

TK Book Chapter

“That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard”.

Those may not be the exact words that came out of my mouth, but over the years it is the phrase that best captures my state of mind when a friend told me about a new church that was about to launch on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Those words revealed both my Jonah-like view of God and New York City and the Abraham-like faith and courage of a husband and wife who left a comfortable life in the suburbs of Philadelphia to launch Redeemer Presbyterian Church. This is my attempt to honor the lives and legacy of Tim and Kathy’s influence in my life and the lives of my fellow urban pilgrims who sought to live out God’s vision of serving and loving this glorious city.

Here to stay

When I was first told about this ‘crazy idea’ I was already attending a church pastored by a gifted teacher with a national profile. Tim on the other hand was known only to a small circle inside the Presbyterian denomination with which he was affiliated. So why leave an established church just a few blocks from my apartment for a church that was more concept than reality?

Surprisingly it wasn’t the preaching but the impact of a phrase the Kellers uttered to a small gathering in their apartment. “We are here to stay”. Until that moment I didn’t realize how much I longed to hear those words as I was just beginning to experience the relational exhaustion and isolation that comes from calling Manhattan home. Reflecting back on that evening I realize how those words reached into what James Baldwin called the ‘irrevocable condition’ of home that we all carry inside of us. They met a longing for permanence and stability in my life at a time when most of what I saw around me was transience and relationships with shallow roots.

Given the impact of both Redeemer and its sister organization City to City it might seem like an obvious strategy to call Christians to root themselves in global cities. But it was no sure thing in 1989 as New York City was just beginning to emerge from a dark chapter, with few signs of the cultural and economic renaissance that would mark the following two decades. For example the apartment in which I lived during my two years at graduate school was across the street from Bryant Park which at the time was a haven for drug dealers peddling crack in plastic vials that crunched under my shoes as I made my way to the subway.

It was into that City that Tim and Kathy moved with their three young sons and became models of faithful presence. For the first decade of Redeemer’s ministry Tim intentionally turned down opportunities to speak at national conferences, telling me one time he’d rather spend two hours with 10 college students in Queens than speak before 1000 conference attendees in some other city. He was constantly meeting with small groups of Christians and seekers, whether at places like the Harvard Club on Friday mornings or college students on Friday nights. For a few months I had the privilege of partnering with him in a ministry to a small community in Greenwich Village for whom evangelical Christianity was more a community of judgment than grace. We would sit around small tables with just a handful of people reading and discussing Scripture. The point is that Tim and Kathy lived out the text that is most associated with

Redeemer's vision (Jeremiah 29:4-9) in which Christians are to see themselves as exiles called by God to love and seek the flourishing of the city.

It is a lot easier to talk and write about proximity, parish and faithful presence than it is to live it out. The allure of blog posts, social media followers, podcasts and book deals distracts many of us from the incarnational nature of pastoral ministry. And the well documented social disconnection caused by technology, not to mention the simultaneous disruptions of the global pandemic, political polarization and perspectives on race and justice have accelerated the commodification and consumerism of congregational engagement. This isn't a new challenge for the church. St. Benedict added the vow of 'stability' to the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to encourage the followers of Jesus to model Jesus' incarnation. This is not to say that blogs, social media, podcasts and books aren't important, and technology has allowed our congregation to stay connected during the darkest days of the pandemic. But the orthopraxy that flowed from Tim and Kathy's orthodoxy is a timely reminder that there is no substitute for Christians staying in places like NYC, forming deep connections with one another while living side by side with people who find your faith strange and sometimes dangerous. This after all, is what Jesus did.

Some of you are thinking

I grew up in a wonderful church community that loved Jesus and each other and where the Bible was faithfully preached and taught. But like many Christian spaces there was an unconscious assumption that everyone sitting in the pew agreed with the message. This kind of environment habituates Christians, like frogs in warming kettles, to lose the capacity to exercise a spiritual discipline that is key to formation, which is to doubt the very faith they claim to hold. In most churches doubt and faith are presented as non-overlapping binaries. You either believe or you don't. Worship services, sermons, classes and Bible studies are often crafted in a way that assumes the hearers are either unquestioning saints or lost sinners. So when I first heard Tim utter the phrase "Now I know some of you are thinking" in the middle of one of his sermons I could almost hear myself shout the words "YES! How did you know?!" In other words, it was the first time in the context of something like worship that my doubts were given permission to come out of hiding into the light of the mystery of faith, allowing me to experience Frederick Buechner's insight that "doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving"¹. Or as Tim put it in his book Reason for God:

A faith without some doubts is like a human body with no antibodies in it....Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide the grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive².

Living with the paradox found in the prayer, "I believe. Help my unbelief"³ can be frightening at first, but Tim's constant infusion of those apologetic antibodies was a chance for an entire community of exiles to cross what theologian Kenneth Archer calls "the desert of skeptical

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

² Tim Keller, *A Reason for God*

³ Mark 9:24

criticism” together. We were a community shaped by the permission to doubt. This shared experience has two related impacts. First, admitting and exploring unbelief often leads to the humble realization that having explored the possibility of leaving Jesus behind leads to the conclusion expressed by the Apostle Peter who when asked by Jesus if the disciples were going to give into their doubt and leave him as well said: “To whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life?”⁴ This in turn allows for spiritual conversations with those inside and outside the church to be marked by humility and curiosity as opposed to certainty and dogmatism.

Tim and Kathy modeled this humility and curiosity, regularly reminding staff and leaders that every event at the church should be crafted in such a way that assumed the presence of unbelief. We were to imagine a co-worker, friend or relative who was openly skeptical of Christianity sitting in the pew, classroom or living room and shape our liturgy, content and conversations accordingly. As many of you know this is not as easy as it might sound. But in this current moment that celebrates deconstruction of every truth claim, combined with the existential disruption caused by the pandemic in which so many people are questioning life’s meaning, the permission to doubt modeled by Tim and Kathy is as important as ever. Whether it is the rise of the *nones* (the religiously unaffiliated), the decreasing church engagement by Christians or the dogmatic divisions inside the church, the Kellers’ approach to doubt remind us of the importance of combining the rigor of exploring the intellectual aspect of our doubts (Making Sense of God) with the discipline of practicing God’s presence (Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering). In other words doubt resides in both our heads and our hearts, and oftentimes what we and others need isn’t just our questions to be answered, but our pain to be seen. And it starts with giving yourself and others permission to doubt.

Lost in the woods

I spent the better part of two years traveling to Tim and Kathy’s apartment to take seminary classes, the same apartment where I first heard the words ‘here to stay’ and the place they still call home. The apartment is full of books including a voluminous number of volumes of Puritan sermons and writings. One evening I remember a discussion about the amount of time it takes to explore and absorb the insights of the Puritans. Tim’s response was that reading the Puritans was a lot like wandering into a dense and beautiful forest, one that lots of people enter, never to be seen again. In other words there is always a danger that deeply engaging in one particular theological tradition can cause you to miss out on a much wider world of theological reflection.

I share this because it represents something core to Tim’s effectiveness, which is a curiosity of mind and heart that keeps him open voices outside his theological tribe. Tim’s humility and curiosity have enriched his preaching and writing and is one of the reasons he has been so effective in a place like NYC. It is also an antidote to the harmful sectarianism and polarization that currently faces the broader church. The rigidity and animus that marks much of Christian dialogue around subjects like politics and race is in part a consequence of pride and a lack of curiosity among Christians who are lost in the woods of their own streams. This is not to say that we at Redeemer or Tim discovered the perfect bread crumbs to lead us to some kind of

⁴ John 6:68, New Living Translation

Eden-like unity and theological creed. But it does open up a deeper understanding of God who is both the word made flesh and the mysterious Spirit who is like a rushing wind (Acts 2) that blows where He pleases (John 3).

The single most critical factor however that contributes to Tim's ability to speak to our culture with wisdom and authority is his love for and study of scripture. He might be known for his capacity to read cultural tea leaves, break down complicated philosophical and sociological positions and weave them into sermons and books but if you have listened to his sermons over the years it is his fidelity to God's word and its central message of the good news of Jesus that remains the center of his reflections. In the late 90's we decided to create "Vision Groups" as a strategy to connect more people to one another through smaller communities. Part of the strategy was linking the sermon text to the weekly written study guides which required Tim to write sermon notes' to those responsible for creating the guides. Those single spaced, multi-page notes are brilliant and practical commentaries that reveal Tim's detailed exegesis of each text and remain some of the most valuable resources for my own personal devotions and sermon preparation.

Yes, Tim has consumed thousands of pages of non-biblical material over the years that have informed his writing and preaching. But his reading of, and reflection on, the biblical text and story have always been and continue to be foundational to his contribution to the church. And as he has said that is because in a world of cultural confusion there is no book more important in challenging our ideologies than Scripture. God's word contains infinite wisdom and insight into the mystery of what it means to be human (anthropology) and our capacity to discern and live out of God's grace and truth as individuals and as a community (sociology). God's Spirit uses the words of Scripture to challenge our pride and alleviate our fear. They are the most beautiful and majestic of all the forests into which we can enter, with mountains, streams, valleys, and fjords, much like Tolkien's mythical "Middle Earth" that has been central to Tim and Kathy's imagination and curiosity. The scriptures are the place when in those seasons where we feel lost in the woods we find something like what Tolkien's character Samwise Gamgee discovered:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach⁵.

The Third (and only) Point

Anyone who has listened to a Tim Keller sermon knows that 'the third point' became shorthand for the inevitable resolution of the narrative tension of his sermons found in the death of Jesus on the cross. This now familiar formula was radically new to me (and I would say many who grew up in evangelical churches) and changed the way I understood the Bible and the gospel. I remember one time my mom, who would visit from time to time, saying that she always felt good about being a Christian when leaving a Redeemer worship service. The subtext of that statement reveals a lot about the experience of most Christians and their understanding of what

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

it means to follow Jesus. There are times of course when the Spirit will impress upon our hearts a weight that disturbs us into repentance, but the more obvious implication of my mom's statement is that most times the weight of moralism is thrust upon the congregant's back as they begin another week. "Do good. Be good. Or else".

Tim's consistent and relentless application of the good news of the cross to every text he preached, taught or wrote about flows from his own conviction and relationship with God and is anything but formulaic. Our hearts are like my grandmother's old concrete birdbath. Each day in the winter she would have to go out and break the ice so that the birds could access the water. Deep insecurity lurks in the human heart, manifesting itself in a cold self-righteousness and brittle fear. I myself am a recovering Pharisee who finds it much easier to convey moralism than grace in my preaching, teaching and living. This is why my congregation has heard me quote over and over again the quote that it is the 'work of a lifetime to live as if you are loved.' It's the love of God in the sacrifice of Jesus that needs to be experienced again and again, not just for our own hearts but also because it is the heart of the mission of the church. In Tim's booklet on "How to Reach the West Again" his analysis once again comes back to the 'third (and only) point':

We must never lose grasp of the difference between gospel grace and religious moralism. Why does the Protestant church constantly fall into the temptation to self-righteousness, dominance, and exclusion? Why does it fail to reproduce the early church's social mandate? Because it loses its grip on the very core of its faith⁶.

The historical impact of the crazy idea of planting Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989 will be written by individuals smarter than I. But the foolishness of the gospel of grace that was proclaimed and lived by Tim and Kathy and the community of fellow pilgrims who I've had the enormous privilege to get to know over the years saved me from a life of looking at a place like New York City the way Jonah looked at the Ninevites. My incredulity at this 'crazy idea' was the deeply rooted belief that God loved me because I was a good Baptist boy who went to Wheaton College. Over the past 30 years it has been the work of my lifetime to believe something far more amazing, that God loves me because he loves me. The proof of which are the scars of his Son.

Thank you Tim and Kathy.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁶ How to Win the West Again, Tim Keller , pg 51