

TEXT: Philippians 4:10-13

November 11, 2007

TOUCHING HEARTS, CHANGING LIVES

Once a year, usually in November, pastors all across the country are called upon to offer up a sermon designed to encourage generosity and stimulate their congregation's sense of stewardship. Usually such sermons start with a joke or two—after all, everybody's a bit nervous about the annual pitch for pledges, so why not loosen them up?

Then, once folks are a bit more comfortable the preacher gets theological and draws on biblical references to stewardship, sacrifices and tithing. He or she might make some comments on a text like the one I just read from Philippians.

It's a good approach. I've used it myself. But this year I thought I'd take a different tact. Not that I don't think God wants you and me to be good stewards. Not that I don't think we should consider tithing. Not that I don't believe that sacrificial giving is a godly thing to do. That's all good stuff. But I thought I'd take a different tact because it's important for you to know just what your giving makes possible. For it is because of your gifts that God is able to work through this congregation touching hearts and changing lives.

Anthony de Mello once said "The shortest distance between a human being and Truth is a story." So let me tell you a story. Let's call it "Last Week at Saugatuck."

It's Friday, November 2, and our church secretary, Marcia Harrington is busy putting the final touches on the church bulletins. Each week she compiles, edits and prints a 16-20 page program for each of our two worship services on Sundays. This Friday is no exception.

Later in the day, six confirmands arrive in the parking lot to meet me and Georgette Huie, our Director of Youth Ministries, to head off for their fall retreat. They are an energetic bunch, and they've brought their pillows and duffle bags. (You'd think we were going for six weeks, not overnight!) We load up a van, and once everyone is piled in we hit the road. It's four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and who knows what sort of traffic we'll hit as we head towards Ivoryton on 95. I'm surprised to learn, as we drive along, that they know all the words to Billy Joel's "Piano Man."

We stop for dinner at Chili's outside of New Haven. Some sort of chocolate thing is devoured at the end of the meal—six or seven spoons dipping into its fudge topping!

When we arrive at the Incarnation Center, Georgette helps the kids settle into their rooms, while I go off to the activity center to set up the labyrinth. At eight or so, another young person arrives; her parents drove her up after play rehearsal. That's dedication!

The labyrinth proves to be a moving experience for the kids. At first, they are not quite sure what to make of my challenge: “Think about where are you on your journey with God.” But then it starts to sink in. Many of them stay for several minutes at the center of the labyrinth, and as they walk out, their pace is much slower. When we sit to talk about it I am astounded by the depth of their observations. They speak of the twists and turns of their own lives, and of a new found realization that God does matter to them.

The formal part of the evening ends with communion. I speak the ancient words, “This is my body, this is my blood . . .” And I am reminded again that these children, these young people turning into adults, are already a part of the body of Christ, even before they join the church and become members.

The next morning, we are taken through a low ropes course by an instructor from the Center. The kids are delighted when he tells them they are finishing the challenges in record times! It is a drizzly morning, and hair is getting all stringy from the dampness—but they are unfazed. And when he takes them to the barnyard, filled with llamas, goats, ducks, and chickens, they are as excited as first graders! I can’t help but laugh as one of them walks around holding a baby goat, and another has a chicken sitting on her shoulder.

As we return that afternoon, many of them sleep in the van. A sure sign of a successful weekend!

Sunday morning, I’m up at 6:00 AM and here at church by 7:00. It’s my usual Sunday morning routine—I bring a cup of coffee and a muffin to my desk and take care of a couple of details before the first service. Around 7:45 the first of our Deacons arrive to set up communion. Then Abby Peterson, our Director of Christian Education comes through the door to get ready for the monthly meeting of our dedicated Church School teachers.

As Caesar Storlazzi starts the prelude the 8:30 worshippers settle into their pews. It’s a loyal crowd at 8:30—very consistent in their attendance. You can count on Roy Spies to ring the bell, and Betty Raila to greet folks at the door. It’s a small service, usually around thirty or so. The hymn sing that starts the hour, is a popular element—and this week is no exception. The words of Francis Assisi and Martin Luther fill the air as we sing “All Creatures of Our God and King” and “A Mighty Fortress.”

Elwood Betts, one of our longest tenured members, offers the Anniversary Moment. He’ll share it again at 10:30. He tells a funny story about how he was shanghaied into attending church school here by the then Pastor Elliot. He speaks of Betts family weddings, baptisms, and memorial services, and reminds those of us who are so much newer to Saugatuck, of the rich long history we share in this place.

Paul Cahill, chair of the Stewardship Committee, leads the congregation in an exercise designed to stir up memories of saints who've touched our lives. And then Bonnie Brown, one of our members and a retired UCC minister, delivers the sermon.

We gather at the table up front and celebrate communion, and then we join hands. We do so every Sunday. And after I offer the benediction, we go around the circle and introduce ourselves. There are a couple of new faces, who are warmly greeted as the circle breaks up.

Caesar heads off to lead rehearsal for the adult choir, while in the Daniels Room, Craig Gillespie is warming up the Youth Choir—and down in rooms 7&8, Brad Peterson puts the Children's Choir through their paces.

I head up to the Teacher's Circle meeting, where Abby is representing a wonderful curriculum for Advent that she and Kathy Ross have written.

The 10:30 Service has most of the same elements as the 8:30 version—but it's a much bigger crowd—six or seven times larger than the earlier service. Paul does his exercise again, and this time some individuals share their thoughts with the entire congregation. The power of personal testimony can never be underestimated.

After worship folks traipse downstairs for a lavish fellowship hour brunch prepared by the Stewardship Committee. Meanwhile, the High School Youth Group meets upstairs with Georgette. The fifteen or so young people are excited by the prospect of a Mission trip to San Francisco.

Monday rolls around, and as I come into work, the twelve steppers are pouring out of the building. If you've never been here at 8:30 in the morning, you just don't really comprehend how many folks are touched by our fifty twelve step groups. Meanwhile, parents are pulling up with their children to attend Nursery School.

I check my e-mails, answer a phone call or two, greet Marcia as she arrives, followed by Rosemary Smith, our bookkeeper. At ten, a pastor from our area, who is one of my spiritual directees, arrives for our monthly session. Over the course of the month I meet with a dozen folks for one hour sessions. We explore together their prayer life and their journey with God. Some of the folks are parishioners, some of them are clergy and two of them are seminarians at Yale.

That afternoon I get a phone call from Lisa Feistel. Her partner Doreen's sister Donna, has been rushed to the hospital; she has had a massive heart attack. Lisa and Doreen are on their way from the Cape. I head over to St. Vincent's. I meet the family. We sit and talk, and pray. It doesn't look good.

And it's not. Early Tuesday morning I get another call. Donna has passed on. We plan to meet later in the day to discuss memorial service arrangements.

I drive down to Nyack to meet with my prayer partner of many years, Tom Willingham. We've been meeting together for over ten years! We share the complexities of our lives, and pray for each other.

When I get back to Saugatuck around eleven, and round the corner, I pass the garden, where Peggy Brady, Colleen Plantiga and my wife Linda are putting the flower beds to rest for the winter. They do such most every day I am astounded by the beauty of they place they and others care for.

When I walk in the building the Crafters are leaving. They meet every Tuesday and turn the simplest things into beautiful Christmas ornaments and decorations! They love to good jokes and as they work and talk it's not uncommon to hear a burst of laughter coming from the room.

Meanwhile, Susan O'Guin, our Financial Secretary, is posting pledge information.

That afternoon I meet with Doreen and her family. We plan for a time in the service when folks can share their own remembrances of Donna.

In the evening the Board of Christian Education gathers for its monthly meeting. Plans are made for upcoming events and activities, as the Board keeps before itself the goal of helping us to be a community that is always learning, always growing. It is just one of the many boards and committees we have that do the work of the church.

The Missions Board is also meeting finalizing plans for the annual Thanksgiving Feast. The hundreds of hours involved in preparing the meal don't seem to faze folks like Don O'Guin, Susie Benton, Mia Costanza, Mary Ann West and Ricki LeTowt. The sign-up board is beginning fill, but they still need many more volunteers.

Wednesday morning, I'm at Sherwood Diner at a 7:30 meeting with our moderator and vice-moderator Kim Mathias and Michael Hendricks. Our agenda is full as we discuss our leadership needs and several other important matters. We know each other so well, that Kim is shocked when Michael and I order eggs. We always get French toast!

From there I rush back to the office to get ready for Wednesday Bible Study. We're plowing through Exodus at the moment, and our attention is largely taken up on this morning by a discussion of the significance of idolatry in our own lives.

Wednesday is also our day for staff meetings. Dave Doyle shares some of his building concerns with us, including an update on the broken circulator pump. The sanctuary is still cold—but we've been promised repairs this week. Vanessa Taber, our Acting Pastoral Associate, and I discuss the visits that she will be making to shut-ins in the week ahead. Georgette and I go over her plans for the new Middle School Youth Group. Then, Gary Stuart, our hardworking treasurer, and I meet with Rosemary, to review the financials for the month of October.

Meanwhile, in the Fellowship Room, our faithful knitters have gathered for the weekly Healing Prayer and Shawl Ministry meeting. The comfort, the strength, the healing wrought by the prayers and the shawls that come from this group are amazing.

At six, our longstanding Earth Share/Earth Care group, led by Russ Brenneman and Cece Saunders, meets for a supper meeting. Over the years they have done a stunning job of raising our awareness of environmental issues.

At seven, we gather for the Serenity Service. Built around twelve step spirituality, the service always features a speaker who is in recovery. Their words are often stirring, as they speak of how turning to God has helped them deal with addiction. Stephen I, tonight's speaker, is no exception.

For me, the evening ends with the last session of a class I've been teaching on religion and politics. We have a lively discussion about faith-based initiatives. I'm adamant in my views, but so are several others!

Thursday dawns to find the Men's Group meeting around donuts, coffee and conversation in the Fellowship Room. Soon the Y's Men start arriving for their meeting in Hoskins Hall. The speaker is the former CEO of Cantor Fitzgerald. He speaks about the events of 9/11. It is an overflow crowd. As I look out my office door, Bill Meyer is carrying extra chairs down to the Hall. "Twenty-five standing in the back!" he shouts.

The circulator pump is still not working. Dave begins to hound the oil company. "We've got a funeral here tonight," he tells them. "It's got to be fixed."

I begin work on my homily for the Memorial Service. Donna had put verses of scripture on post-it notes and hung them on her bedroom wall. Those will serve as our texts.

The Investment Committee meets at 10:30, and we review several issues affecting the church's future.

The afternoon is largely turned over to the homily. At about four-thirty first one, then two, finally six vans pull up from the oil company! Feast or famine! They get things fixed in the nick of time.

That night, as Caesar plays for the service, Brad Peterson fills in to direct the hand bell choir.

It is a very moving service. Lindsey Huddleston offers a prayer in motion. Doreen tells an amazing story about Donna's last hours and a nurse named Cindy who helped them through it. Lisa shares a recorded song that she and Donna had loved. And Caesar, bless his flexible soul, has taken in stride my last minute suggestion that I sing the Benediction. Afterwards, the Fellowship Room is filled with just that—Fellowship, as friend and family share food and stories in Donna's honor. "You know," Doreen says to me, "This church has just held us up these past three days."

The night is still young for Caesar though, as he holds rehearsal for the choir. And as I am leaving the building around nine-fifteen, I hear song drifting down from the Choir Room. It is Caesar and the section leaders, Brad, Craig, Penney and Aidan, practicing for their upcoming concert.

It has been another full week at Saugatuck. And as I settle into my easy chair to read the newspapers and watch *ER* on television, I realize that in some ways, Saugatuck is like a hospital. We have our emergency room, we handle crises all the time. But we also provide preventive and chronic care!

But hospitals are largely funded by government programs and insurance. We are not. Our work is funded by you and me. Yes, we receive maintenance donations from outside groups that use our space. Yes, we have an endowment that underwrites some of our expenses. But the biggest part of our operating budget comes from the pledges we make each year at this time.

And for our work to continue, you and I need to pledge, and pledge generously. It's that simple.

God will always touch hearts, and change lives. But for that to happen here, we all must share our time, our talents and our financial resources.

And that, my friends, is the story called "Last Week at Saugatuck."

Amen

John H. Danner