



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### “*Un-Terror Cells*”

Isaiah 61:1-2

September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Sermon by Dr. Matt Hook

*\* I read the term Un-terror Cells in an article by Brian McClaren.*

Isaiah 61:1-2. 1 “*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn*”.

The world has been changed for good. The term **Terror Cell** is now pretty well known. The 19 hijackers from September 11<sup>th</sup> were an example of one al-Qaeda cell, though they divided even further into four groups, each one assigned a specific airliner.

A terrorist cell is a group of 4-12 individuals working together for the purpose of either supporting or carrying out acts of violence against a target or populace. Terror Cells are mobile, autonomous, and flexible in their range of targets and objectives. Terror cells plot violence to spread fear to force change; seeing status quo as unacceptable. They move like a flock of birds, school of fish, or swarm of bees, and they can respond to changes quickly. All cells recruit, too, and all cells share a common and clearly defined enemy—big enough and bad enough (in their minds) to keep them tightly unified.

We live, on the other hand, not terribly unified, not terribly focused, but terribly alone. Trapped in unjust systems that isolate us, inviting us to treat people like objects, or labels, rather than as people. Prejudice happens along all sorts of lines because we often let our fears get the better of us. We think we can insulate ourselves from the rest of the world, which adds to the injustice. Like my friend said the day after the Columbine High School shootings, “Even the good kids only talk to the other good kids.” Total isolation and insulation: Is that our problem? Most of the world doesn’t know they are being offered a connection like no other, through a relationship with the living God revealed in Jesus Christ? Or that people feel left out, because we’ve left them out?

When you see who Jesus chose, who responded to his invitation, and who led the church after His ascension, you realize they were all people who needed to be delivered. And the longer I live, (especially the longer I experience myself as a husband and father), the more I realize my own need for deliverance. The good news is that he does it—Jesus does deliver—when we allow him to. What if we could get that message out to the world? That Jesus changes lives—that He delivers people? It’s what we want.

What we have to say to the world is so expansive and joyful that limitations of our language frustrate us. We know God is doing something amazing in us. We know God desires to change the world through us. (Jesus Himself called us “light of the world” and “salt of the earth.”) And we know that the people of the world need to understand these things if they are to participate in bringing in those wonderful changes that God wills for all humanity.

**The Social Gospel:** In some ways, you and I are the survivors of a theological earthquake that happened 120 years ago in the Methodist Episcopal Church (as it was called then). Some thought we needed to impact

society more, and others thought we needed to just worry more about people's souls. The Methodist Church 100 years ago leaned toward the Christian leaders who championed Jesus' most-used phrase, "*the Kingdom of God.*" These were the champions for social justice, working hard to communicate the idea that the salvation of God was much more than a way of getting people into heaven when they died; it was something to be experienced in this world. It was labeled the "Social Gospel." Salvation not only transformed individuals, but societies as well. People weren't just saved from sin for heavenly bliss. They were saved to be a people who would work for Jesus Christ on earth. Through them God wills to change the institutions of society so that they do good and deliver justice, making steps toward the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is one in which everyone acknowledges God as King and everyone relates to one another in ways Jesus prescribes by His love. Much like the early Methodist class meetings, which were key to changing the institutions of slavery and child labor in England.

Ideally, the world will be shaped and transformed, and justice will prevail. People will see the Gospel, and evil will be vanquished, poverty eliminated, and war will be no more. What a powerful image! Throughout the Old and New Testament, there is a longing for the Kingdom, when God will call all people home to Him. Jesus declared "The Kingdom is at hand!" His parables explain the Kingdom, and His miracles were signs that the Kingdom of God was breaking through.

In the Kingdom image, these earlier leaders found a way to emphasize some dimensions of the gospel that the church had been ignoring. The problem was, 100 years ago, they emphasized so much what God wanted to do in the world to move institutions into expressions of love and justice, that they deemphasized personal salvation. They passed over the fact that human beings even as individuals are self-centered. I don't need extra help to be radically sinful, in need of becoming a new person through faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. But years ago, they left that part to the fundamentalists. And a separation formed that never should have been. After all, the opposite of social gospel is anti-social, and the opposite of personal gospel is anti-personal. So today, we seek to preach the whole Gospel, as our church's vision says, that we may be a regional equipping center for Christ-focused life transformation for the unconnected 1000s.

It's not just for pie in the sky by and by, but also working here on earth for safety and peace and justice and shalom for all people. **Shalom** is the Biblical concept of deep peace; when all people would live together as brothers and sisters, when no one would be hungry, and everyone would have enough to live life to the fullest. Isaiah says it: "*preach good news to the poor...bind up the brokenhearted...proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.*"

The "year of the Lord's favor" is known as **The Year of Jubilee**. God's commands include the Sabbath day of rest and peace every 7<sup>th</sup> day. But there was more: There was the sabbatical year every 7<sup>th</sup> year, to let the land lie fallow. Debts were cancelled, indentured servants were released. It was a renewal of life with a fresh start for all. But it there was to be something even bigger. The Year of Jubilee was every 50 years. Economic equity and justice were affirmed. All debts were to be canceled, all land returned to its original owners, and even those in prison were to be set free. (In those days, prison was primarily for debtors, since most other crimes were punishable by death). Jubilee was good news for the poor. How many of you paid or are paying student loans? Imagine how you'd have felt if next year all debts incurred were canceled! As far as research shows, the Jews never fulfilled the Year of Jubilee. That was left for the Messiah, when he came.

In our passage this morning, Isaiah writes that the fulfillment of Jubilee will bring the new economic order in which the poor will be delivered from all oppression and freed to live life to the fullest. Everyone knew this was one of the signs of who the Messiah was, because He will declare this year "the year of the Lord" to Israel.

Now, Isaiah wrote those words around 700 years before the birth of Christ. People knew them. And we know them, because Jesus Himself read them before a crowd of people in Nazareth in his first recorded public sermon. Can you imagine being in the synagogue the day Jesus, the traveling rabbi walked up to the front, pulled out the scroll of Isaiah, and read those words? And then on top of that He says "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Luke 4:21! The crowd went wild, thought it was blasphemy rather than the Truth, and took Jesus to the edge of the cliff. But Jesus turned on them and walked through the crowd.

Something powerful was happening.

And equally powerful was that Jesus made this Kingdom of God-Jubilee central to His mission. Church, when we get it right, it will look something like the Year of Jubilee. Every revival, every major movement within the church, has involved good news to the poor. The close encounters people had with Jesus were salvation for deliverance from sin and physical healing, as well as a gift of well-being for the poor and downtrodden in the world. (Remember the woman with the alabaster jar and the Gerazene Demoniac?) Jesus worked for justice in a whole new way. Jesus ministered in Word and Deed, and so should we. Asking which is more important is like asking “Which is more important: breathing in, or breathing out?” It depends on which one you did last. ☺ He brought salvation, justice, mercy, grace, shalom, and jubilee where ever he went. He created cells of people living it out; and carrying His message, the Hope of the world, they changed it. When it truly worked, their message was shalom: the opposite of terror.

So this morning, I would like to propose the **Kingdom of God looks like an *un-terror cell***, and our church is a faith network and all the small groups, missions, fellowship, and ministries are "unterror cells." While terror cells plot violence to spread fear, faith cells plot good to spread hope. While terror networks believe change is pushed by fear and violence; faith networks believe constructive change is pulled by hope and love, service and friendship.

We too can innovate—on how we share the timeless message of God’s Word today. What would happen if more of us saw our faith communities—churches, small groups, circles of friends, mission teams, whatever—as cells in an unterror network that was constantly plotting goodness and hope in the name of Jesus? Our staff no longer has desk jobs, but network management posts to be in ministry...to our communities. Can our church be a safe space the Kingdom of God?

All that energy that went into the terrorist attacks 5 years ago. All that technology. All the strategy. All the timing. All the training. All the communication and research. All for a vile, evil act. Just think: What if all that kind of energy, passion, brilliance, training, years of preparation, communication and research went into something that could build people up, rather than tear them down? God’s salvation is such that we can do that. Jesus’ message was for just such a time! Claim his ministry. Remember it was Jesus’ first public message: “*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*(Our cell could do that in His name!) *He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,* (Our cell could do that in His name!) *to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,* (Our cell could do that in His name!) *2 to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor”*.

5 years ago, the world was changed for good. Thanks to Jesus Christ, may we, too, change the world...for good.