

## **“Once More Unto the Breach”**

Isaiah 55

It was in November 2008 that my husband read an article in the local paper about Ruth Graham and her ministry and emailed them to see if they'd consider coming to Brockville. Ruth Graham, as I think all of you know, is Billy Graham's daughter. Now I know what it's like to be a P.K. ... a preacher's kid, but the pressure of being a BGK: Billy Graham's kid, can't have been easy. In her adult life she has experienced a great deal of pain and struggle. She had two difficult marriages which ended in divorce, as well as struggles with her children who have at various times with dealt with drugs, bulimia and unplanned pregnancy. Her life was hard and she couldn't help but notice that it seemed even harder when she went to church. At church she felt like she didn't measure up and rather than feeling supported all she felt was guilt and a reminder of how bad her life was. With time and the support and love of her parents and by the grace of God, her pain has turned into her ministry. That's often the way God works. God does not cause the pain in our life, but God will use that pain for good. Ruth's ministry and message is that we need to be more open and honest as individuals about our struggles and we need to as a church cultivate a culture where people feel safe sharing pain and being real so we can move towards healing.

I feel a little sheepish that when I went on maternity leave, we were just in the beginning stages of planning for the conference. Now I arrive back and all the hard planning and work is done! I am very grateful to Doug Mather and the chairs of each of the teams and everyone who has and will help out with this conference. But I think if you talked to anyone who has been in the center of planning for this event, they will all agree that there has been more than hard work behind this event. I believe this event is truly blessed by God and that it will be an incredible blessing to the community.

I can't believe we are sold out. I remember thinking at the beginning that if we get 500 or 600 attending the conference it would be fantastic but that 400 was more realistic. Now we've had to turn people away because we just can't accommodate more than 1000. And it's not just in the numbers that I see the hand of God. There are several teams that were set up to help prepare for and run the conference such as Hospitality, Welcome, Arrangements, Promotions, Products, Follow-Up team, and I'm sure they've all had their share of challenges and blessings, but I've been privy to the Prayer team because my mother is the leader of that group.

My mother made a couple of phone calls at the beginning to a few friends and to some local churches. From the beginning she felt called to involve other churches, but she didn't feel like her phone calls were getting anywhere. Mostly she left a few messages. In truth she's a bit of a reluctant leader. She's happy to be *in* a prayer group but she was a bit reluctant to lead one. Nevertheless, week by week the numbers of the prayer group kept growing. What's funny is that my mother suggested at the beginning that they meet once a month to pray and the group all said no way, once a month wasn't enough. I remember my mother telling me after the first session "They want to meet every friggin' week! Every friggin' week!" So since the Spring, every friggin' week, people came from other churches to pray for us. And, every single week new people keep joining the group through word of mouth. There are currently people on the team from Centennial Road, the Pier, First Presbyterian, First Baptist, St. Lawrence Parish, St. Francis, St. Paul's, Maitland Community Reformed and the Wesleyan Church and of course Wall Street. There is also one member who drives from west of Kingston; another comes from Ogdensburg and deals with border line-ups every week. So the question I have is, if you were asked to be in a prayer group for another church that was hosting a conference and the other church wasn't even your denomination and it's summer time and maybe an hour's drive away, would you go to pray for their conference... every friggin' week? Not very likely.

Tonight there is an ecumenical prayer meeting. (Ecumenical just means 'bunch of different churches hanging out together). Every once in a while the area churches get together to pray for the community—this is completely separate from the prayer team for the Ruth Graham conference. And yet because of the conference we are hosting this coming week they decided they needed to have a special one. So people from many local churches are meeting at First Presbyterian at 6:00 tonight and everyone who comes will be divided into groups to pray for local churches and community places like schools and city hall, but every single group will also be praying for Wall Street for the Ruth Graham Conference. So now you've got a choice. You can

come back for worship here at 5:50 or you can meet at the Presbyterian Church and pray for the city and our church.

So why are so many people from so many different churches praying for us? It's not just because they really think we need prayer. And I don't think it was my mother's persuasive phone calls or that they are just being nice and charitable to our need. You know we talk about working together with other churches and we really believe it doesn't matter what church community you attend. I've even referred people to another church not because I didn't want them here, but because I knew they would experience God better in another setting. Despite the talk it's easy to get into a kind of competition with other churches or to start comparing ourselves with another church....which is ridiculous because God needs all of us and God has called us all to different ministries. But to see in action the different churches coming together to pray for a conference that we are hosting here is incredibly humbling and inspiring and in it I see the hand of God. People who have joined the prayer team from other churches have all experienced something that kept them coming back. They've all said: the Holy Spirit is moving. The word that I keep hearing is Revival. There are many who believe that a Revival is coming to this area.

What is a Revival? Throughout history there have been places and times where Christianity has burned brightly and an unusual number have come into a genuine relationship with Jesus. Times like the Reformation in Europe in the 1500's & 1600's, the Great Awakening in the U.S in the 1700's and 1800's, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Welsh Revival, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Azusa Street Revival, several in Asia, South America and Africa, and interestingly, the Toronto Blessing in the 1990's is counted in chronologies of great world revivals.

Will the St. Lawrence River valley experience a revival? I don't know. That's probably more for history to say anyway. I do know that the Holy Spirit is moving and moving powerfully. I felt it and I'm not the only one. And for some reason here at Wall Street United Church and with this conference is where people are feeling the power most strongly.

This summer my husband I went to Maine with our two youngest kids to visit a friend. While we were there we went camping. It was a weekend and we literally got the last site available. As Murphy's Law would have it, we ended up camping next to a very large group of yahoo's who's goal for the weekend was to get completely wasted. They were classic rednecks...don't get me wrong, some of my best friends are rednecks. ☺ They all had pickup trucks and they had an unneutered pit bull named Rex who was tied up but occasionally got loose and wandered around. Anyway, apart from being a bit too loud and way too drunk they were mostly fine. But at one point in the night as Alex and I sat by our little camp fire chatting while Maisie and Petra were asleep, a couple came over to their truck parked close to our site and we couldn't help but tune into their conversation as he started saying to her "I hate you, I hate you so much you F-n c-word." He just said it over and over. And she clearly had heard this lots before because it didn't seem to faze her, she just responded "Oh Mike shut up, you can be such a jerk sometimes. Just give it up". And then they drifted away back to the main party. I felt ill hearing that conversation. I felt for this poor woman who wasn't getting very much love out of that relationship and I couldn't help but think that Mike's life had to have been lacking in love too. You can pretty much guarantee he'd heard the words 'I hate you' a few times in his life, maybe as a child. I don't know. Maybe you've been on the receiving or giving end of something that was a long way from love.

It reminded me deeply that the ministry we are called to at this church is so important. Before this conference and with this conference and beyond this conference, God is calling us here at Wall Street to open our doors and our hearts to people who are broken: people like you and me and others who are struggling with addictions, depression, anger, fear, control issues, mental illness or caring for others with hurts, habits and hang-ups. This has been our special ministry and we've been on this journey for a few years but we need to continue down this path. We need to truly reach out in love and help bring healing to people.

I've been reading a great book called *Jesus Freak* by Sara Miles. In the book she writes: "If you want to see God, sometimes you have to sit in the smoking section". (That doesn't apply to those of you who are trying to quit smoking!) ☺ It means we need to go where we may not be entirely comfortable. We have to be willing to go to the painful and messy parts of peoples' lives. We need to be willing to share God's love and mercy and help people through their rough patches. The incredible and wonderful thing is that as we reach out to people who need to feel love and acceptance we end up experiencing God's love in the places of our own lives that desperately need it.

I called my sermon *Once More Unto the Breach* which is from Shakespeare's Henry V. I never did study that play, but it is the King's rally cry to once again charge and attack the city through the hole in the wall. By the grace of God, the walls between our churches are coming down, and that is an amazing thing. But I'll tell you they're not coming down so we can sit together, smile sweetly and sing Kumbaya. They are coming down so that we can go out to the highways and the byways, to Tim Horton's and King Street, to the Nursing homes and the hospital wards, to the Food Bank and the High Schools and wherever else you find people who are afraid and lonely and wanting to know that someone cares. And that someone loves them.

Here at Wall Street we have been called to tap into the depths and roots of our tradition and faith and move beyond our walls with the light and love of the gospel of Christ. As we do, we will see God working marvellously and lives changing. So join the prayer team in praying that this conference will make a lasting difference in our city and surrounding area and among our churches, in our own church and in our own lives. It is always amazing to watch God at work. But we are called to do more than sit back and marvel --- we are called to join in, to answer the call and reach out.

Thanks be to God. Amen.