

## Mecklenburg Ministries Annual Breakfast

### Bridge Builder Award Speech

10/16/13

I have to admit that I am humbled and more honored than you will ever know to be named a Bridge Builder; but more than that, I am honored to share this award with my friend, Russ Dean. I must say that I have benefited more from his friendship and camaraderie than has he, and I am grateful for his courage to ask me to be his “friend!” To share this award with this deserving servant leader who has given his all to Meck Min and Charlotte for the past 7+ years, that to me really is an honor.

I first want to say thank you to God without whom I would have no purpose, to Jesus Christ for whom I have pledged my life, and to the Holy Spirit for Whom I hope to always be a conduit; to my parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles who introduced me to God and pushed me to be my best self; to my wife, Madeline without whose support and partnership nothing I have done for the past 27 years would be possible; and to my daughter Ariyah for whom I strive each day to leave a better world. Thank you Tom for your introduction this morning, and for the “call” you issued for me to come to Charlotte some 11 years ago. Thank you to my Union family, my NAACP family, and my Moral Monday family (Forward Together...Not One Step Back!). Thank you Maria in absentia, Glencie for your leadership of Meck Min in these troubled times, and to the entire Meck Min family for an award I hope to spend the rest of my life learning to live up to!

It is an honor to be called a Bridge Builder. I remember the discussions we had with the Mission and Values Task Force about whether or not that phrase appropriately represented the work of Meck Min. We decided it summed up our core values as we strive to link people across the chasms of diversity, division, and difference that threaten our cohesion as a city, be it racial, cultural, religious, ideological, political, economic, gender-based, or sexual-orientational difference. So this award to me symbolizes what we as an organization are here to do.

When I think about what it means to be a bridge builder, I am drawn back to the first chapter of Genesis, chapter 1, verses 26-27:

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;'  
27 So God created humankind in his image... (Gen 1:26-27 NRS)

It is this notion of the tselem Elohim or the “Imago Dei,” or the “Image of God” that drives me to think it is necessary to be concerned about bridge building. These two verses declare that there is something special about human beings, that there is something Divine reflected in our human frame, that there is something sacred about us that deserves our respect, that deserves our reverence! This passage calls us to attend to the fact that human beings are more than a “tiny vagary of whirling electrons or a wisp of smoke from a limitless smoldering.” As Dr. King notes, “Every human being is a child of God made in God’s image and therefore deserves to be respected as such.” There is something valuable in us all; something that is valuable to our common Creator and therefore there is something in each of us that should be celebrated by all of us.

And that's where Bridge Building comes in for me. It is that requisite attempt to reach beyond the anesthetizing comfort of ourselves, beyond the familiar boundaries circumscribing those who are like us, and across the seemingly perilous chasms of human difference to encounter the Other in her or his own space. Though it may seem to be a humanist effort to seek a common core in all humanity, Bridge Building is actually a spiritual journeying as we seek to discern the reflected image of God in Othered skin.

To me it is a reminder that God is often with us, but we fail to see God because we imagine transcendence and forget God's incarnational tendencies. Though we are clearly not Divine (one look at the current debacle in Washington can disabuse us of this notion!), there is an aspect of Divinity that animates us! God is near us, among us, in us, and has been all along... but we tend to miss the ever present expressions of God because we tend to consider Othered human flesh as mundane, unimportant, unworthy of consideration. But there is more there and I urge us all to consider that.

One of my students once told me that the pastor of her home church always spent a great deal of time tending to the needs of those often marginalized, needy people who came to the church seeking assistance. When she asked him why he took such care with each of these otherwise unremarkable folk, he told her that whenever he encounters such people he notes that "That's just God in one of God's more unusual costumes!" I wonder if we thought of the disheveled homeless man, the formerly incarcerated unemployed man, the pregnant single mother of three, the immigrant family who just enrolled their children in "our" school, the observant Arab Moslem family that just moved into "our" neighborhood, the gay couple whose kid's new best friend is "our" daughter as God in disguise, it might just change the nature of our welcome of these Others, it might just change the nature of our embrace of them in their difference.

I wonder if the reason there is still poverty, there is still racial division, there is still internecine violence, there is still political discord, there is still hatred is that we do not see the victims of these evils as expressions of God. I wonder if the reason our state and federal legislators can develop policies that denigrate, disenfranchise, dispossess the poor, the elderly, minorities, women, children, and immigrants is that they do not see them as bearers of divinity, as those worthy of consideration. I wonder if we could just change the way we look at Others, we just might change the world!

This is to me the essence of Bridge Building, seeking to overcome those things that separate us so that we might more clearly see the expressions of God sitting right in front of us. I commend this type of work to you all and I pray that we may all be Bridge Builders in our own right, seeking to foster fellowship with those we might otherwise avoid and seeking to embrace those we might otherwise shun. This is our common work, a work we all can do! And this is my promise to you; if when we look at each other we could finally strive see beneath the different skin, beneath the different clothes, beneath the different customs, beneath the different faiths, beneath the different ideologies, beneath the different orientations, beneath the difference; then we might just peer behind the vale that hides the very face of God.

May God enable us to see God's Self in every face! Amen!