

“Getting Home is (not) the Goal”

Wow! It is hard to believe what has happened in the last 5 months. I know I can't get my brain fully around it. But I'm learning that I don't have to. But today is a good day. It's good to be home, it's good to celebrate. But at the same time we've got to recognize that there some from among us that aren't here. Wendy Istas, Will Norton, Glen and Lori Holland, Judy Smith, and Nancy Douthit and their families will see this homecoming differently. The people we lost from our church in the tornado. We've got six empty seats for them today and we still grieve their loss and we always will. On my cycling trip I carried a wrist band from Will Norton the whole way, as well as Wendy Istas's wedding ring. I can't tell you how many times those things inspired me to keep going when I didn't want to go any further.

Let's pause for a moment and just honor these six people along with the others that died...Our hearts hurt because they're gone, but I believe that they, in particular, would want today to be about joy, and restoration, and rebuilding. They, in particular, would remind us that life wins, that we need to get busy living it—loving God, loving others, serving the world.

I've got to take a few minutes and just thank the staff and leaders and volunteers here at Saint Paul's and from churches around the country who've been busting their tails to get us ready for today. Pastor Mark and Pastor Ben, and all the directors, and all you who have been volunteering and serving have been doing over and above to make today happen. Organizing people to clean, and paint, and get signs, and clear the parking lot and, and, and...

In fact I feel a little bit guilty because I was gone these last two weeks. But I believe I was doing my part. After the tornado I felt like God was asking me to tell the story of Joplin and our needs, and our faith, and our hope, and our thanks.

As many of you know I went on a cycling tour from here to Tuscaloosa, to Atlanta, 790 miles, to raise funds and awareness for tornado victims and churches that were hit. 13 of us made the journey and everywhere we stopped we spoke either at churches or to the media or both. The story went out to tens of thousands of people. Three from our team were guests on the Weather Channel morning show talking about what we did. On Thursday we all rode into the Catalyst Conference and a video about the trip was shown. Then I was interviewed in front of 13,000 church leaders from all over the country.

I'm trying to do my part to keep our story alive and growing and going somewhere. In fact, this evening I'm flying to back to Atlanta and I'm going to be live on the CNN morning show on tomorrow with Robin Meade, 8:20a.m. our time. Yes! I am a highly sought after celebrity! But seriously, listen. My 15 minutes of fame are about up, and I've got to get our story out while I can. And that is not my life. My life is here, with you, with this amazing city. But I'm going to tell your story of faith, and strength, and creativity, and thankfulness every chance I get.

After all that we have been through, this should be a joyful, happy, day—coming home. So let's talk about coming home for a minute. Because when I come home in the evening, when I came home after being away for two weeks, one of the things I want to do is just crash on the couch. Get a big bowl of Chex Mix and just set it on my belly, turn on the TV and blissfully enter into a vegetative state. And there is nothing wrong with that on occasion. Some of you need to do that a little more often. Most of us need to do it a lot less often. There's not a thing wrong with being comfy and resting as you go home.

But please don't think that this home, this church, is a just place to come and crash on the couch, and be comfy and eat a big bowl of Chex Mix off your belly. This church is about a mission that's bigger than any one of us. It's about a mission that's bigger than all of put together. It's the mission of Jesus himself, the one he said he was here to live out. In the Gospel of Luke the day comes when Jesus starts his ministry. He goes in the Jewish place of worship, synagogue, and he's asked to read from the Old Testament. They hand him this scroll to read and he reads it. Here's what he read that day, **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”** Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of

everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'' (Luke 4:18-21).

Jesus is saying, "I'm on a mission. Watch what I'm about to do, because it's going to blow your mind. People who've not heard any good news about God are going to hear that he knows them by name and loves them more than they can imagine or believe. The poor, who think they're poor because God is punishing them, are going to hear that God loves them especially, and is working for their good. Those imprisoned literally, and those imprisoned by hurts, and habits and hang-ups, are going to find freedom for the first time. Those who are blind physically and spiritually are going to see things they never imagined. People that have been put down all their lives, that have been kept at the margins of life, are going to see just how significant they are and they are going to find themselves in the middle of a movement so powerful that nothing can stop it."

Jesus boiled down his mission later on in this Gospel when he said, **"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).**

Yes, we're home, and there is no place like home, and yes, home is where the heart is, and yes, this is place to rest and restore, but that rest and restoration is meant to get us ready to live Jesus mission out there! This home is not meant to be a living room where you crash on the couch. It's meant to be kitchen where you're fed, and nourished, and prepared to go out there and do what Jesus himself did! To see and become involved in the lives of those who need good news, who are imprisoned, oppressed, poor, blind, forgotten.

In the last two weeks part of our job was not just to ride miles but to stop and talk to people. And just about anytime somebody shouted out to me I tried to stop and go back and visit. Except for those two men in the junk yard in Alabama that whistled at me thought I looked good in my tight pants. Didn't go back for them. But I did stop and talk to these guys. This was a half-way house in the middle of Mississippi. They saw us flying and by and started shouting. We back and talked to them. Told them our story and heard theirs. Mental illness, substance abuse, pain, joy. Life. A staff member came out and talked to us too. Afterward she said, "Why did you all stop. Nobody every stops to talk to these guys. Why did you?" Another day we a whole bunch of kids started shouting at us. And so we stopped. These kids were so excited to see these bikes we were on and us in our uniforms and helmets. They wanted to know, "Why did you stop?" The answer is that I'm trying to see people the way Jesus sees them. I'm trying to live out his mission to bring some good news to people that nobody else wants to even acknowledge exist. I'm trying to live out this mission that Jesus gave me and you. I'm trying to teach you and inspire you to do the same. Because we've got work to do. And you need to be here for worship so you can be nourished and prepared to go out there and live it.

On Thursday night at the Catalyst Conference there was a preacher named Judah Smith and at the end he invited anybody to come up for prayer that needed it. And I needed it. I was tired, depleted, my body hurt, I was sad to have to leave my new friends, worried about today, worried about my family, about Joplin. So I went up to the stage area where there were a bunch of people to pray with. I kind of stood there waiting for somebody to be available. Very random. Right? Wrong? I'm waiting there saying, "God, just a word from you would be great. Something to let me know you're still with me." A lady waved me in and said, "My name is Megan what can I pray about for you?" And I was so tired I couldn't really get out what I needed to say. I was like, "Me. Tired, home, community, rebuilding..." She was probably thinking, "This poor foreign man can't speak good English. But she said, "This morning God led me to a passage of scripture in Isaiah 58 that talked about preparing someone for repairing the walls of the city and restoring foundations and rebuilding homes." Then she prayed for me. I don't really remember what she prayed because I was so overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence, God's affirmation, the reality of this amazing God intersecting with my little life. Here's that passage that that lady had read that morning. **"Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings" (Isaiah 58:12).** I just stood there for a few moments and cried. In case you've been wondering. God is real, and he knows you, and he loves you, and he's got a plan.

Coming home is NOT the goal. The goal is our mission, to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. To lead people to a place where they love God, and love others and serve the world with passion, with

joy, with tears, with power. Home is not a destination because even though we're back here, we've not yet arrived. We have work to do out there and that demonstration of the Good News of Jesus will allow us to have a powerful proclamation of what he can do in somebody's life. Coming home isn't crashing on the couch. It's about being more able than ever to go back out there.

Let me tell you what's out there somewhere. Somewhere out there is a five-year-old boy who doesn't know that right now plans are being made by a passionate group of Christian leaders from a church he's never heard of to offer a neighborhood Vacation Bible School that will change the direction of his life. The songs he will sing will stick in his mind, the stories of Jesus will enliven his imagination, becoming more familiar with the years. The man singing silly songs will make him laugh, the teacher will make him feel loved and welcome, and the hospitality of those followers of Christ will so touch his Mom and Dad that they will take a small, unexpected step toward faith.

Somewhere out there is an elderly woman who lives alone. Her family has long since moved far away and she feels like everyone has forgotten her. Her world has shrunk to her small apartment, the weekly trips to the grocery store, and the visits to the doctor's office. The television has become her best friend and most faithful companion. She doesn't know it, but right now a small group in a church has awakened to the calling of God to reach out and to offer a ministry that invites people like her to a weekly lunch and to a chance to serve others. Six months from now she'll be using her long-neglected skills to knit baby blankets that will wrap medical supplies bound for Nicaragua, and this taste of community and purpose will save her life and give her a rebirth she never imagined possible.

Somewhere out there is a young couple stressed to the breaking point by personal debt. Fear squeezes the life out of them and fills their hearts with unmitigated worry. The exquisite moments of shared intimacy and the simple joy of companionship have given way to non-stop arguments about money, to destructive blame games, and to sleepless nights of pacing and panic. They don't know it, but right now one of their colleagues is praying for them, and asking God for the right words with which to invite them to come with her to a seminar at her church about managing money. They have no idea that the long path to new life and restored relationship will take them through the doors of a church they've never heard of before and into a community that will shape them forever.

Somewhere out there is a teacher who thinks no one else cares about the children she has given her life to serving. She works in the hardest section of town with kids few others would choose to spend their time with. Her schoolroom is rundown, and there's less money now than ever before to provide the resources she needs to do her job. She has no idea that right now a congregation she didn't even know existed is preparing themselves for a new ministry that will change her circumstances. She has no idea that the congregation has felt called to make a difference with kids and have decided to adopt a school like hers. She has no way of knowing that six months from now, she will weep with joy as strangers give up their weekend to repaint and refurbish her classroom with her help and encouragement. She cannot now imagine that droves of people she has never met will step forward to volunteer to tutor, to read stories before school, and to coach basketball after hours. She has no inkling of the effect this will have on her and on her students, and how this will become the door by which she rediscovers her own faith in Christ.

Somewhere out there is an idealistic young person who wants to change the world and who isn't even thinking about church and who maybe even feels anti-church. She doesn't know it, but right now a congregation which her friend attends is planning an international service project, and in a few months she'll be invited to participate. It will change her life forever, shape her career and calling, make her rethink her beliefs about God and spirituality, and put her on a path she will walk for the rest of her life.

Somewhere out there is a young man whose border-line mental illness and inability to cope with the basic mechanisms of daily living have caused him to lose his job, to stop taking his meds, and to slip through the cracks of every social, community, and family network. Having fallen through the cracks, he kept falling and falling and falling until now he sleeps on the streets, carries cardboard for bedding, and digs through trash bins for dinner. He has no idea, nor do his Mom and Dad who lost touch with him years ago, that right now a congregation is gearing up to offer a shelter and food program in cooperation with other churches, and that one day this ministry will change his life. He cannot imagine that one day in the future as he is served a meal, someone will engage him in conversation, treat him as human, listen to his story, learn his name, and

reconnect him to his family and to the social networks that will allow him to live again a basic life with dignity. He has no idea that God, working through people desiring to follow Christ, will restore him to a life he barely remembers.

Somewhere out there in an African village a young girl plays in bed with her little sister, both of them safely covered by a mosquito net bought by the youth of a church who felt called to make a difference for Christ. No one can see it now, but she will grow up to become a doctor herself, relieving the suffering of thousands. She will live a long and full life, a life that never would have been possible without a simple net and many generous young hearts across the globe.

Somewhere out there...in a neighborhood near you, is a person who has no idea of the change that is coming his way and the new life that will transform him forever. I picture the person unknowingly prepared by the spirit of God to receive the embrace of Christ that will be offered when our churches come alive with the mission of Christ.

Somewhere out there is a person God plans to use you to reach. Somewhere out there is a person God will use to change your life as you reach them. Somewhere out there is a person for whom Christ died. Somewhere out there is someone who thinking that death wins, that darkness is all there is, that hopelessness prevails.

But no. No. No. You, get on this mission with me and this home that we've come back to will be what it needs to be. A place where we are prepared and sent out every week to live out the greatest mission in the universe. A place from which we proclaim the death does not get last word, that darkness does not prevail, that destruction cannot win. We proclaim with the power of the living God, the resurrected Jesus, the King of kings, the Lord of lords that life wins! And for today, that is the good news! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Bishop Robert Schnase for his blog posting called "Somewhere out there..." parts of which I have used here.