

**Taking Many Mansions Seriously:
Service and the Kingdom of God in Detroit**

**The Reverend Dr. Stephen Butler Murray
President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Preaching
Ecumenical Theological Seminary, Detroit, Michigan**

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Hear these words from Second Samuel, in chapters 5 and 6.

2 Sam 5:1 Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. 2 For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." 3 So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. 4 David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. 5 At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

6:1 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. 3 They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart 4 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 5 David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

Hear too these words from Psalm 150

Ps 150:1 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Let me begin by saying how very glad I am to be here with you this morning. Ever since I moved from Boston fifteen months ago to become the President of Ecumenical Theological Seminary, I have been bowled over by the hospitality that I have received in Detroit and

throughout the surrounding area, and you, my friends, my fellow American Baptists have been leading the way on the hospitality train. You've met me over lunch, we've shared coffee and other sundry libations, and my guest preaching calendar is filling up nicely, thank you so very much. And let me say how very good it is to be among American Baptists. Before I moved to Detroit, I was the Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Boston, founded in 1665, the fourth oldest Baptist church in the United States and the third oldest church in that city. I taught Baptist history and theology at Harvard Divinity School. I do a lot of guest preaching, often two different churches on Sundays, with Methodists and Presbyterians, Lutherans and Episcopalians, Congregationalists and Disciples of Christ, AME Zion and COGIC, even, very occasionally, a Roman Catholic church...and it always feels like I'm home when I'm at one of ours.

Of course, this church has been a significant supporter of Ecumenical Theological Seminary over the years. For five years, you shared your former pastor, David Swink, with ETS as our President, and another four years as the Chair of our Board of Directors. He continues to teach for us part-time as Professor of Church Leadership. Chilson Hills Baptist Church has been among the most stalwart supporters of Ecumenical Theological Seminary, from its very beginnings as an inter-denominational institute for continuing education for clergy based out in the suburbs, to its current status, as an ecumenical seminary serving over 30 denominations, accredited by the Association of Theological Schools to offer masters and doctoral programs. And so on behalf of Ecumenical Theological Seminary, let me say to you, thank you for your gifts to us, so that we might be a gift to you. Thank you for entrusting your students to us, so that we might teach them to lead your communities. And on behalf of myself, let me say thank you for the kind invitation to speak with you this morning. Your pastor, DJ Reed, is a bright light among the clergy in the Detroit area, and it has been a joy to get to know him. For many of us who don't get to see him preach as often as you do here at Chilson Hills, his participation this year as one of the seven preachers at Hartford Memorial Baptist Church's Good Friday service was something of a revelation. DJ blew us all away. He did you proud.

Our lesson from Second Samuel today speaks of Hebron, which today is a Palestinian city in the southern part of the West Bank, about 20 miles outside of Jerusalem. I was there in 1997, back when I was a student at Yale Divinity School, spending a month in Israel studying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hebron is home to about 200,000 Palestinians, about 600 Jewish settlers, and over 3,000 Israeli soldiers to protect those 600 Jewish settlers, and those soldiers are everywhere: on the street, walking on the rooftops, always, always with machine guns pointing straight into the crowds. The boiling pressure, the potential for violence to break out there at any time is extraordinary.

If you ever travel to Israel, one of the things that stands out is the constant reminder that just as Judaism birthed Christianity, Judaism and Christianity birthed Islam. All three religions share so many of the same stories and major spiritual figures. And perhaps nowhere reminded me of that fact more than Hebron. I remember being encouraged to visit the Ibrahimi Mosque in the Hebron hills, and I did so, unaware that Ibrahimi is, of course, the Arabic name for Abraham. The Mosque that I was sought out has another, popular name: The Cave of the Ancestors, a Saladin-era mosque, which had been converted from a large rectangular Herodian-era Judean structure. Once one steps inside of the Mosque, one finds a series of subterranean chambers. According to tradition that has been associated both with the Jewish Torah, our Old Testament, and the Quran of Islam, the cave and its adjoining field were purchased by Abraham as a burial plot.

As I moved into the subterranean chambers of the Ibrahimi Mosque, the Cave of the Patriarchs, I was awestruck as I came upon the double tombs of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, considered to be the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish people. There is even a Jewish tradition which maintains that Adam and Eve are buried there as well. Each tomb was gigantic, easily twenty feet high, each one covered with an ornate Oriental carpet. They were beautiful, hauntingly beautiful, and majestic. And, for me, there was no more telling testimony to the inextricably interwoven histories of Judaism and Islam, and Christianity as well, than to find the tombs of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish people kept lovingly, reverently, in the auspices of a mosque. And it makes one realize how very difficult it must be for those religions in that land to live well together, given the complexities, the histories of violence and misunderstanding and open aggression that existed and still exist, and yet co-exist they must.

There is, in the Old Testament, a book called Haggai. Do not be ashamed if you think to yourself that it sounds familiar, but that you cannot quite place it. Haggai is an incredibly short book of the Old Testament, a mere two chapters long. Haggai is a prophet of Israel, and his brief entry into the biblical tradition is an urgent message for the people of Israel to proceed with the rebuilding of the second Jerusalem temple. He understands that there are always excuses for inactivity, noting that a recent drought has helped to dis-incentivize the people of Israel to rebuild the temple. But nonetheless, the Temple, Haggai is convinced, the Temple is key to Jerusalem's glory. In order for Israel to be great once again, for Israel to emerge out of the depths of the pain and difficulties of its overthrow, it must rebuild toward greatness. And the epicenter of any rebuilding, the crux of any attempt to achieve greatness once again, is rebuilding the Temple, honoring and establishing the physical and spiritual representation of the heart of God in the heart of the city. It is only by maintaining that fragile and powerful mission, being the heart of God in the heart of the city, that the church can live into its calling to be with and for the people of God, which is to say, to be with and for everyone: To be with and for everyone, no matter their background, no matter their circumstance, no matter whether we love to be together or find it difficult.

If one were to travel to Jerusalem and go to the last remaining wall of that Temple, referred to as the Wailing Wall, it is remarkable that within a quarter mile on either side of that wall, one would find the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on the land where it is said Jesus was crucified, and the Dome of the Rock, the third most holy site in Islam.

Learning to live together. Learning to live together has been and continues to be one of the most tremulously difficult yet profoundly rewarding enterprises of the human experience. When we are bold enough to step outside of the comfortable boundaries of our own backgrounds, our own expectations and our own prejudices, our own fears, we are able to encounter a rich, enticing, multichromatic world in which we are no longer the prisoners of our own imagination, but the astonished inheritors of the entire spectrum of what it means to be human, beautifully human, flawed and imperfect, but still glimmering with the image of God in which we were made, each and every one of us. When we stay in one place our whole lives, we do not challenge ourselves to realize that the world is a whole lot bigger, more diverse, always tending toward change, than we ever give it credit for, perhaps even more than we want to believe. My cousin Amy grew up in Tucson, Arizona, spent her whole childhood in the desert, and on her first trip to the East Coast when she was in high school, wondered out loud what all of the green balls were beside the road, what those poles are, covered with green formations. Those are bushes, I told her, those are trees. And why does everyone have weeds all over the front of

their houses? That's grass, I responded. She grew up in a climate of sand and pavement, brick and adobe, where some people, reminded of the echoes of a former life elsewhere, would fill the lot in front of their house with small pebbles, painted green, to approximate the color of a front lawn; an illusion convincing to no one.

People react differently to encountering something new, something unexpected. Some folks embrace the opportunity to experience the unknown while others are scared, intimidated, shun what is outside their norm, their day to day way of living in the world. And we all get into that place sometimes, that place where we shut down and shut out, when the world is too much, too big, and we prefer the company that we keep, thank you very much, the people who look like us, dress like us, pray like us. We are terrified by the prospect of connection that might rock our world and shatter that misperception that we had it all together, that we know all that we need to know.

I encourage you, if you don't know it, to find a book, *Howard's End*, written by the wonderful British author E.M. Forster. And yes, yes, the movie version with Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson is excellent as well, but for goodness sake, put down the remote control and go find the book! And as you open it, and begin flipping through the pages, and no worries, no spoiler alert here, because they are the literally very first words that you will find, before the first chapter begins, there is a page that is blank except for only two words, two words which set the context for the entire rest of the book, which set the challenge for what humanity must do, must become, must achieve: Only connect. Those two simple words, "Only connect," are all that appear on that lone page, that simple charge to the reader. It comes up again later, and no, I won't ruin the whole book for you, but it comes up later, more fulsome this time, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die." That is such an important idea, that when we live without connecting, we live merely in fragments. We do not live the full, flowering, thriving lives that we could. There is something bestial, there is something self-mortifying, life-denying, about turning down, refusing the opportunity to connect when the opportunity is there, right in front of you, and you do not take it because you are intimidated, you are scared, by what that connection might mean, how that connection will shape you, change you, transform you. We are frightened that by making the connection we will no longer be who we were before, and you know what, we are right. When we make connections, we cannot be who we were before. The innocence of isolation is sacrificed on the altar of opportunity when we encounter what we do not know, and we are made bigger, sturdier, worldly, increasingly compassionate, entirely more empathetic when we face the unknown, touch the unknown, caress the face of the unknown and trace our hands over the curves of the face and skin and hair and lips and eyes and nose of the unknown, and realize that the unknown is not the person to fear, but the fellow child of God. The unknown is the fellow child of God who grew up with different stories, who was taught a different way of valuing what she sees, comprehending what he hears. The unknown is the slightly shifted mirror image of ourselves, born into a different part of this vast world than the microcosm that we know.

Faith can be like that. We Christians, especially those of us within the comfortable homes of denominations, whether we are Episcopalians or Methodists, Lutherans or Presbyterians, UCC or Baptists, we like to get so caught up on who is right and who is wrong, what is forbidden, what is upheld, how we, within our doctrines and our creeds and our polity, how we are going to define the good life. And we forget that in the course of defining the good

life, saying this belongs and this does not, that when we define the good life in a certain way, we are devaluing the good life of another who sees the world differently than we do, who knows and loves and respects and honors God differently than we do. God loves you, and you, and you, but not you. And no matter how much we think we have it right, and make no mistake, that is what we do as people of faith, as Christians who make certain truth claims: we think we have it right. But no matter how much we think we have it right, it is vitally important to remember that it is we who live in God's world, and not God who lives in ours. As much as we try to box God in, God eternally rebels against any such definition, confinement, limitedness that human beings try to place upon God's holy, untamable, irrepressible, irresistible, wild and utterly free reality. Each one of us, individually, is precious, irreplaceable, representing some unique facet of the complex jewel that is God's image. The more that we know other people, love other people, open ourselves to be challenged by other people, to be vulnerable to other people, the more we then have the unfathomable opportunity to witness and experience the glory of God's image made known to us more fully than we ever could have encountered humanity before, on our own, trapped in the stygian depths of self-selected self-limitation.

The world is complex and challenging and heart-breaking and life-affirming and disappointing and majestic. We live in a world where privilege and poverty exist right next to each other, separated by a hair's breadth, and yet do their very best never to touch. And thank God for the times when privilege and poverty meet, connections are made, and mutual humanity is recognized as the fragile gift and indelible truth that it is, when lives are made more whole and safe and content, when mere surviving crosses over to the promise of thriving. But that is not often how privilege and poverty meet. Rather than connecting, they collide, and we all suffer the trauma of that collision. Like flint and steel striking, sparks fly, fires burn, destruction is unleashed.

What are we called to do as Christians? We are not called to sit comfortably within the stone and wood fortresses of our sanctuaries as though nothing is happening outside of those beautiful walls, listening to the wondrous sounds of our organs playing all the sounds of nature but we dare not step outside to see the desperate and real and immediate need of our cities and our towns, our people, the people of God of every nation and race and creed, the children of God who need justice to be more than an empty promise. And we must dare to live out that call to justice, that call which does not summon us to the cause one by one, but which calls us to rise as one, to move forward as one, to be the Kingdom of God standing up against the tyranny of injustice in the land.

Our father's house has many rooms, the kingdom of God has many mansions, and we cannot embody the Kingdom of God alone. Chilson Hills Baptist Church cannot do this good work alone. All the Baptist churches of Southeast Michigan cannot do this good work alone. The Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, the Lutherans cannot do this good work alone. Don't worry, I'm not going to list all the denominations active in our region, but not one of you, no matter how many people you have coming on Sunday morning, no matter how well endowed your church is, no matter how committed your people are, not one of our churches can take on this phenomenal task of standing up to the abundance of injustice alone. We need places where we can come together, where our diversity stands not for our division, but the glory of the possibilities represented by our unity within our diversity.

Think on those bookend stories of the Bible, the Tower of Babel and Pentecost. The Tower of Babel is where God sees human ambition becoming twisted by its common purpose to

be grander than we are, to position ourselves as though we were gods, and so smashes that narcissism by scattering the people with a plurality of languages. It is impossible to be united to a common cause when we cannot communicate with one another. But then, recognizing that, the author of Luke and Acts later relates the powerful story of Pentecost, when the brokenness of human language is reunited again, such that no matter the origin of the listener, no matter the differences that might separate the speaker and the hearer, the message of the gospel, the unifying good news is heard and received by all within their diversity.

Ecumenical Theological Seminary is one place where we can do that, where we can come together, city and suburb, black and white, rich and poor, affluent and underprivileged, but all privileged and empowered in the ultimate way, in the way that not only do we recognize that each and every one of us is a child of God, but that we look out at the populations of the world, and we see children of God everywhere. At Ecumenical Theological Seminary, we speak about the capacity of theology to not be bound up within the academic Ivory Tower alone, prettily studying theology as though it is the irrelevant written meanderings of dead authors, but instead how theology streams out into the streets, demanding justice today, creating the architecture of faithful resistance to the powers and principalities of the world, today.

Ours is a seminary that celebrates the distinctions of this great city of Detroit which is its home, drawing together the churches of the city and the suburbs so that we might learn together, serve together, pray and sing together. Our greatness comes in our commitment to do this work as part of an urban community and its suburban neighbors that honor and cherish Detroit as one of the artistic capitals of the world, renowned for Motown and hip hop, the symphony and the street, the Institute of Art and the poetry of motion that comes amid proud sports teams and the ballet. At Ecumenical Theological Seminary, we want to work hand in hand with churches and people of faith to strive together toward the promised land of peace and justice. And while none of us can know whether we will reach that promised land, when all meets its fulfillment and all is complete, that doesn't mean that the journey through the valley of dry bones is not the necessary activity of a people who journey into the freedom, the sheer and wild and awesome freedom of a kingdom of love, hospitality, and respect.

One of the great Christian voices of the twentieth century was that of Helmut Thielicke, a leading German university intellectual in the '30s, a professor of philosophy and theology at the University of Tübingen, who was removed from his position by the Nazis and forbidden to teach because of his courageous critique of the Third Reich. A brave Lutheran bishop appointed him to be the pastor of the great Lutheran cathedral in Stuttgart, and he started to preach such strong, compelling sermons that the 4,000-seat church was filled every Sunday. When Allied bombing destroyed the cathedral, Thielicke continued preaching at different locations in bombed-out Stuttgart. In a now-classic sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Thielicke concluded:

Let this last thing be said about loving our neighbor. All loving is a thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved and healed in loving: we grow into all the mysteries of God when we pass on what we have received and when we learn by experience that a disciple of Jesus becomes not poorer but richer and happier in giving and sacrificing and that whatever of his feeble strength he puts at God's disposal comes back to him in twelve great baskets. . . . God is incalculable in the abundance of his mercy." (*The Waiting Father*, p.169)

Remember that: "All loving is thanksgiving for the fact that we ourselves have been loved and healed in loving."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

