of this gathering, who are wondering: When we get through with all of our shouting on Sunday morning, why is the God that we have all this energy about not present in the midst of the difficulties of the communities in which our churches operate? Every Sunday that we gather, we stand in the midst of the residual fragments of a broken community. Every Sunday we worship in the barren fields of our community and we struggle to produce a harvest from ground saturated with the blood of our children. Children whose lives have been callously cut short by one another or, far too often, tragically taken by those who swore to protect and serve them. In the midst of these tragedies our communities cry out, "Where is your God when another young life gets taken?" We stand here in worship and celebration while our community continues to lift up their voices in lament.

We live in communities torn apart by the issues of domestic violence. Too many

of our young women's lives have been destroyed, often through acts of violence perpetrated by frustrated young men who themselves are often trapped in an endless cycle of despair. It is a despair born from their captivity to a criminal justice system that is far from just. A system that uses felonies as a tool for political disenfranchisement. Or worse yet, as a means for ensuring that this capitalist system continues to feed off of their cheap labor. A system that Michelle Alexander rightly calls the New Jim Crow. This community is wondering where is our God when injustice runs rampant in our communities.

We worship in communities where our children are failing in an educational system that is struggling under the burden of trying to educate children that arrive at school too hungry, too tired, too ill, or too traumatized to function socially, intellectually or spiritually within a learning environment. "Where is your God?", asks teachers trying to educate children who are literally walking out of war zones. I don't just mean the war zones constituted by the streets where they live. I mean the war zones in their homes. If you listen closely, you can hear these families wondering, while we are doing all of our shouting, "Where is your God?"

You don't need me to rattle off all of the ills that plague the communities in which we worship: The woeful lack of economic activity and jobs within our community. The poor who struggle simply to sustain themselves while the privileged and powerful wonder why the poor don't just pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The rich conveniently ignore that they have grown fat in a system that has been rigged for their benefit for decades. The willful and intentional disenfranchisement of men and women of color of their political power at the voting booth. Our children, generation after

generation, are trapped in despair while we go back and forth to church, having a good time but our community remaining the same.

This is the community in which we worship. In an African-American community that has become so despondent about its own destiny that its hopelessness has mutated into a hardened apathy robbing the descendants of men and women who once had the courage to stand in the face of dogs and hoses and even death itself while fighting for their freedom of the will and the power to do the same. Now their sons, daughters, and grandchildren no longer have the fortitude to drive to the polls or the church, to reshape their own future. These are the men and women, standing in the ashes of dreams and hopes too long deferred that look on our gathering asking: “Where is your God? Where is your victory and where is your power? When will your religion result in our rescue? For it is clear that Olivia Pope has left the building and no one in white hats is coming to our deliverance.”

We should not be too quick in dismissing their critique or shrugging off their concerns as though they are without merit. For it is true that at times, we have been so heavenly focused that we have been of little earthly good. We have been so busy making names for ourselves and our ministries or foolishly competing with one another - trying to see if we could keep up with the latest and greatest ministry trick seen on TV. We have been so busy shouting about the life to come, that we have failed to live fully in the life God has granted us in the here and now.

PROBLEM NOT GOD

But while the concerns of our community hold great truths for the church, I am glad to report to you today that the problem is not God and the answer to this crisis is

not that we lose our praise or our worship. We cannot lose our focus on the life to come. We should keep our eyes on the horizon and keep our churches filled with joyful anticipation of the life to come.

But we must remember: While we have a hope greater than this life, we can feel the glory of heaven pressing itself onto our lives right now. We are to live, in our present, that hope that is yet to come. We have got to understand that the glory of heaven is so great that it is not simply waiting for a time to come, rather it is pressing itself on our present. While we shout and we sing, while we look to the heavens for the coming of the King, we must remember that God has not saved us simply for God's future glory. God is calling on the church to live into that glory right now. This is what is meant by, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!" [Matthew 6.10]

And to a community, families, and individuals who desperately cry out for deliverance, victory, and change, we - the church - have to be the clarion call in the midst of darkness. We must replicate the very power of God as found in Genesis 1 and call light into the midst of darkness. This is our calling. We should not abandon moments of celebration. We should not cease praising God. We should not give into the darkness around us. We should follow the admonition of Paul as found in the words he so powerfully penned in that darken jail cell: We are to stand!

STAND UP

This is the job of the church. This is our calling. If these moments of worship are to have any meaning and if they are to have any lasting impact long after the benediction, we are to stand in the face of the onslaught of the enemy seeking to

destroy our community right before our eyes. It is the church's responsibility to take a stand for justice here and now. Your responsibility and mine is to stand and not simply plead the blood of Jesus from the cool confines of our cathedrals. We are to stand and finally declare through our words and deeds that enough is enough.

We have not gathered here to rest in empty praise. We have gathered here because we believe that those who are covered by the blood of the risen Savior have the power to change this community. We do not have to wait till we get to heaven. We can bring heaven down to this place! The question is: Are we willing to stand? Will we stand for the disenfranchised and the dispossessed? Will we stand for the powerless and the poor? Will we stand for our young men and our young women? Will we stand for our families and our communities? Time for us to take a stand!

I just want to say to the community that might be listening in on this moment of worship and questioning its power or efficacy for their lives, that our God is alive and well and not absent from this community. It is time for those who are the children of God to show this community that the God we pray to is present in the church that stands for justice. This is what Paul has declared to the church at Ephesus. You are fighting powers and principalities but here's what you must understand. It is time for you to take a stand. I wonder if the church, present in this stadium, is ready to take a stand. It is time for the church to declare before this community and to the systemic injustice present in it, "Enough is enough! Not another life, not another family, not another child shall be lost to the violence and evil of this world." Time to stand on the solid rock that is Christ. Time to lift up our voice and proclaim the liberty God desires for this community.

So, the question confronting us today is simple: Are we willing to take a stand? Are we willing to declare that we are not going to allow the petty parochial pursuit of personal or institutional fame to distract the church from coming together to perform the liberative work of God? Time for us to stop shaking our heads and wringing our hands at the problems that confront our community. We don't need another organization. We don't need another conference. What we need is for the people of God to declare that, "We believe God and are going to fight until the chains of oppression, depravation and poverty have been broken." Will you stand with us? Will you take a stand for this community? Will you stand for the incarcerated? Will you stand for the abused? Will you stand for the neglected? Will you stand for the captive? Will you stand for the unemployed? Will you stand for the exploited? Will you stand for the neglected? Now is the time to take a stand!

Stand on the word of God and declare, "I believe what Jesus said. I am set free. I'm free indeed. Not just me, but this community shall also be free. Through the power of God, working through the church, we can all be free!" We will stand and fight until all of God's children can sing the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

F. SERMON - DEAD MAN WALKING⁵³

1 Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. 2 And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, 3 who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, 4 because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. 5 And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. 7 And he cried out with a loud voice and said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me."

8 For He said to him, "Come out of the man, unclean spirit!" 9 Then He asked him, "What is your name?"

And he answered, saying, "My name is Legion; for we are many." 10 Also he begged Him earnestly that He would not send them out of the country.

11 Now a large herd of swine was feeding there near the mountains. 12 So all the demons begged Him, saying, "Send us to the swine, that we may enter them." 13 And at once Jesus gave them permission. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine (there were about two thousand); and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned in the sea. [Mark 5.1-13]

INTRODUCTION

Brothers and sisters, I have noticed as I have become a little bit older that I am no longer the man I once was. I am not as fast as I used to be. I don't jump quite as high as I used to jump. I can't eat what I used to eat. I can't stay up as long as I used to stay up. Gradually, with each additional year, there are more changes that I notice. For example, it recently dawned upon me that when I was a young man, I used to love going to horror movies. I would be the first to see Friday the 13th or Halloween or the slasher movies. I would be in a front seat with my popcorn watching gleefully.

⁵³ This is the transcript of a sermon delivered at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. The sermon has only been edited in places to improve readability. The sermon reflects the sermonic moment as spoken word and accordingly does not always follow the conventions of written discourse.

However, as I have grown older, I can't do horror movies anymore. I guess as you get older you realized there's too much real horror that happens in life. If you want to be horrified, go watch the news. So, it was with some concern that I encountered this text. It struck me that the scene that unfolds feels like something out of a horror movie. It has all of what you would normally see emerge in such a movie.

The text describes the disciples stepping out of the small boat onto dry ground. You may remember that the disciples have had quite a traumatic evening before they show up on land. In the previous chapter of the book of Mark, we are told that the disciples started out on a fishing trip. These men are experienced fishermen. They are familiar with navigating the complexities of sea travel. However, on this occasion, after launching their boat into the sea, the winds begin to pick up, and the waves began to batter the sides of the ship. The biblical record tells us that these experienced fishermen did all they could to navigate the storm but, in spite of their best efforts, they struggled. The ferocity of the storm frightened them and they grew concerned that the storm would overtake them. They began to panic among themselves. But, the scripture also tells us that Jesus was asleep on the boat. In their desperate condition, the disciples wake Jesus from his rest saying, "Master, carest thou not that we are about to perish." [Mark 4.38]

Jesus arises and goes to the bow of the ship. If you would allow me to use my spiritual imagination, I can envision the wind, like a naughty child caught in the midst of mischief, immediately recognizing things were about to change as Jesus appeared. As Jesus stood there, I am confident that the storm would have happily moved on its merry way, but so those gathered around Jesus would understand the power he had, Jesus

speaks to the winds and the waves and says, "Peace, be still!" While Jesus' words were still echoing in the atmosphere, the wind packs its bags and walks away. The waves return to their peaceful slumber and stillness descends on the sea. The disciples say to themselves, "What kind of man is this that even winds and the waves obey his will?" What a dramatic moment with the Master! One can only imagine the disciples' nerves are frayed as they finally make it safely to land. I am sure a few of them were looking forward to the firmness of earth under their feet as they stepped ashore. But, no sooner do they arrive at what appears to be a place of safety, a crazy man comes running out of the tombs. As the demoniac of this text approaches Jesus and the disciples, you can imagine the scene that unfolds. His hair is matted on his head. He is covered in dirt and filth. He stinks to high heaven. He runs and screams at the top of his lungs as Jesus and the disciples come to land. The man, battered and bruised, wounded and weary, stumbles toward Jesus. The text paints a picture of this man that is truly heartbreaking. He is alive but just barely. He is the walking picture of death. His life has become so disrupted by what ails him that he has been exiled from those who love him. He is forced to live in the tombs. He has been banished from the community, fellowship, and relationships that make life worth living. He is alone and struggling with a condition that he cannot tame.

The magnitude of his problems jump out at you from the text. He lives what I would refer to as a distorted life. What do I mean by that? The Bible tells us that he is living in the midst of tombs. We know that the tombs are a place not for the living but for the dead. The fact that he is there, in the midst of these tombs, suggest that he is living in a place where his very living conditions speak against his purpose. He was

meant for something different but now finds himself living in conditions that are constantly saying to him that his life and his purpose has become distorted. His environment testifies that he is not what or where he should be. Every time he stumbles over the headstones all around him; every time he falls into the dirt; every time he gathers himself at morning, noon, and night; his very living conditions speak against his purpose. He is truly in a terrible state.

CHAINED BY THOSE THAT LOVE HIM

The third verse of the text tells us that no one could bind him, not even with chains. The fourth verse says no one could tame him. The chains that once held him bound have been broken into pieces. Can you imagine that this is somebody's son, somebody's daddy, somebody's brother, somebody's husband? He is not disconnected from community, yet those who love him can't help him. Those who love him have seen him so enveloped in this condition that no matter how they've tried to rescue him, they have been unsuccessful. Those who love him did not start out with chains. Can you see his loved ones first trying an intervention? Maybe trying to talk with him about getting some help? Yet, as his condition grew worse and worse, as he became more violent to himself and those around him, those that loved him not only had to put him out, but at some point they thought that the best thing they could do for him was to chain him. How horrible your condition must be for the only thing those who love you can come up with is to bind you with chains.

HURTING YOURSELF

And as if this were not enough, the demoniac had a third condition in the description provided. We are told that he spends his time in the tombs cutting himself

and crying out. Can you imagine what he must look like at this point? Body filled with scars, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. His arms and legs are scarred and bruised. Some of the scars are old and some scars are new. Some of the scars are healed and some of the scars are unhealed. All because he has been cutting himself. This is physical evidence of the personal pain he is going through. What's even more tragic about his condition is not simply the presence of the wounds but the knowledge that they are self-inflicted. He isn't simply hurt or injured, but he has hurt himself because he has a condition in his life that he cannot cure. This is the tragic picture of the man that emerges from this text and that we are greeted with at the beginning of the fifth chapter of Mark. He is the walking dead. Now, you may believe that there is great distance between you and this man, but I would offer that things are not as different between you and this tragic figure as it might first seem.

LEADING A DISTORTED LIFE

Whether you realize it or not, we are surrounded by the walking dead this morning. It may not be immediately apparent to you because you can't always see it by what people are wearing. You can't always see it by what people say, or how they sound, or how they smell, or how they look. Yet, we are surrounded by the walking dead. There are walking dead in our homes, our communities and our jobs. People are going through the motions of life but there's no life in them. Some are getting up on Monday mornings and going to jobs they cannot stand. They are sitting in relationships they can barely tolerate but they have gotten used to being in that condition. They realize that something is missing in their existence. Is this your story? I know you might not want to agree with this assessment too quickly but ask yourself: Is there an

absence of joy in your life? Is there an absence of peace in your life? Is there an absence of the kind of love that we talk about Sunday after Sunday? Are you just going through the motions of life? Well, it may be that you are a part of the walking dead!

There are walking dead among us. Some of us have become convinced that survival is all we should expect instead of an abundant life. You might be asking yourself: How do I check to see whether or not I am the walking dead? Well, apply the same measures we see emerge from this text with the demoniac. Ask yourself:

Am I living a distorted life? When I look around my life, is my life trying to tell me that I am out of place? Are there conditions in my life that speak against a God-given purpose and liberty for my life? Have I just gotten used to the struggles and oppression in my life? Have I been frightened because there have been times in my life when I have heard the call of God on me to live above and beyond the conditions I find myself anchored in? Have I run from the divine possibility that I can and should live free? Have I refused to accept God's declaration that I should not give in or give up? Have I been too scared to step forward because it would move me out of my comfort zone? Have I gotten used to just going through life but I know this is not what God wants for me? When I look around my life do I keep seeing stuff that speaks against God's destiny for my life? Well, the demoniac is in such a condition and he is the walking dead. Is it possible that you might be as well?

CHAINED BY THOSE THAT LOVE HIM

A second sign of the walking dead is that the demoniac's friends felt it necessary to chain and constrain him. I wonder if when you look around your social circle; when you begin to go down your friends list on Facebook; when you look at your followers on

Twitter; when you examine who it is you picked the phone up to call when you found yourself in the midst of crisis; Are these people really helping you? What was the outcome from the last piece of advice they gave? When you listened to certain sisters and brothers, and you followed their counsel, how did things turn out? Is it at all possible that some of us are surrounded by people who are doing us more harm than good? Are you surrounded by people who seek to constrain what God is doing in your life? Are you surrounded by people who tell you what you can't be and what you can't do? Are you surrounded by those who suppress the expectations you have for your life? Do they tell you that you ought to be satisfied with what you are? Are you being bound by small-minded counsel that doesn't understand the possibilities that God has for your life? Well, I am here to declare that God can free you from the chains that bind you. If the people around you cannot speak life to you, you may want to consider that maybe you are among the walking dead!

HURTING YOURSELF

You are the walking dead if you are surrounded by those who instead of freeing you are chaining you. But also notice the last element mentioned in the text. The man is cutting himself. He is crying out of the pain of his condition, but he is also causing his pain. One of the last questions this text presents that will help you determine if you might be the walking dead is: Am I engaged in self-destructive behavior? All of us, if we are honest for just a moment, can identify moments of self-destructive behavior. We have been engaged in actions that have created moments of difficulty in our lives. Everything that's happened to us hasn't been somebody else's fault. We may blame people, or our upbringing, or the system in which we exist, or our supervisor at work.

We may blame our education or lack thereof, or maybe the teacher that didn't like you in middle school. But the truth is that some of the problems we encounter in life are born of the mess we made ourselves.

Are you engaging in perpetual behavior that harms you? When you look over the course of your life, do you see patterns emerging in your life where you are making the same bad decisions over and over and over again? Do you run into the same situations and find yourself in the same mess, not because people are against you or seeking to harm you but because you keep cutting and harming yourself? The man in this text is in a situation where his environment speaks out against his purpose. That's how we know he is the walking dead. The man was surrounded by friends who eventually end up binding him. He is the walking dead. The man is cutting and harming himself. In spite of any desire for a better life he is harming himself. He is the walking dead.

Now, these three conditions are bad enough all by themselves. I wish this was the worst thing happening to the man in the text. However, there is a far more powerful and painful reality that emerges from this text. It is not just that he is harming himself, and not that he is living in conditions that speak against his purpose, and not that even those who love him are binding him. What is even worst is the fact that he has now gotten to the point where he believes his condition is normal.

It's one thing to find oneself in these types of conditions. It's an entirely different problem when you have finally gotten to the point where living under these conditions has become normal for you. It's one thing if you are cutting and hurting yourself, but it is entirely another thing when you begin to believe this is just the way your life should

be. It's one thing to be chained and constrained, but it is an entirely different thing when you get to the point where you are convinced that this is as good as your life is going to get. This is the real tragedy in this text and this is the tragic circumstance some among us face. Some here may not raise their hands and will not say amen, but this is the problem you confront. You have been in the same mess for so long that you think this is the way your life is supposed to be. You have accepted your condition and think to yourself: I am not supposed to expect anything more from life. I am not supposed to get anything more out of life. I am supposed to live in these impoverished and deprived conditions. I am supposed to be trapped here and there is nothing more I ought to expect. Well, I am just here to proclaim the good news of the gospel to you on this morning! This is not the way your life was meant to be. Don't you let abnormal become your normal! Don't you believe that God has brought you this far in life to leave you in the midst of this mess. God wants something different for your life! I know there is something on the inside of you that is disquieted and ill at ease about what you are and where you are in life. Something on the inside is pressing against your bosom to let you know that this is not how things are supposed to be. When the abnormal becomes your normal, you begin to think you are suppose to get use to abusive relationships. You get use to not being loved! You get use to not being appreciated and taken for granted. You get used to being the tail and not the head. You get use to having bad credit or being broke. You get use to bouncing from job to job. You get use to living in these conditions. You get use to living with people who take more than they give. You get use to this kind of mess. Yet, Jesus is declaring that this is not normal!

In the first verse, it tells me all the good news I need. The Bible tells me that

Jesus showed up. The text suggests that no matter what the magnitude of the man's problem, no matter what the pervasiveness of the power against him, no matter how long he had been trapped in that graveyard, no matter how many times he had cut himself, no matter how messed up his mind, Jesus got off the boat and stepped onto dry ground and Jesus made the difference. Is this your testimony? Can you proclaim today: I know what its like to be trapped. I know what its like to be changed. I know what its like to be held captive but to then have Jesus show up. Jesus was the answer that I needed. When I was still crazy Jesus showed up. When I was still in the tomb Jesus showed up! That boy from the manger; the one who hung on Calvary; the one who shed his blood for us; Jesus! Lily of the valley and bright and morning star. Friend to the friendless; mama to the motherless; father to the fatherless! Jesus! Jesus showed up! I was at my weakest, but Jesus showed up! I was about to throw in the towel, but Jesus showed up! I was about to fall but Jesus showed up! When Jesus shows up it changes everything.

Now, the text tells us that Jesus shows up and it also says the man came running to Jesus. The man cries out and says, "Lord, don't torment us and don't destroy us." In essence, the demons ask the Lord not to take action against them. He came running to Jesus even though he had something inside of him that was resisting Jesus. Like the demoniac, some of us have had this same experience. You came running to Jesus because you were wrestling against your condition! When you got up in the morning, you kept saying to yourself, "I don't know how to get out of this, but I know life ought to be different than this!" As you stood over your children's bed, you said to yourself, "I don't know how to fix this, but I know things ought to be different!"

You looked at your spouse you knew that you needed help with your relationship. Something caused you to declare, "I don't know how to fix this, but I know it should be better!" Have you ever had that feeling? When you knew your life was broken; when you knew you were stuck in a situation that you could not get yourself out of; when you knew there were some things in your life that were binding you! In your midnight hour, you couldn't sleep because something in your spirit kept saying, "This is not how life is supposed to be! I am supposed to be better than this. God has something more for me. I can't give up now!"

The man cannot help himself. He must get to Jesus. I am grateful the man runs to Jesus. I am grateful he does so in the condition that he is in. It lets us know that we don't have to get ourselves fixed before we come to Jesus. Can you imagine what the demons are saying to the man? "Listen, you better not go to Jesus! Don't you run toward Jesus! You know the mess that you are in! You know how messed up your life is! You know what you have done to yourself and your loved ones! Remember, you ran out on your family! You left your kids! You have been running around in this desert place all this time, cutting yourself and harming yourself. You are not fit to be with Jesus! But something about the presence of Jesus caused the man to believe that he might not be right, but if he could just get to Jesus he would be alright. He could just come as He was.

And you can declare the same on this morning. This morning, your spirit is telling you, "I can just come to him as I am. I know everything is not right with me. I know what I am struggling with. I know what holds me bound, but if I could just come to Jesus, I can be free! You can come just as you are. All Jesus needs to know is that

you want the help! The chains can drop from your hands today. Just say the word!

Lord, I can be free. Today is your day. Now is your time. You don't have to go back to the tombs this morning. You can be free today.

G. SERMON - FREE AT LAST⁵⁴

Sermon Text: Luke 4.16-21

16 So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. 17 And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

18 “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;

19 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” 20 Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

INTRODUCTION

It is easy, my brothers and sisters, for us to arrive at this moment of celebration, after the events of last Sunday, feeling a little triumphant. This is not the first time that God has blessed the works of our hands. Our's is a rich history of God consistently manifesting God's presence and power in our midst. While we know that all of the glory belongs to God, we shouldn't take the particularity of God's presence in this place for granted. God could have manifested God's power in any number of ways, but God chose to manifest it through us. God has chosen to use Mt. Zion as a role model ministry. God chose us as a vessel for demonstrating what remains possible, for any ministry, with God. We ought to celebrate God's presence, not only here at Mt. Zion, but throughout this community in bringing about good for the men and women of Joliet through God's children gathered in this place. Yet, even in this moment of celebration, it

⁵⁴ This is the transcript of a sermon delivered at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. The sermon has only been edited in places to improve readability. The sermon reflects the sermonic moment as spoken word and accordingly does not always follow the conventions of written discourse.

is equally important for us not to lose sight of our true mission.

It is important that we remember why we are the church and what it means to be the church, particularly in moments of success. Often it is not failure that is most problematic for a ministry, but rather managing success. While reflecting on what God has uniquely done in this place, we must not lose sight of what God has actually called us to do. God has not called us to dedicate ourselves to building a fiefdom or a kingdom. God is not interested in the size of our facilities as our telos. God is not interested in our accumulation of power, influence, or resources. These things are not an indication of whether God's favor rests on us. How do we know this? There are some of us who have been members of churches far smaller but we know that God was present in those places. There are some of us who have seen churches that may not have the financial resources that Mt. Zion currently has. Those churches may not have had air-conditioning or heating units, but when you stepped across the threshold of those churches, because the presence of God was in that place, you knew that God's favor rested on that place. At Mt. Zion, we have great ministries, great musicians, and great music, but some of us have been to churches where there was no drummer or organist. All that could be heard echoing in the sanctuary was the sound of clapping hands or stomping feet. Yet, in the midst of that naturally born musical celebration, one could feel worship emanating within that place reminding us that the presence of God is not tied to tangible things such as buildings or musicians. This is not to suggest that God might not bless ministries tangibly, but that God gives bigger buildings so that God's children can do bigger ministry. God does allow churches to have multiple services, but not so they can brag about their number of services, or the congregants on

the pews. What is more important is whether the lives of people are being changed in that place. God blesses ministries but requires that we keep our eye on the mission and not simply the blessings. So, in the midst of being blessed we must always remember our mission, particularly in a world filled with religious distractions.

We live at a time where the concept of the church's mission has become blurred. If you constructed your understanding of the mission of the church simply by watching the reality shows or televised Sunday morning worship services, you would end up with a sense of the mission and purpose of the church at odds with the biblical record. That is why I am grateful for the text before us. It reminds us that our mission is Jesus' mission and Jesus' mission remains our mission. The beauty of this Lukan text is that it makes it clear to us that Jesus was clear about his mission. One of the wonderful things about Jesus is that no matter where or when you glance at his life, you see a man who understood what God had called him to do and who was relentless in his pursuit of God's will. Everything that Jesus did, he did in obedience unto God and commitment to his mission.

He was empowered, as the text before us tells us, by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus and rested upon him because of the mission God had for his life. This is an interesting introduction to the ministry of Jesus. It differs from the way the other Gospel writers depict the beginning of Jesus' mission. Luke emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the anointing and empowering Christ. If you were to read the beginning of the fourth chapter, you would see that it was the Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness for the moment of testing that would occur. You would witness the power of God ministering to Jesus after that testing. Now, in the sixteenth verse we hear from

the lips of Jesus that it is the Spirit that has anointed him. It is the Spirit that has empowered him for this moment. This acknowledgment of the role of the Spirit is important because Luke is also going to pen the Book of Acts. In Acts, we see the Holy Spirit active in the birth of the church and empowering the early church for its mission. Luke draws a direct connection between Jesus' mission and our mission. The power behind both is the power of God through the Spirit. Just as the Spirit rests upon Jesus, the Spirit rests upon the church. Just as the Spirit anoints Jesus, empowering him for his mission, the Spirit anoints and empowers us. We are serving the same God and empowered by the same Spirit. When we look at what Jesus' mission was we know that's our mission as well. Just as Jesus had the power to perform his mission, we have that power as well.

Notice what the text tells us. Jesus is absolutely clear about what he has come to do. He has come to preach the gospel, or good news, to the poor. He was sent to heal the broken-hearted. He came to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. His mission is to set at liberty those who are oppressed. What is most intriguing about this litany of descriptions of the people that are the focus of Jesus' mission is that it is likely many of them would not have been present in the synagogue on that day. The synagogue would have been filled with many of the religious elite. In this moment of worship it is unlikely that many poor, broken-hearted, or captives were there. We know that the blind would not have been in the synagogue and many of the oppressed would have been more likely begging and simply trying to survive rather than being in the synagogue. So, it seems odd for Jesus to stand in front of the religious elite and share with them that the ones he has come for stand outside this moment of

worship.

Jesus proclaims that he has come with good news for those who have been left out and left behind. Jesus has come to proclaim the power of God to the neglected and the outcast. Jesus has come to speak a word of life to the powerless and the dispossessed. These are the ones that Jesus has come for and he makes his mission absolutely clear. I am grateful Jesus does not enter the synagogue and say, “I have come that I might pastor the largest church! I have come that I might have Deacons and Trustees amassed across the front pews of the church. I have come that I can have a fancy car in my driveway or appear on the beaches of Galilee or the Preachers of L.A.” No, this is not the mission of Jesus! He has not come to make something of himself. He has come to serve those who need him most. The question this text painfully presents to those of us who would follow this example of Jesus is: If this is what Jesus came to do, shouldn't this also be what we've come to do?

I know there are so many things that can lay claim to our attention, but what Jesus is saying in this text is, “I came to make a difference in the lives of those who need it most!” Our mission, brothers and sisters, is to proclaim the good news to the poor. To those who are poor monetarily! To those who are poor spiritually! To those who are poor emotionally! Where ever there is poverty, the abundance of God's power can meet your needs. It is the mission of the church to proclaim this reality and to help bring it forth. It is Mt. Zion's responsibility to participate in the healing of the broken hearted. For those who suffer under the burden of grief, those who suffer under the shadow of sorrow, those who suffer in the darkness of loneliness and despair, it is our job to proclaim to them that God is on their side and able to heal them of their

brokenness and to participate in that healing. We are not called to simply rest safely sequestered in our sanctuary but to recognize that God has called us for the benefit of this community. Now is the time to proclaim liberty to those who are oppressed. This is the mission of Jesus and this is the mission of our church. Most importantly, this is the great need of our community. For those struggling just to keep their heads above water, making a way as they can; for those wondering how they are going to make it from one week to the next; Mt. Zion, we have been called to bring liberty to those Jesus sought to serve.

As you go through Jesus' proclamations, these are some things Jesus is proclaiming and some things he is delivering. He does not say that he came to proclaim healing for the broken-hearted. He says that he came to heal the broken-hearted. He didn't just come to talk about liberty, he came to be an active part of the manifestation of liberty. What this teaches us is that while it is important for us to be a voice to this community of the possibilities God presents for our lives, our testimony to this community is incomplete if it rests in our words alone. The oppressed will never experience the liberty of God through our words alone. The words of liberation must live through our deeds. It is not good enough for us to simply declare, "...my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." [Phil. 4.19] We can't simply talk about Jehovah-Jireh or God as provider. There must be times when we serve on God's behalf to facilitate provision. It is not good enough for us to talk about how God will make a way out of no way, God has given us the resources to be the vessel through which a way out of no way is made. It is not good enough for us to talk about hope, as powerful as hope can be. There are times when God is calling us to be

the hope this community needs. This mission of Jesus requires Mt. Zion, in both our words and deeds, to proclaim the living power of our God to our community.

In this text, Jesus presents us with who he has come to serve: the outcast and the left behind. The significance of this is seen by simply imagining how our church might change if these folks showed up on a Sunday morning. How different would the church worship be, if those who have truly been left out and left behind filled the pews of the sanctuary? What would change about how we do church if we judged our success by how much we impacted the people Jesus came to serve? These are the ones God has come for and these are the ones that ought to be the object of our mission and our ministry.

If there is a disconnect between the mission of Jesus and the mission of our church, we should ask ourselves, “Why?” If Jesus is so clear on his mission, and if his mission is our mission, what keeps us from performing this task? What is it that keeps us from proclaiming the good news to the poor? What is it that keeps us from being vessels through which broken hearts are mended? What keeps us from standing in the midst of overwhelming oppression and injustice and proclaiming the liberty of God as found in this text?

I can only believe that whatever the obstacle is it’s got to be great, because it stymies us from doing what God has called us to do. Some might argue that maybe we are just uncomfortable dealing with the people presented in this text. Maybe their grief or their captivity or their pain makes us uncomfortable. Maybe we would rather surround ourselves with people that make us feel good. Maybe we don’t want to sit next to a sister or brother because of where they live or what they’ve been through or

what they are going through. This is what some would say but I have got to believe that the folks at Mt. Zion are better than that. I've got to believe that there are too many of us who have just come out of our own brokenness for us to turn our nose up at the broken. I've got to believe that too many of us know what it is like to cry ourselves to sleep for us to turn our nose up at those overwhelmed by sorrow and pain in their lives. I've got to believe there are too many of us who have been freed from addictions for us to turn our nose up at those still struggling in the chains of addiction. I've got to believe that we ain't so big time that we have forgotten what it is like to be oppressed and to not be able to see our way through.

I've just got to believe there are still some people of faith in this church that remember what life is like on the other side. You ain't been fancy so long that you forgot what it is like to have baloney sandwiches! You ain't been fancy and had that good job so long, that you forgot what it is like to have your lights cut off! You ain't been so big time for so long that you forgot what it feels like to not know how you were going to fill your gas tank up. You ain't been fancy and big time so long that you forgot what it is like to have holes in your shoes, or holes in your pockets. You ain't been fancy and big time so long that you forgot what it is like to watch your hungry children go to sleep and wonder how you were going to make it. You ain't been fancy and big time so long that you forgot what it is like to have relatives behind bars! You ain't been fancy and big time so long that you forgot what its like to have loved ones in some trouble! Or to be in trouble ourselves! It can't be that somehow we forgot what it is like to be on the other side! Truth be told, some of us are still on the other side of the tracks! I know we get healed on Sundays and then declare to one another that we are blessed and highly

favored but some of us, right now, are the poor and the broken-hearted! Some of us sitting in this sanctuary are the captives and we are wondering what the good news is for us!

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF LIBERTY

So, what is it my brothers and sisters that holds us fast. I've just got to believe that what really is holding some of us back is that you can't proclaim what you have not experienced. What's keeping some of us from being able to fulfill the mission that God has for us is that you have not yet experienced the kind of freedom that God is talking about in this text. How can I tell? Well, if Jesus has shown up in your life and done for you what he said he will do in this text, there is something about that kind of liberation that will not allow you to remain silent. This kind of deliverance will not allow you to remain in your seat. This type of liberty would propel you to be used of God to help others experience this same liberty. If you have ever been broke but have experienced God making a way out of no way; if you have ever not known where your next meal was coming from, but witnessed God showing up in the midst of your circumstances; there is something about that encounter that will cause you to celebrate right where you are and proclaim this good news to others. There are some of us who have been captive in life, but Jesus showed up and broke the chains. If you have ever experienced the liberating power of a living Savior you got to tell somebody the good news of what God has done for you!

What I really celebrate is this fundamental truth - when God has changed your life, when God has really done something for you, when God has liberated you, when God has made a way out, God's liberating love moves you to action. There is

something about God freeing you from the oppression in your life that will cause you to celebrate and share that liberation. Don't take my word for it. Look around you. Some came here this morning just to say, "I want to let the good news out. I want the poor to know that God can provide! How do I know? Well, I have been there. I want the broken-hearted of this church and this community to know that I serve a God that can change your garment of sorrow into a garment of praise. I want you to know that I have been captive but God set me free. I want to tell this community what God can do. If you know God is a deliverer, make some noise! Now we can proclaim that we once were lost but now we're found! We once were blind, but now we see! Free at last, free at last!

When God has freed and delivered you, you don't have a problem going back out into this community and letting God use you to free somebody else. When God has changed your life, you don't mind going to the poor, the broken-hearted or the dispossessed and letting them know that if God has done it for you, God will do it for them as well. Now that we are free, it time to spread this liberty throughout this community!

H. LIBERATIVE HOMILETIC

When I speak of a liberative homiletic, I am speaking of the pastoral pursuit of a homiletical response to the issues of oppression, in all of its manifestations, and the systemic and entrenched repercussions attendant to this disease within the community in which the church exists and serves. Just a few of the authors that speak to these issues are: Rieger [2009], Hendricks [2006] and Franks [2009]. To examine the ways in which the mutating effects of capitalism on the homiletics the church is witnessed see: Bowler [2013] and Mumford [2012]. As mentioned, this construction of a liberative homiletic relies heavily on Dr. James Cone and Black liberation theology. Dr. James Cone is considered by many to be the father of Black liberation theology. Black liberation theology and its theologians have labored to make visible the oppression that seeks to deform, degrade, and ultimately destroy the beingness of blacks through its rendering of that beingness as societally invisible. These theologians interrogated the tools of oppression and prophetically illuminated that oppression wherever it was found. While activists, community leaders, and politicians of the Black community turned their attention to the political and societal institutions that served the interests of power, liberation theologians turned their attention to the Christian community which they found complicit in the maintenance of oppression but indispensable to its eradication. The theological reflections immanent in Black liberation theology interrupted systems of oppression and made explicit patterns of non-recognition which had become normalized in American culture, propagated by the Christian community, and even internalized by segments of the Black community and its religious institutions. While the efforts of Black liberation theologians were eventually effective in addressing the church's

participation in racial oppression, the fluid nature of oppression insured the need for ongoing vigilance by these theologians. In fact, one of the many achievements of Black liberation theology was to expose the ever present tendency of the church to ignore the powerful presence and negative effect of universalized theological constructs on marginalized communities. The normative intellectual posture Black liberation theologians faced was one which ignored or discounted the relevance of race in the theological conversation. This proclivity reflected white theologians' universalizing of their theological perspective with no acknowledgement of the influence and limitations inherent to their theological models resulting from their social and historical context. First generation Black liberation theologians rightly contended that one's socio-historical reality was determinative for theological engagement. The failure to recognize these contextual influences crippled the theological project of mainstream theologians. This error was further compounded by appeals to objectivity proffered by theologians that showed little regard for the existence of alternative epistemologies that challenged their universalized theological claims and that masked the inherent intellectual and moral pre-commitments that shaped their theology. Additionally, theologians spoke of oppression while often conflating the issue of race and economic agency in their theological responses to the plight of Blacks in America. Over time, with Black identity often tragically anchored conceptually to the intellectual and philosophical stones of socio-economic deprivation, the conflation led to race increasingly serving as a signifier of economic agency. Ultimately, a monochromatic focus on race came to dominate the discussion, relegating economic agency to the "colored" entrance into the theological discourse. When economic performance was engaged by theologians and

homileticians, the impact and influence of these issues, particularly upon and within Black religious institutions, was universalized and theological needs arising from these issues was insufficiently engaged.

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