

“Going the Extra Mile”
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 and Matthew 5:38-48
February 19, 2017
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

Have any of you ever heard of Church of the Savior in Washington, DC? Possibly not. It was not a large church, but it had a profound effect on the DC area as well as pastors and churches around the country. This was a church that truly lived into the scriptures we read this morning. It is a church that practiced holiness in their internal faith life and the way they lived out their faith in the world. They went the extra mile.

The church was founded by Gordon Cosby, who grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia. One day, when he was 16-years-old, Gordon and his brother were walking through a section of town that was populated by African Americans. This would have been around 1934, so it was odd for two white boys to be walking in that area in this time of extreme segregation. They passed by a church and started talking with some people there. They were told that the church was without a pastor. They told the people, “If you want, we can be your pastors.” The people were skeptical. “We are not sure about that. After all, you are just two skinny, young white boys.” Being 16 and pretty sure of himself (as many 16-year-olds are), Gordon said, “Why don’t you let us have a shot at it for one Sunday, and if it works out, we will be your pastors.” They stayed at the church the next few years until Gordon went off to Louisville, Kentucky to attend Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Gordon and his brother, PG, had an ongoing competition to share the Good News of God’s love for all people. If they failed to do it any day, they had to pay a “fine.” Like many teens, Gordon didn’t always do this in a timely manner. In order to avoid the fine, he often climbed out of his second story bedroom window in the night and went off in search of anyone who was awake and would listen. Apparently, there was a lonely night watchman who got “saved” many, many times!

After seminary, World War II had broken out and Gordon enlisted as in the Army as a chaplain. He was among the soldiers that came up on Normandy Beach on D-Day. He buried and gave comfort to many young soldiers in that event. He even had to bury his best friend. He found that, while they were churchgoers back home, many of these young men did not have the faith resources to answer the big questions around life and death. He vowed to start a church when he got back to the United States that would deal with these questions.

In 1947, Gordon and his wife, Mary, started the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. They never built a huge sanctuary. They never sought to grow a mega-church. Instead, they obtained a smallish brownstone “mansion” near Dupont Circle. They worshiped there and provided Christian training. Gordon realized that people needed to commit to the inward journey through prayer, silent meditation, and classes on Christianity. At the same time, they needed to participate in the outward journey by working for social justice in the community around them.

Washington, DC had an institution called Junior Village. It was basically an orphanage for children and youth who could not be adopted or find a place in the foster care system. It was known to be a pretty bleak place. 30 to 40 members of Church of the Savior went in to befriend the children and let them know that people in the outside world care about them. They canvassed friend and people in the neighborhood to take these kids into their homes. They even took them into their own homes. Over time, Junior Village closed because there was no longer a need to it.

Gordon and Mary were invited to speak at a church in New England. They were to share about their work with Church of the Savior. They arrived and found the church to be incredibly cold and unfriendly. After an unpleasant time at the church, they found out the church was putting them up for the night in a room above a crowded, rowdy bar that rocked and rolled well into the night. The next morning they got up and went to a small, friendly café where they were well-treated. They were fairly sure that Jesus spent more time at the bar and café than at the cold church. Gordon got many invitations to speak after this, but he turned them all down.

Upon returning to DC and reflecting on the “fellowship” present at the bar and café, the church began to look for a property to acquire. Potter’s House became the first Christian coffeehouse in the country. Gordon marched with Dr. King in the March on Washington in 1963 and the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. Potter’s House became a place where people of all races could come together to talk about what was happening around them. It was a safe place for sharing. From the start, Church of the Savior was an interracial church – something pretty much unheard of at the time.

The need to build up the inner life was important. The church acquired 40 acres in rural Maryland to start the Dayspring Silent Retreat Center. First, they built a lodge and later built an inn. People from all over the country go to Dayspring for retreats. I first heard of it when I was at Christ UMC in Greensboro, NC. We had many church members who went there for retreats. I never got there, but I do have their delicious recipe for vegetarian lasagna!

The people of the church acknowledged that there was a lack of safe, affordable housing in DC. If you were wealthy, there were many nice places to live, but not if you were poor. They started Jubilee Housing, an organization that built and ran affordable housing for the poor.

Medical care was lacking for people who were homeless. The members of the church built Christ House, a medical facility for the poor and especially for homeless people. Gordon Cosby died there at the age of 95. His wife, Mary, still lives there among the people she spent her life serving.

In Leviticus, we heard, "You shall be holy because the LORD your God is holy." As I said earlier, the members of Church of the Savior were required to live both the inward and the outward journey. Both are required for us to be holy. The writer then went on to describe the process of gleaning. The owner of the field was not to harvest all that was grown. Some was to be left for the poor, so they could have enough to eat. Ruth and Naomi would have starved if not for the farmers who allowed for gleaners. It was while gleaning that Ruth met Boaz, her husband-to-be. It is a matter of going the extra mile. We heard about that in Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Most of the world is content to do as little as possible, but we cannot do that. We are called to more.

Gordon Cosby wrote: "I believe the only hope of our world is the existence of Christian communities which are completely real, in which there is no artificiality, no equivocation. We must come to the place where we can do what Jesus did, where we can watch the rich young ruler walk away and, with sorrow and ache in our hearts, let him go until he can come back on the terms of Jesus Christ. We have been so afraid we might lose potential members that we have been willing to take them on their own terms. Then we wonder why the church is relatively impotent and doesn't have the power to transform human life, to shake society at its very roots."

Tosa Avenue UMC was once a much larger church. We sometimes think that, because we are not as large as we once were, we cannot do great things. The Church of the Savior was never as large as we are now and they did all these things. Church of the Savior no longer exists. All of the ministries they created have become separate Christian non-profit organizations. They went "out of business" because they felt their entity as a congregation was no longer needed. I think, as a place of worship, we will always be needed, but what can we do in the community that is an expression of holiness – an expression of the inward and outward journeys?

I sometimes hear from some of our older members, "I used to do so much with the church, but I am not able to do those things anymore." I used to respond with the need

for prayers for the church. Yes, there is power in prayer, and I hope everyone is praying for the ministries of Tosa Avenue. However, I have come to realize that is not enough. Many of our members who are experiencing mobility challenges are still quite engaged in what is going on in the community, even if they cannot participate fully. We need those people to keep us honest. We need those folks to keep our feet to the fire. I need to hear, "What have you done this week," and if it is not enough, they need to challenge me (and to challenge the rest of us). There is no one here today who does not still have a role in this inward and outward journey.

I believe that our church has great work to do in the world. The world needs what we have to offer. How will we go "the extra mile" together?