

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 24, 2007
Lessons: Ruth 1:6-21a and Mark 3:1-6

BRIDGE TOWN

A river divides the city of Dayton, Ohio, not just geographically, but racially, socially, and politically. West of the river, most Daytonians are African-American; to the east, most are of European descent. The biologically and spiritually insignificant distinction of skin tones creates a polarity we describe as black-and-white, the true opposites of the light spectrum. No one living on either side of the river is either black or white, but prejudice sees different skin tones as opposites, and so the river divides Dayton into two different worlds of human experience and perception.

Do you remember the ACTION 2006 team that visited Bridgeton last fall and held several events here in our church building? Team members came from such diverse countries as Senegal and Ukraine, Vietnam and Latvia, Rwanda and the United States. The parent organization for the ACTION team is called Initiatives of Change. IofC's purpose is to motivate people in divided communities to reach across their gaps and to offer them tools they can use to communicate with each other productively.¹

Last Thursday through Saturday, I participated in an IofC conference in Dayton and served as a "discussion starter" for Saturday's conversation on interfaith relations. Some folks in Dayton have formed what they call a "trialogue," a three-way discussion among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Some years ago, we had a triologue in my office: a rabbi serving Congregation Beth Abraham, a priest or sensei serving the Seabrook Buddhist Temple, and I hammered out understandings that enabled us to continue the Interfaith Community Thanksgiving Service in Old Broad Street Church, without turning it into a generic pseudo-service that gave voice to no one's faith.

The triologue in my office was friendly but not easy, and it was complicated by the reality that worship is the very hardest arena in which to come together because it takes each group to the very core of its beliefs and into its cherished sacred space. Worship is holy ground, and religious professionals do not concede patches of their holy ground. So each of us had to reach down deep into his or her own core faith to find good reasons, faithful reasons, to take a few steps together – not *in spite* of our core beliefs but *because of them*. For me, it could not be, "*Even though* I believe in Jesus Christ, I will get together with you." No, it had to be, "*Because* I believe in Jesus Christ, I will seek ways to be with you in this

small but difficult step toward community.” I do not recommend worship as the activity in which to come together, but I’ll say more about that in forums next fall.

In recent years, Dayton has lost General Motors plants, an National Cash Register plant, and various other major businesses. The economic blows have been staggering. Dayton’s schools have fallen under state supervision, but this year came up enough in the all-important test scores, not to be rated as doing well, but to be seen as significantly improved. On the other hand, a much-needed tax levee for those schools failed to pass with the voters, and so there will be teacher layoffs and curriculum cutbacks. Race was an issue.

As I sat in the conference listening, I could not help making comparisons between the larger city of Dayton and the smaller city of Bridgeton. Racially divided, economically hard-hit, and with part of its population waxing nostalgic for the “good old days,” while the other part remembers them less fondly.

Yet some of Dayton’s people came together with the rest of us to share their efforts at building bridges, at making Dayton what I’m calling a “bridge town” and not just a dividing-river town. *Because* they are Muslim – for reasons they find in their faith – the husband and wife physicians I met have joined the dialogue and the conference. *Because* she is a single mother, a Christian, an African-American, and (as she told us) a “member” of the group making less than \$20,000 a year, she joined the discussion in the hope, I think, of being understood and respected.

It is important to note that, even in this self-selected group of people committed to building bridges of understanding and mutual respect, there was anger and suspicion. In response to the dominant theme of trust-building, one man told us the word “trust” did not even enter the social vocabulary of people he knew. They had no thought of trusting the other side of the river but only of surviving and doing the best they could for themselves.

In one plenary meeting, where I sat next to a black woman from Dayton, the speaker was talking about his disappointment at the failure of that levee for the city’s schools when he used the phrase, “all our children.” I wrote it down and showed it to the woman next to me, who nodded. If we believed that phrase to be true – that all the children are “our children – both Dayton and Bridgeton would be on their way toward a new era of community and shared humanity.

Ruth is a Moabite woman, an outsider to the covenant, a foreign resident within the territory of Israel. *What is she doing here?* Many would see her as the unfortunate mistake her late husband made in marrying when he was a foreign worker in a strange land. Some would come to see her “kind” as a threat to the very nature and existence of the children of

Israel. *Get rid of those foreign wives.* You know those genealogies in the Bible that are so boring to read? There's a short one at the end of the book of Ruth. She is the mother of Obed, and so the grandmother of Jesse, and so the great-grandmother of – who is that? – David the king. *Oops.* Maybe it wouldn't have been such a good idea to get rid of her. Oh, she's also named in the New Testament among the ancestors of Jesus.

He, Jesus, stands before us the kind of person we find unworthy, insignificant, or even disgusting. We have rules, standards, norms. Jesus asks us what to do with a person who is suffering, who is humiliated. The conference was about building trust, but for that we need *empathy*. We need to develop feelings for each other's humanity. Jesus gets angry because his rule-loving critics are so hard of heart with actual people. They allow themselves no feelings for this man, and for that reason their hearts are far from God. The evils people do to each other come from a lack of empathy. We fail to see and regard each other's humanity. We feel no bond. One of our hymns has a line that haunts me: "Races and peoples, lo! we stand divided, And sharing not our griefs, no joys can share."²

My wish, my hope, my prayer, is that Bridgeton can become a *bridge town* – a divided community it is already, but it can be one hard at work building bridges to span those gaps that separate its people. Such work is not easy and cannot be done superficially, without pain, without doubt and risk, without anger, without disagreement. In each division, the majority would have to take double-care to stop flexing its muscle and start listening, without whining about its threatened sense of privilege.

These days, it is the style to build walls rather than bridges. We have religious walls, towering racial walls, language barriers used as an excuse not to listen, educational-level walls, gender walls, sexual-orientation walls, generational walls, and class walls. "And sharing not our griefs, no joys can share."

Long ago, Bridgeton was called Bridge Town. I wish we could be that again but with new meaning: a town building bridges across all its divides for the common good. Not just for what people like to call dismissively, "equal opportunity," because the playing field is not even close to level, and the rules are not the same for everyone. Instead we need respect, empathy, security, and deliberate justice for all.

How well we remember one of the Sunday church school songs of our childhood! "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." *Jesus loves ME*, the mantra of much of Protestant Christianity in our land. Why do we not remember the other childhood song just as well? "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white (though no one is any of those colors, except folks like me red with sunburn), they are precious in his sight." Imagine if we really knew, felt, and believed that

“all the children” were our own because they are God’s own. It’s not the Cohansey we need to span with bridges so we can move back and forth, visit, and share. We know where the divides are, but Jesus Christ does not honor them. So, we have some major construction jobs to do.

One of the eight directions for our vision of our future as a church is the *development of ecumenical and interfaith relations*, and largely for that reason I went to the conference. Another is *service and outreach to the community*. A third is *getting to know each other better*, which I realize refers to the people within our church family, but what would happen if, because we believe in Jesus Christ, we extended the goal out into the communities of Bridgeton and the 08302 area? I’m reading a book, *Nickel and Dimed*, on the struggles of low-wage workers in America.³ I haven’t even finished the book yet, but already it has changed permanently the way I see waitresses, store checkers, and countless other people in our society. For the way they push themselves day after day, running on pain killers and sometimes nicotine, without medical care or dental, without enough money to “make it in America,” and without the basic respect all people are due, they emerge from this book as truly heroic. They don’t need a battlefield to be fighters every day.

Getting to know each other better, to understand and appreciate each other’s humanity and nobility, sharing life’s struggles, shouldering a few burdens together so they aren’t quite so heavy, acknowledging the human dignity in each other’s eyes and not dismissing people as “not our kind”— these are leads we can take as a church and as individuals who follow Jesus Christ. We can all be bridge builders in some way. I hope and pray we will. Amen.

1. “Building Trust in America,” Initiatives of Change National Forum, June 15-16, 2007 on the campus of the University of Dayton. *Initiatives of Change: trust-building through hospitality and honest conversations across divisions of race, class, religion and politics; equipping individuals and groups by offering leadership formation and increasing the capacity of local networks to take action; intervening through mediation or facilitation in order to resolve specific conflict situations; raising new visions for America through public events, conferences and collaborative initiatives*. Web site: www.us.iofc.org
2. “Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation,” number 486 in *The Hymnbook*.
3. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: on (Not) Getting By in America*, Henry Holt and Co., LLC, 2001.