

“The Servant of All”

October 21st, 2018
Mark 10: 43-45

190th Anniversary Service
Wall Street United Church

Guest speaker: Rev. James Murray of Dominion Chalmers United Church, Ottawa

About thirty years ago I was a student from Queen's Theological College, and my first summer field was at the North Augusta pastoral charge, just a few miles outside of Brockville. One of the highlights of that summer was learning about Barbara Heck, who is known as the Mother of Methodism in the United States. It is because of Barbara Heck's pioneering efforts that both of our churches exist. Dominion-Chalmers United in Ottawa was the first Methodist church in Ottawa. My congregation is now over 200 years old. We got our start when a Methodist circuit rider started a meeting in a settler's log cabin. The Methodist circuit riders got their start when Barbara Heck came as a Loyalist refugee to the Brockville area in the 1770's and established the first Methodist congregation in Canada. She provided the organizing support to share the gospel as a wave of new immigrants created a new life for themselves in the wilds of Canada.

Our two congregations share a lot of similarities. Like you, Dominion-Chalmers has a large sanctuary with a wraparound balcony, that seats 900 people. Like you, our building takes up the better part of a city block right in the downtown core. We are only a few hundred meters from Parliament Hill. Like you, our sanctuary is a place of great beauty that lifts the soul up into the presence of God. We also share the modern challenge of a downtown location, growing deficits and declining numbers.

At one time, Dominion-Chalmers was a rich church. Back in the year 2000 we had \$6 million in our trust funds. We spent half of that \$6 million on renovations. Like you we had a stepped chancel. We replaced that with a flat chancel stage that let us host concerts. Today our building is the venue for 100 concerts a year. The Ottawa Jazz Festival and the Chamber Music Festival love the acoustics and the atmosphere our building provides. But even that change was not enough to save us.

Like many congregations, Dominion Chalmers had a strong resistance to change. Our deficits soon hit \$250 thousand a year, which quickly depleted our Trust funds. Even with the prospect of going bankrupt, many were unwilling to change how we do business. Like you, we used the United Church of Canada 'Edge' consultants to determine other financial options including redevelopment. After several months of working with their consultants, we realized that there was no financial scenario for

redevelopment that would generate enough income to allow us to keep the building.

Around this time, people in my congregation started to say I wasn't praying hard enough. They thought it was God's plan to save the building. At one financial planning meeting, our treasurer said he wasn't panicking. He said that in the past when the congregation had financial troubles it was usually solved when a member died and left Dominion Chalmers a large sum of money. During this time one of our beloved Trustees died. He was a bachelor and everyone expected him to leave his fortune to the church. As it turned out this gentleman did not approve of our deficit spending and he left nothing to the congregation. Our Edge consultant pointed out that having people die is not a viable financial strategy that you can count on.

Around this time I was wearing out my knees with a lot of praying about the future of the congregation; for there was more than just the building at stake. My job was on the line along with the livelihoods of the rest of the staff. As a result of the uncertainty I started to keep a bottle of Pepto-Bismol in my desk to help me recover from all the financial planning meetings we were having every single week.

In my praying and reflecting, I came to realize God wasn't asking us to save the building. I came to hear how God was asking us to save the congregation. Back in the 1960's Dominion Chalmers had 2,000 members, and even back then they struggled to pay the bills on such a big building. Now with under 200 members, it was way beyond our means. We came to realize that a viable congregation does not always equal a viable building. If our congregation had been in any other United Church building in Ottawa we would have been fine. We were an average sized congregation in an oversized building we could no longer keep up.

We were confronted by the realization that while Christ's church is eternal; church buildings made by human hands are not. Buildings are really powerful helpful tools which can help us be Christ's church, but they are not required. We went over the history of Dominion & Chalmers over their 200 year history. It turns out the building we are in was building #8. We were a church that had moved many times from that first log cabin as the city grew up around us. But over time we had forgotten how to move forward to meet the needs of the community we are called to serve. We had to learn that the mission of Christ's church is bigger than our great building. The mission of Christ's church does ask us to serve God's people. It was a humbling thing to realize that the Mission of Christ's church doesn't require us to own a building.

Our prayers were answered when we went to Carleton University with

a proposal. We knew they wanted to build a concert hall but they didn't have that kind of money. So we offered to sell our building, as long as we got a long term lease. It took two years of negotiations. We were surprised to discover that universities have a governance structure that moves even slower than churches do. The deal closed with Carleton at the end of June of this year, and we have a 25 year lease that allows us to keep worshipping in the sanctuary, and we have enough time and space for our midweek programs. Carleton's music faculty will be using the space for rehearsals and concerts, which is something they desperately needed but could not afford.

During those two years of negotiations I was spending most of my week in meetings rather than pastoring. I was facing a challenge that my theology training at Queen's did not prepare me for. Fortunately, my undergrad degree is in Business Administration. I was very lucky to be able to draw wisdom from those two very different worlds.

Over my almost 30 years in ministry I have often heard how the church should be run like a business. Having been trained in both worlds, and having worked in both, I would say a church should be as well run as a business. But we can't make church decisions on a strictly business model. Most of what we do makes no financial sense. A strictly business perspective would never justify the money needed to build all the beauty that surrounds us in this sanctuary. A business perspective values profit over all other concerns. Profit wants to maximize revenue and minimize cost. A church wants to bring people into a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ. We as Christ's church seek to bless people and mend the world. Together as the church we are called to feed the hungry, to bind up the broken hearted and set the people free. Our job is to teach people how to pray and grow as disciples who follow the way of Jesus. You can't put a price tag on blessing people. Our goal is not to be the greatest, the biggest, the most successful church in town. Our goal is to be the least of all, the servant of all.

In this secular age we are living in, the old certainties have passed away. There are no quick fixes or simple solutions to the challenges we face. We live in a secular world that seeks greatness but has lost its sense of meaning and purpose. Everything is being reduced to simple yardsticks like money and power.

Thankfully you still have a gift of beauty that offers an alternative message to this broken world. You have the gift of a message that tells people 'you have a soul'. You have a ministry that tells people there is something more to life than just making money. You offer something

beautiful that lifts up the soul. You offer the gift of community to a world that far too often sits isolated at home alone. For God is still at work here. God is still speaking to you.

You may not get the answer you were expecting when you pray, but if your hearts are truly open to what God is seeking, something beautiful is still possible. For when we are willing to lose ourselves by being the least of all and servant of all, for the sake of the gospel, nothing is impossible.

So have courage my friends. And may God's blessings be with you always. Amen