

Leadership Memphis / Diversity Memphis Annual Breakfast
Multicultural Memphis Keynote Address
October 27, 2009 ~ Hilton Hotel Ballroom
Rabbi Micah D. Greenstein, Temple Israel

This past weekend, I officiated a coming of age ceremony for a thirteen-year-old, known as a bat-mitzvah. The service took place outdoors far away from here in a makeshift chapel in the woods. I'm told that not far from there, a priest, a minister and a rabbi conducted an experiment they had been planning together since their friendship as chaplains at a nearby college. Given today's crowd of friends who are Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, it could just as well have been those three instead!

So the minister, rabbi and priest would all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it. Seven days later, they met to discuss the experience. Father Ed Flannery, who has his arm in a sling, is on crutches, sporting various bandages, goes first. "Well," he says, "I went into those woods to find a bear. And when I found him I began to read to him from the Catechism. Well that bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him, and Holy Mary Mother of God, that bear became as gentle as a lamb. The Bishop is coming out next week to give him his first communion and confirmation.

Reverend Billy Jones spoke next. He was in a wheelchair with an arm and both legs in casts and an IV drip. In his best fire and brimstone oratory, Reverend Billy exclaimed, "WELL, brothers, you KNOW that we don't sprinkle! So I went out and found me a different bear. And I began to read to my bear God's Holy Word. But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took hold of him, and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, UP another and DOWN another until we came to a creek. So I quickly DUNKED him and BAPTIZED his hairy soul. And just like you said, Father Ed, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the night praising Jesus.

The minister and priest both looked down at their friend the rabbi who was lying in a hospital bed. The rabbi was in a body cast and traction with IVs and monitors running in and out of him. He was in bad shape. The rabbi looks up and says, "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start!"

I will not start with circumcision but with sharing how honored I am to be with you this morning. Especially on the day after a new era has begun for every man, woman, and child in our great city with Mayor AC Wharton of Leadership Memphis and Humanitarian of the Year for Diversity Memphis leading the way.

In my prayer and blessing for our Mayor, I asked the God of us all to remind us what AC would have us remember – that it's not about him – *it's about us* – all of us. One Memphis doesn't mean uniformity. It doesn't even mean tolerating our multicultural differences. It means celebrating, appreciating and embracing the most unique living laboratory in America – Memphis. And I'll explain why later.

I applaud Dave Williams of Leadership Memphis, Jim Foreman of Diversity Memphis, and the fifteen community agencies and institutions for this third annual multicultural Memphis Breakfast celebrating communities of faith. Year #1, you heard a talk about economics, international companies and their economic investment in Memphis and how our community has something to offer multinationals as a community of choice. Last year, this breakfast focused on the over 70 nationalities totaling over 5000 students in the Memphis City Schools from all over the world who have made Memphis and Shelby County their home. But whether you moved to Memphis from a different nation or a different city, we all know the second question people ask you here after your name.

That question is...what church do you attend?!

With all the bad news we read about and watch in the news, I have some good news to share with you this morning.

If a person considering a move to Memphis - a Christian of any denomination, a Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Unitarian, you name it - if a person of any faith tradition is contemplating a move to Memphis, perhaps the greatest overlooked selling point is this Memphis community of faith – a faith community unlike any other in America - and not simply because of great gospel in the African American church tradition or the sizeable Southern Baptist presence in this part of the country. Our mosques are beautiful, the Hindu Temple is magnificent, the renewed Roman Catholic Cathedral is breathtaking, the Greek Orthodox Church is legendary, the Latino Church community is growing, and the synagogue I lead, Temple Israel, is the oldest and still the largest Jewish house of worship in the State of Tennessee.

But what distinguishes the greater Memphis Community of Faith - and let me be very clear - some are not interested in moving beyond their own theology and ideology - but for those who are part of this new paradigm which created the "Tear Down The Walls" for cities across the country to emulate – what distinguishes this faith community are three Ps- purpose, passion and philanthropy.

What's worth celebrating today is that the heightened purpose of this particular faith community isn't only about saving souls - it's about the Metropolitan InterFaith Association's motto - Faith in Action. According to this religious paradigm, saving lives is our paramount purpose rather than only saving souls. Not that they are mutually exclusive within our particular faith communities. My dear friend who brought dozens of former gang members to Christ one recent Sunday has certainly saved those young men's lives too! But outside his church and my synagogue, we hear God's call in saving the emergency room at The Med. Our purpose isn't just to pray about it, but to support Mayor-Elect Wharton for being fearless and tireless on the plight and funding of the only health net and point of access for the most vulnerable members of our society - the indigent, the poor, and the forgotten - not only for Memphians but for the sick and needy in Mississippi and Arkansas too, whose lives are saved because of The Med.

So our purpose as a community of faith is different than our particular prayers within our respective faiths. Our purpose, put differently, is to live the words we pray. We cannot merely pray to God to root out prejudice - for we already have eyes with which to see

the good in all people if we would only use them rightly. We cannot merely pray to God to end starvation - for we already have the resources with which to feed this entire community and world if we would only use these resources wisely. We cannot merely pray to God to end despair, for we already have the power to clear away slums to give hope if we would only use our power justly. We cannot merely pray to God to provide access to healthcare for the poor and forgotten, for we already have the power to convince the State of Tennessee and Congressmen of both parties not only NOT to decrease the subsidy to The Med but to increase it!

That's the purpose behind the Memphis Community of Faith - to pray as if everything depends on God, Christ, Allah, or Karma, or the Hindu path – to pray as if everything depends on your conception of God, but to act as if everything depends on each of us. Perhaps the motto for people of faith in Memphis living this new paradigm– no matter what faith tradition you follow or don't follow - is to do the most that we can with the time that we have in the place where we are.

And whatever reason brought you to Memphis – whether a job, a significant other, or any other reason, this place where you have landed and are now leading may be the most unique living laboratory in America. Why do I say that? Name another major city area in America with a population of approximately 1 million with virtually as many black and white citizens, with the balance a polyglot of Latino, Asian, and Middle Eastern. I recently hosted a delegation from a national organization in Manhattan as well as the Senior Rabbi of one of the leading synagogues in Los Angeles. They all came to Memphis to experience diversity. I said to my buddy who has a massive building in Koreatown and another one in West LA, “Steve, are you kidding me? Coming to Memphis to experience diversity when you live where you live?” Steve said, “You don't realize just how special Memphis is.” “In Los Angeles, we don't experience diversity continually as you do...unless you call the fact that my child and Denzel Washington's child go to the same private school in Beverly Hills as experiencing diversity!” I heard the same from the Manhattan delegation who work in the city and live in Westchester suburbs. “We read about multiculturalism, even pass it by and believe in it” one New Yorker said, “but the Memphis you showed me is an overgrown small town and major city that is a living experiment in diversity and all the challenges America faces – yet she's not past the point of no return.” “Why do you say that?” I asked this other gentleman? “Because you can get everywhere in 20 minutes. Sometimes it takes me 20 minutes just to get through the tunnel from my suburban home to the city,” this guy said.

A growing number of us across creedal lines have found a way to delve more deeply into our particular faiths while expanding our appreciation of the ways in which God finds expression in other faith traditions. We believe that you can be religious not only in the way you treat the Bible. You can be religious also in the way you treat others different than you.

There will be always be theological exclusivists who have no interest in reaching beyond those who believe one way or no way. I always say to people who think I'm going to hell, “I know you will be surprised to see Jewish people in heaven, I just hope you won't be disappointed!”

If you're surprised, that's fine, but if you're disappointed, or forget about Jews since Jesus was Jewish...if you really believe that Gandhi is burning in hell because your belief about who is in and who is out of heaven trumps Gandhi's exemplary life of non-violence and goodness, if you believe that, that's certainly your right, but that's neither the purpose nor passion of a faith community where our love is greater than our fear and where the old Negro spiritual, "We're in the same boat brother (and sister)" is our communal hymn. The Christians who share this kind of religious passion preach compassion for "even the least of these" rather than the notion that "I'm going to Heaven and you're going to Hell because you don't believe what I believe."

The question is whether we focus on those who have a problem with different holy paths to the same God or whether we showcase the living laboratory others are raising up to make Memphis a national model of interreligious dialogue and relationships so deep and so trusting, you can't possibly speak of an "other" because that man of a different creed and color is truly my brother/sister.

It's the same challenge our Mayor faces. We only have 24 hours in the day. Wish we had 30, but that's not the way God made the world. Do we spend every every second, every minute, every hour and every day on those whose thinking drives people apart?

What you leaders need to know is that not everyone in the Memphis community of faith is focused on consigning God's children in Memphis who are different to eternal damnation. To the contrary, those in the Memphis faith community who are passionate about the greater good right here in this city, are, in my judgment already setting a unique example for the world.

And that's the second "p." There are people with a passion for the greater good of so many different faiths represented here today who see their houses of worship as a gateway for action, change, and building a bridge rather than a barrier across racial, creedal and religious lines. Which is why another action item I would urge you to do when you leave here is to forge deeper relationships with those of different faiths if your co-workers' houses of worship aren't doing so already. Why? Because when you really get to know someone of a different faith who is as kind, decent, and good as you - if not better(!)- you are never the same again.

I don't know if you heard about youthful upstarts who wanted to embarrass a more senior tribal leader and take over the leadership of the tribe. They decided that one of them would hold a bird in his hands and ask the chief if the bird was alive or dead. If the chief answered, "alive," the upstart would squeeze the bird's head, break it's neck, and show everyone how wrong the chief was. If the chief said it was dead, the upstart would let the bird go free and prove that the chief had erred. So there the group stood, with its rebel leader holding the bird and asking the chief, "Is the bird alive or dead?" The chief answered wisely: "The choice is in your hands."

I see the role of communities of faith as uniting behind this notion that the choice is in our collective hands because everyone has the spark of the divine within them, everyone not only has value but can make a meaningful contribution to our community and world. That's what Diversity Memphis stands for and what I know Leadership

Memphis is trying to do in a big way - to move people from being passive consumers to being engaged participants in our community.

Most of you Leadership Memphis participants and alumni are already highly engaged participants in community efforts for the greater good, but we have the opportunity when we go to our offices this morning to impact thousands of others. I mentioned urging your community of faith to forge relationships with others, and how an issue like saving the Med is a religious and moral imperative, even if my coverage gets me in to Baptist, Methodist or St. Francis.

Yet another way to get engaged is to sign up and encourage folks to sign up for Common Ground, especially our houses of worship. Few multinationals have participated in Common Ground, so please pick up information on the tables and let's get our houses of worship and Memphians from different nationalities and backgrounds signed up for this model path to community and civic engagement across all religious and ethnic lines.

I've explained 2 of the P's – the purpose of the new paradigm our faith community is holding up and the passion behind it, but before I move to the third and final “P” let me sum up what I've said so far slightly differently - The world is too small for anything but mutual care and deep respect. The world is too great for anything but responsibility for one another.

Memphis – unlike larger cities without a feeling of true community or vacation communities which are created as getaways – Memphis more than any other city I have visited, is a living reminder that unless we learn how to help one another, we will only hurt each other. We can, must, and I believe we will, create a synergy for addressing the national and global issues of education, health care, safety and community right here in Memphis. The faith community, along with the business community and political community, must lead the way. Why? Because religion's task is to cultivate disgust for violence, sensitivity to other people's suffering, and the love of peace. Different are the languages of our prayers, but the tears at the Baptist funeral I attended 2 weeks ago and the one Jewish one I'll do this afternoon – the tears are the same.

One more point before I move to the final “p” - a comment arising from the words of the prophet Malachi 1:11, *“From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is Great among the nations, in every place incense and prayer is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among all peoples, says the Lord of hosts.”* The prophet Malachi is proclaiming that men and women all over the world, though they confess different conceptions of God, are really worshipping one God, the father of all humanity, even though they may not even be aware of it!

The purpose of this new paradigm for religious communication among people of different commitments is not the hope that the person spoken to will prove to be wrong in what he or she regards as sacred. The purpose is mutual enrichment and enhancement of respect, appreciation, and like the postcard for this morning's breakfast, realizing that if you want to see God's helping hands in this world, hold yours up and know that God has no other hands than ours to transform the Memphis that is into the one we know can be.

Which brings us to the final “p” that I’m convinced has everything to do with our faith community. And that fourth “p” is philanthropy. Memphis, this poor city, is the 4th most charitable in America. Did you know that? After LA, NY, and Chicago, it’s not Atlanta, Boston, Philly, Miami, or Dallas, it’s Memphis that has the highest per capita giving to charities of any other city in America. What explains Memphis’ off the charts generosity? Wealth? Hardly. The richest foundations in Tennessee aren’t in Memphis, they are in Chattanooga. Memphis is a disproportionately poor city. Memphis proves that philanthropy has less to do with wealth and more to do with generosity of spirit, since there are people on fixed incomes who are generous, and people materially blessed who are tight-fisted. What explains Memphis’ philanthropic spirit? What explains that giving back – not just time and counsel – but charitable giving – is the 4th highest per capita in the nation in a city struggling with poverty? I would argue it’s our communities of faith. We have proven in a poor city that philanthropy and greatness doesn’t have to do with how much you have. It has to do with how much you give. That is why, from those with limited incomes who tithe to the few foundations which give so much to the welfare and well-being of Memphis above and beyond what foundations in other cities typically do, the spirit of philanthropy and the spirit of the greater faith community go hand in hand.

In closing, the reason why this year’s topic is so critical in building a better Memphis, multiculturally and in every other way, goes back to something people forget that Dr. King once said. He said that when your character as an individual or city is built not on business foundations alone and not on political foundations alone, but when your character is built on a moral foundation however you live it, your contagious way of life can influence millions.

May this morning inspire you to influence the million Memphians within our collective reach and may your contagious leadership and community engagement help transform Memphis and continue the model we’ve just begun to create for Memphis, our nation and the world. Thank you very much.