

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: How to Make a Difference

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, October 9, 2016

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 18:1-8

¹ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

⁴ "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Luke. Thanks be to God.

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I was required to take something like six credits of art classes in college. The first class I took – Art 101 – included creating a piece of art based on an axiom or metaphor from our common language. So I created a sculpture out of Styrofoam, toothpicks and green paint to represent the adage “seeing the forest for the trees.” It was a horrible project but I got an A because my teacher loved the metaphor, the thinking and meaning of it all.

Then I took a photography class. I had saved my money and bought a Pentax K1000 SLR camera for \$200, which was and still is a LOT of money for me. Of course this is the day and age of film – no digital photography. And my camera was fully manual. There was not one “automatic” thing about it. So every change of f-stop, every nanofocus, every consideration of speed and light had to be thought through, it had to be considered, decided and implemented. And, as the professor told us, the best you could hope for was one good shot out of a roll of 36. So we had to be prepared to take a lot of photos and use a lot of film.

The whole semester we shot with black and white film. We learned how to take the photos and we learned how to develop the film in the dark room and print the photos. I have to tell you I loved this class. I loved it but it terrified me because every week we had to show our photos and then everybody got a chance to critique them in front of the class. I’m just no good with public humiliation so this idea was indeed a terrifying moment for me.

Our first assignment was to take a series of photos simply to show the contrast of dark and light. Black and white film is unique in being able to show the shadows and the crevices. So we were told to find subjects that revealed this play of dark and light. Well, winter semester in Michigan means that there is snow everywhere – so the “light” part of the equation was pretty easy. The trick was finding the contrast. I took a series of photos of the firewood pile at my neighbor’s house. They were pretty cool and they turned out well. So no public humiliation that week in class. Thank goodness.

And so the semester continued with our assignments – indoors, outdoors, unfocused, landscapes, portraits, on and on. There is something about being behind the camera that you see things you don’t usually notice. I’m sure you have had that experience of trying to take a picture and then realizing that it will look like the plant in the background is growing out of someone’s head – or even in news events when the police confiscate cameras and video cameras because of what will be revealed in the background or scene. It’s amazing how much you notice.

Our last assignment in class was to take a series of photos that revealed the background – a series of photos to show what we had discovered while looking at something else. So in my home town – a university town of 25,000 people, I walked around and took some pictures, developed the film and got ready for the final exam where one last time we showed our work to everyone.

I set up my series of seven photographs on the easels and everyone walked around. The professor pulled out his magnifying glass on some of them and then turned to the class. Dead silence as they stared at my seven photographs.

A man sleeping on the ground in the corner of an industrial lot up against a brick building. A man sleeping on a park bench with bags of his belongings sitting nearby. The dark shadows under the

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bridge at the freeway that runs on the East side of town, with two or three people living on the embankment. Silence.

The professor began the critique with the technical questions – shadow, light, exposure, focus, framing, printing, etc. And then, he asked questions about the content. Now, granted, I was a townie, having lived in Mt. Pleasant since third grade and most of my classmates were mostly here for college and living on campus. So maybe I had an advantage of knowing the town. But not one person in the class thought I had actually taken the pictures in Mt. Pleasant. They were sure I had gone out of town – the state capitol, Lansing, Grand Rapids maybe, or Detroit even, but not Mt. Pleasant. There are no homeless in Mt. Pleasant! How can that be! This is a middle class university town in the middle of the heart of Michigan’s agricultural community. How can it be that people are homeless here?

And yet there it was. In black and white prints on seven easels in the room.

Taking photos didn’t change anything for the men in the pictures. I didn’t speak with them; I didn’t get their permission; I didn’t look them in the eye and encounter them in an active way. Truth be told, I was a little afraid of them and taking photos at a distance was all I could do at the time. Yet, I saw them. I SAW them.

The world has changed since 1978. Thirty-six years later, there are not only more homeless but those who are homeless have coalitions and government agencies working on their behalf. The homeless themselves are standing at the drive-thru of Starbucks asking for a handout; or standing in the median of the road as the cars slowly approach the freeway on-ramp. We no longer have to look far to see the outcast of society, the beggars, the needy and the homeless. Now that is not to say that there isn’t also a significant segment of society that is invisible to us – that finds themselves so far outcast that they no longer want to engage with society or at least not outside their own community of survivors.

I think this means that part of our job as Christians is to be what Janet Hunt calls a “Detective of Divinity.” We are detectives – looking for the lost and lonely, looking for the ways God is working in the world that might still be invisible to us, searching for the ones who need healing and belonging.

It is a fascinating truth that when we encounter a stranger God has already been working in the life of that person just as God has been working in ours. When we encounter a stranger, there is already a piece of divinity within the other person – and I would argue especially so if the stranger experiences this world as an outcast. God has already found the stranger; we are just catching up.

There is no judgment of their past or circumstance. There is no judgment about what might have brought them to this place or why they are stuck in this moment, if indeed they are stuck at all. This is not a moment for public humiliation. Indeed, this is the moment where you are Detective of Divinity – where your goal and objective is to see God in the stranger.

Last Thursday, 15 of us gathered in the Fireside Room. We set up an assembly line of granola bars; fruit bars; candy; combs; Kleenex; plastic forks, knives and spoons; quarters; water; gum; chips; dental floss; shampoo, soap; dish cloths; toothbrushes and toothpaste and so much more. We set up

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three tables and then walked the circuit to fill 50 large, two-gallon bags with all of the Essentials for someone who lives on the street, who asks for help, or otherwise begs at the side of the road.

We were not the ones receiving the gift of these Essentials bag but there was not one person who was not grateful to be there. Grateful. Thankful. For the opportunity to give. We are grateful that we have an abundance to share; we are grateful that God has been working in our lives and given us a place where we belong; we are grateful that we can see God in each person, no matter their circumstance.

So today we are going to distribute these bags to each of you. Everyone gets one. We'll move the extras to the Fireside Room so if you want to take two or three more to give away, please use them.

It's an interesting story – this story from Luke where Jesus heals ten lepers. Ten people who are sick and outcast. Ten people no one wants to see or have around. They call out to Jesus and Jesus sends them to the priests and they were healed. And out of the ten, only one came back to Jesus with gratitude. It's a pretty thankless job for Jesus. Yet he sees the Samaritan and he offers a blessing, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

So I want to tell you two things:

1. Don't expect the stranger to say thank you when you offer the Essentials Bag. Some people may think it is not what they need, even though it is what you are offering. They may have wanted something else. And that's okay. You are not doing it for the gratitude. You are not doing it to be thanked. You are doing it because you have seen God in them and this is an act of gratitude from you to God.
2. The act of recognition, of acknowledging another's humanity, this is a spiritual practice for your life. To look at another person, to see God within them, this is a spiritual practice that expands your heart and fills your soul. This is an act of belonging to something bigger – belonging to God's larger purpose. And through this practice Jesus will offer you the same blessing: "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Amen.