



A River, Not a Dam

Week 2: Spilling Out

Lori Lampert - 10/09/2022

A dam holds back water. Obviously. And, as a person who loves going to Table Rock Lake, I appreciate the wonder and beauty of the lake that was created when the corps of engineers put in Table Rock Dam. Miles and miles of lake formed from the White, King's, and James rivers being held back by this enormous dam when it was completed in 1959. When you stand at the base of it and look up, it is incredibly impressive to imagine the weight of the water pressing against it. The force being exerted that is behind those concrete walls is huge. Dams are amazing feats of engineering.

As you look up at Table Rock Dam you can't help but notice the spillways. Without them the land above the dam would flood in our often wet winter and spring weather. With them water is released in controlled amounts. Energy is created. But sometimes the needs of the people and land above the dam make it so that the people below the dam suffer the flooding. The water gushes from the spillway so rapidly that Lake Taneycomo, and then Bull Shoals Lake, can't keep up.

Who set the parameters under which the spillways are opened? Who controls the volume of water being released into the lake below? Someone—or actually I hope multiple people—are watching the gauges. Opening or closing the valves. And what happens when there's water in the lake, but it's dry downstream? Again, decisions must be made.

A river, not a dam. This is who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke these words in John 7:

³⁷ On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸ and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

We are to let rivers flow freely through us. To let the life-giving water of Jesus Christ course in us and then out, traveling around the next bend, over the rocks. Not a dam, a human-made barrier, constructed to hold back that which doesn't belong to us in the first place.

As we watch the difficulty and problems continue to rise throughout the world, our concern cannot be only for ourselves, for those living above the dam with us. Our concern is for all humanity and how to bring everyone to safety, to peace... to the free flowing of living water.

As the body of Christ, as this particular body of Christ known as The Downtown Church, our service to the people of God is to be a river, not a dam.

Years ago, my daughter Emily told me about a book by Nadia Bolz-Weber titled *Pastrix*. Emily said I needed to read it and to not let the first word in the book, which I won't repeat here, keep me from enjoying the entire thing. She knows me pretty well. *Pastrix* is a word Bolz-Weber had heard describe her, a female pastor. I loved the book, and since then I have had a few opportunities to hear Bolz-Weber speak in person.

The first time was right after reading the book when she was at a meeting in Kansas City. I invited myself to attend. Bolz-Weber at the time was the pastor of a church in Denver called the Church of All Saints and Sinners. She is outspoken in her love for all people and authentic with her own struggles in life. There is no doubt she loves Jesus, has great compassion, and is not content to let the body of Christ just limp along. If you choose to read her books, and I would recommend them, do so with your eyes open to learning and seeing differently.

Nadia opened up the floor for questions and was asked by a pastor, of course, “What does your church do for missions.” In other words, even though she had spoken beautifully of her call to bring everyone into active

faith in Jesus Christ, there has to be a mission program too. Specifics. A list. Something that if we all followed step by step would assure that we were doing the right thing. I will never forget what she said, it has shaped my understanding of service ever since. Nadia said, and I am not quoting directly as too many years have passed, but she said “ My church is full of people who work in non profits and serve all week long. My job is to remind them of why they do it.”

I remember thinking ‘that’s it.’ If, as a pastor, I can cause those who call The Downtown Church their home to want to serve Jesus here, there, and everywhere, I know that would please God and move us closer to being the place where Christ and the community intersect.

Listen as Jesus describes our call as those who claim the title, “Christian.” I’m reading from Matthew 25 in the Message:

³¹⁻³³ “When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

³⁴⁻³⁶ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

**I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’**

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ “Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the

solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'

Jesus is saying be his sheep, not goats. I know I am taking license, but it sounds to me a lot like Jesus is saying be a river, not a dam. Move. Flow. Step. Swim. Wherever you are, wherever you wander, be of service out of your love for me.

Thirsty people in this world? Hungry people in our community? Yes, please help us as we serve through the Council of Churches, Rare Breed, and other agencies. I know there are those of you here who work for Crosslines, Convoy of Hope, Ozarks Food Harvest. You volunteer at the Salvation Army and other places in our community.

And I know there are those of you who cannot help but stop and give to the person with a sign on the side of the road. Who will buy a meal for the stranger on the street. Who chooses to leave a large tip simply because you understand how hard that person is working. Did you look in their eyes? That was Jesus.

Homeless or unsheltered people. Shivering, needing clothes. To which I would add people who are living on the couch of a friend, others who will be moving as soon as the rent is due. Children whose safe place is the school, and who don't know if the house they left this morning will be the same one they will return to when the bell rings at the end of day.

There are those of you who will stay up all night at Safe to Sleep and the shelters that open when the temperatures drop. There are those through Reading Buddies and Ozark Literacy Council and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Springfield who are giving of their time with children. The teachers and students of Macgregor Elementary School and those who need the services of One Door are blessed because of your generosity.

You are caring about how people learn to parent well through Good Dads. And, there are those of you who are the safe families in the neighborhood. Who give clothes and toys to others freely and often. As you do so, Jesus is pleased, because he said **Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'**

Sick and stopped to visit? In prison and you came to me? Perhaps the most challenging of all. I am grateful for the many of you who take our prayer ministry seriously and intercede on behalf of others. I am thankful for our Parish visitors who are connecting with people each month. And I would imagine you are aware of people in your life who are dealing every single day with chronic illnesses that require vigilance and treatments and ongoing changes in their lifestyle.

I would imagine you know a neighbor who has a loved one who has been or is currently in jail and is terrified. You know someone imprisoned by addictions whose family is struggling to figure out the next step. As we allow the blessings of Jesus Christ to flow through you as living water, we will find so many opportunities to look into the eyes of another and see Jesus.

Sitting outside the doors of this sanctuary is a pink house. You can't help but notice it. And yes, it belongs to The Downtown Church. Originally built to serve as a home for the pastor of this church 100 years ago, it has stood sentinel to everything that has happened on this corner. At one time when the church was overflowing with people, Sunday school classes met there. As the years passed and the church dwindled in size, it was leased to other agencies and people. It has been vacant since 2014. Since we began the renewal of this church, a frequently asked question is "what are you going to do with the house?"

For many years the answer was "nothing." There are far too many things to do with the rest of our property first. And we have done many of those things to care for this huge space entrusted to us. A new roof on the sanctuary, the building of a stairwell connecting all three floors, the renovation of our children's area upstairs, two new classrooms remodeled. Tuckpointing, sealing the bell tower, and fixing downspouts and other things too numerous to name.

But regarding the pink house, "nothing" is no longer the answer. As you leave today, or the next time you drive down Walnut, you will see nothing leads to something. The aging of our house is resulting in disrepair. The roof, windows, wood trim, are getting progressively worse. The years are marching across the face of our house. So the question became relevant for our board once again "what are we going to do with the house?" They began to explore

what it would take to restore it and what it would take to remove it. Either decision would take resources.

Other questions then began to shape our conversation. “What if the house was made available for Christ and the community to intersect? What if we offered it to a nonprofit whose work was impacting the lives of God’s people? What if in renovating this property we were planning for the “someday” when The Downtown Church might grow to need it again? What if this property moved from an eyesore to a gift to the community?

We could continue to be the controllers of the spillway. Only releasing resources to tend to those who live along the shore of the lake created by the dam. But is this who we said we would be as we began to live into our vision of being a place where Christ and the community intersect?

What if instead of holding on to this house, holding back our resources, functioning as a dam, we saw this property as an opportunity to let rivers of blessing flow through us into the community?

After months of due diligence and discussion, the board voted to move forward with the renovation of our house. The hope is to have the outside work completed before January to prevent further decay, and to have new electrical work done to meet the needs of 2023. Once that is complete we will most likely need volunteers to do some of the work inside to create a space ready to have open doors and serve others. At the same time, six Drury architecture students are helping us dream about all of our property, inside and out, and think creatively about how we use it all for the community seven days a week.

The generations that came before us, some who are still with us, set aside the financial means to do all I have described. They gave of themselves with resources and prayers, dreaming of the day this church would come back to life. To them we owe a debt of gratitude. They are the wellspring that out of their love and devotion to Jesus, began the river you and I are now called to continue.

If The Downtown Church is the place you have chosen to live out your faith in Jesus Christ, if our vision has become your vision, if you are a member or regularly attend, you have received a letter this past week asking you to

make a pledge to our budget for 2023. We do this each year so that we will know as accurately as possible what financial resources we will have in the coming year. We do this to understand how to plan, dream, move forward with our work as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Next Sunday we will ask you to make your commitment, to add your spring of blessings to that of others as this river of life flows forward. We will celebrate with a Bluegrass Sunday of worship and joy. And we will rejoice for what we will be able to do together for the community and the world in which we live.

This is who we are called to be as the body of Christ. Holding nothing back out of fear or selfish ambition. But allowing the Holy Spirit to move in us and through us. To see in the people we encounter the face of Jesus. To know that when someone is overlooked or ignored, Jesus is giving you and me the opportunity to serve.

To continue to contribute with your time and service to the many who need what we can offer: food, water, companionship, the words of a book read with enthusiasm to children, shelter for the night, clothes for the day, holding a hand in prayer. And sometimes an entire house.

A river, not a dam. Water that flows freely and unencumbered. Water that moves and picks up more water from tributaries and springs along the way. Water, living water that carries blessings to a dry and thirsty land.