

“Can These Bones Live?”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

University Baptist Church, College Park, Maryland

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. ~Psalm 19:14

I am honored to be with you this morning. Being here is a homecoming, quite literally. My wife and I spent eleven great years here in Maryland before moving to St. Louis. Several of you have been pivotal influences. Jerry and Judy Buckner have been gracious friends. I'm not sure if Jerry and I have eaten a lot of Chinese together or just chewed the fat, but I do know he's been an ever wise and encouraging mentor. Jeanette Holt, too. Without her direction, Broadneck Baptist would never have found me, nor I them, back in 1990. So, thank you. It's good to be home again.

And I'm at home with your pastor and his family. John, Karen, Jacob and Joanna opened up their home to me this weekend with real grace. Faithful pastors like John are as scarce as hen's teeth. Lots of pastors have heart, but, to be honest, they tend to be mindless, even sappy. And even a few pastors have brains, but they can come off heartless and dry. But you're fortunate enough to have a pastor like John, who approaches his faith with *both* his mind and his heart fully engaged by Christ's transforming love. It's like it dawned on him along the way that his head and his heart were connected like Siamese twins. If he tried to cut them cleanly apart, he might kill them both. Now, I'm not saying that engaging the Holy so wholly comes easily for John. It doesn't. But that's just one more thing I love about him: his *humanity*. I believe that's the secret of his humor--the passionately honest way he embodies his faith. He's all in, questions and all. Sure, he's got feet of clay, but this clay is of the Potter's variety. John has known the kiln's fire of God's fiery grace.

So I'm at home with you, at home with your pastor. But let's be honest, coming home is not always what it's cracked up to be. Most all the great spiritual teachers offer this litmus test: If you think you're making spiritual progress, try this: Go home and spend a few days with your family. There you'll find the truth of your growth. We've all got skeletons in the closet and they're scary. We all resist going to those places that are "too close to home." Maybe that's why we so rarely go there, why it takes something as serious as a heart attack or a funeral to take us home again—or, for us this morning, something like a Natural Church Development (NCD) survey.

In February, thirty of you brave souls and your Pastor took the Natural Church Development (NCD) survey. Yesterday morning we explored those results together. For the benefit of those who weren't with us, you should know that NCD researched over 1000 different churches on 5 continents covering 32 countries speaking 18 languages, churches large and small, well-known and unknown, in areas that were experiencing great spiritual revival and those that weren't. And

what they discovered after examining some 4.2 million bits of data is that *healthy* churches are *growing* churches. They make more and better disciples in loving obedience to Christ. And what's a healthy church? They discovered that all healthy churches, wherever they're found on God's green earth, embody in different ways the same 8 characteristics. Note that the emphasis is upon the adjectives: *Empowering Leadership*, *Gift-Based Ministry*, *Passionate Spirituality*, *Effective Structures*, *Inspiring Worship*, *Holistic Small Groups*, *Need-Oriented Evangelism*, and *Loving Relationships*.

Your survey revealed that UBC is a very healthy church, a community of faith that is on the right track in many ways. Your greatest strength is the love that you share with each other and the community. You may not be surprised at all to hear that UBC is also very gifted and strong in the areas of worship and pastoral leadership: your worship is inspiring; your leaders are empowering. But every church, like every person here, is a work in progress. We may say we have nothing to prove, but we all have something to *improve*. And UBC's weakest characteristic is (drum roll please): EFFECTIVE STRUCTURES!

Really? Sounds kind of anticlimactic, don't you think? When's the last time you got excited about church structures? It's hard enough to get people excited about church, much less the structures that comprise it. Instead, I hear people say that they're spiritual but not Christian, or that they're Christian but not into church, or that they love Jesus but hate the institutional church. Now, most every one of these persons has benefitted from a hospital stay, or from a college degree or two. But I've yet to hear anyone who's had a tumor removed complain that Georgetown University Hospital is just too well organized and staffed, or a college graduate whine that they would have learned so much more at the University of Maryland if they hadn't had to put up with professors' expectations, degree requirements, and all those unnecessary parking spaces. And the Terrapins would be National Champions if it weren't for all those silly rules and NCAA regulations. By the way, what's up with all the wasteful upkeep on those buildings on campus, like Byrd Stadium and Comcast Center? These sorts of comments would be seen as ludicrous, so why are we so turned off by the church as an institution with structures?

I'm a slow learner myself. I was having lunch with a friend one day, listening to him rail away against *organized* religion. It finally dawned on me to say, "I get it. So you're into *disorganized* religion? You'd be right at home in my church." What I really wanted to say was, "Good luck with that."

But I get it. When people would ask me years ago as a young pastor what I loved most about ministry, I never once blurted out, "Effective Structures!" I never ever said, "That's easy. Church administration! That and working late with committees!" Instead, I would have waxed elegiac about theological themes or philosophical questions or the wonder of community and the power of God to transform our lives. I might have even held forth about the need for change and justice in the world. It wasn't until I actually pastored awhile that I discovered that none of these things happen without structure. I saw that the way a church is organized, how it invites input and responds to suggestions and criticisms, how it makes decisions about its money and programming and mission trips and worship services and outreach efforts, how it pays the bills and folds the bulletins and cleans the toilets—all these things would not happen well without, well, let's just say it, the "C" word. No, not cancer—committees, councils, and coordination.

It's not very exciting or romantic. God had to drag me to this truth kicking and screaming. Heck, where I'm from it's the crazies that get *institutionalized*. They're the ones that end up *committed*! Yet here we are! Anything life-giving must be instituted to be nurtured and sustained—marriage, education, healthcare, you name it, even that thing of the Spirit called church. And institutions require commitment. So, let's face it: Confronting the need to restructure UBC is right where God would have us be.

The Bible is full of stories where God calls people to face things they'd rather not. I remember how pastor and author Will Campbell used to say that when he answered God's call he didn't know it was *collect*! Take Ezekiel, for example. In today's passage we're told from the get-go that this vision is "too close to home," that he did not want to visit the valley of dry bones. We read: "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones" (37:1). Catch the tone? It's called *ambush*.

God had to sneak up on Ezekiel, so he came to him in a vision. We'd call it a dream. Our dreams happen to us at night, when our ego is disarmed, when we're asleep. Lots of threatening visits occur in Scripture via dreams and visions. Like that angel that visited Joseph regarding Mary's pregnancy. Dreams are God's way of slipping past all the games we play, our protective rationalizations and denials. God slips on by in the night. Like a courier under fire, God crawls under the barbed wire of our defenses and delivers a letter to our heart.

God had to *grab* Ezekiel by the scruff of the neck. The Spirit sweeps by like a great bird and snatches him up, then drops him with a thud of dust in the middle of a valley of dry and clattering desolation. Jewish scholar and sage Abraham Heschel notes that Ezekiel does not seize the moment, the moment seizes him. He is overwhelmed. The moment of truth is "violently, powerfully urged upon him" (*The Prophets*, vol. ii, p. 224). Ezekiel's attention got grabbed, and he did not like it one bit. Early on in my ministry a red-faced man came up to me after a sermon in which I'd tried my best to be prophetic. He told me that I'd stopped preaching and had "gone to meddlin'." Clearly, Ezekiel feels that God has "gone to meddlin'."

And there in that valley Ezekiel is forced to tour the desolation up close. God, we're told, doesn't just take Ezekiel *to* the valley, God leads him *through* the valley. God gives him a tour "round and round" all these bones and we read that they were "very many and very dry." Everywhere Ezekiel looks is desolation and dessication. No, this is not where Ezekiel wants to be. It's downright unnerving, these bones. It's a hard word, reading these bones. As Ernesto Cardenal says, "We want God's voice to be clear as day, but it is deep as night. It is deep and clear, but with a dark clarity like an x-ray. It reaches our bones."

Just in case it's not clear, I'm suggesting that church structures are like these bones. They're the Rodney Dangerfields of our bodies—they get no respect. The skin gets lots of attention. Other parts get memorialized: the heart on Valentine's Day, the sexual parts and the muscles make the covers of magazines, even the hands in sculptures. But what about the skeleton? The skeleton gets no play, except maybe at Halloween as a spooky remnant of the eerie past or the lurking future. The bones are disregarded, until you fall and bust a hip, or blow a knee, or break something as simple as your little toe—then you realize how vital your yeoman bones can be.

And the same is true for the structures of your church, the skeleton for Christ's body. God wants you to take a close tour of your structures. What do they look like? As you move through this valley, how are you set for communicating with one another and making decisions? Some of these structures dried up a long time ago, their marrow so hard that there's no blood, no passion, being regenerated. They're very dry. Some are just flat-out broken and need to be mended. Some have begun to thin out, developed osteopenia, and need to pump a little iron and take a daily dose of Calcium plus Vitamin D. Some are in more serious trouble. Osteoporosis has set in and these infrastructures are at risk for fractures. This leaves you timid and in constant fear of falling. Maybe strategic planning needs to occur. Maybe your vision needs to be revisited, revitalized. Maybe your committees need, well, to meet. Maybe your leaders need a better sense of their giftedness and call. Maybe your church body has grown too reliant upon two very important shoulder-bones called John and Mark and that's why your back has begun to bend. Who knows?

Well, Someone knows. Someone knows. And what is known goes far beyond diagnosis and critical thinking, as important as these may be. As Ezekiel is taken by the arm through the valley God asks him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" It's a simple question, addressed to the one we call Ezekiel. But God doesn't call him that; we do. Other prophets get called by their personal names, like Jeremiah and Amos. But God never calls Ezekiel anything other than *mortal*.

At its best we know Mortal to be our true name. There's really no such thing as normal—only mortal. We are not God, not perfect; we're flawed and small with myriad maladies, the greatest of us simply Spirit-filled specks. We know it in our bones. And church at its best knows this. We're mortals. We're all here because we're not all there! We need each other. We need God. Someone once complained to William Sloan Coffin that the church was just a crutch. Coffin replied, "Oh, and you think you don't limp?"

Call us by our true names, God. Take us by the arm and help us see our church for what it is, bones and all. Then we can see those areas where we've fled far from home, where we're pretending to be something we're not, or where we're not trying hard enough to be who we truly are. Call us Mortal, Lord, and then we might be more at home with one another as we move through this valley. Maybe then we can drop our guard and bring to bear what's true and good. Call us Mortal, Lord, that we may find ourselves in a more honest place, vulnerable enough to share our flaws, to admit and confess before You and one another what's dry-boned dead about us, to confess as Bruce Springsteen sings that there are days, there are days when we can't tell the difference between our courage and our desperation. Call us Mortal, dear Lord, oh, please, God, call us Mortal, for then we're stronger, so much stronger than when we parade around on the shaky stilts of our strengths.

Call us Mortal, Lord, then maybe we can hear you when you ask, "Can these bones live?" *These* bones. Not *those*, but *these* bones. *Our* bones—never mind about that bag of bones over there. This is our church we're talking about, our structures. God's asking us and no one else. The question is dropped at *our* doorstep like an unwanted baby. Will we take it in?

God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And you know the answer. It swells up from the valley where you once felt good as dead. It stirs from the dark distance. It is known by many names. Some call it faith. Others hope. Many dare call it love. But the answer's always the

same, “O God, you know.” The tone is what matters. Ezekiel’s not shrugging his shoulders with a glib, “Search me.” Instead, he’s offering a prayer, “Lord, you know, even when we do not know. We believe; help Thou our unbelief. We’re trusting you to know.” Yes, it’s the tone. How you ask this of us, Lord, and how we answer you. Yes, God, we feel it, how you hold us and our unfinished business, how we hold on to you, how we hold our own. Yes, it’s beginning—the mending, the re-pairing, the clattering together, bone to bone, sinew, ligament, joint, the slowly unfolding spine, the God-breathed breath, the rising up—we feel it, in our very bones. Amen.