

MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH LOVING JUSTICE

Jeremiah 22:3-5, 8-9, 13-17

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Why is it that we come to church? In a world where time is money, why do we spend our time on something that doesn't add to our bottom line? Many of us are practical and pragmatic; we look for logic and reason. Yet we come to this place where we are not promised any instant results at all. Going to church won't make you rich, it won't cause you to lose weight; church membership isn't something that will necessarily help you get into the right college or land you the job of your dreams.

The church is, in some ways, an odd place with peculiar habits. Ministers wearing robes and stoles. We sing hymns even though we don't always understand the words we're singing. We pass an offering basket even though almost half our members donate their money electronically. We have a language all our own; we even have names for seasons, like "Advent" and "Lent" - we use words we need to translate to new comers.

Some people go to church because they've been taught that, if they don't, they'll go to hell. We don't have that belief in this church. We don't come out of guilt or fear.

No, there other reasons which draw us to this place. There is something else which pulls us out of bed on Sunday morning, into the practice of Christian worship.

One reason is community. We're here because life can be lonely and life can be hard. We need to be connected to one another, to people who care, to people who will

pray for us when we need it, to people who share common values, to people who will encourage us and challenge us.

One reason, of course, is God. I met with our group of prospective new members last week and we talked about all of the programs and activities this church sponsors and how they can become involved. I concluded by saying to them, "We have a lot of opportunities to meet one another, but we're not primarily a social organization. We have strong mission and outreach but there are other places you can go to help in the community. We have exercise groups, a diabetic support group, and a parish nurse, but health and wellness isn't our main purpose. The central focus of everything we do is our relationship with God. That's the core and everything else we do branches out from there. You can go other places to enrich your life; we are the place that focuses on your spiritual life.

And one reason we're here is because there is within each of us a deep desire for our lives to count for something. We want to enjoy life but we also want our lives to have meaning. One of my favorite writers is the poet Mary Oliver. In one of her poems, she says, "I don't want to live simply having visited this world." What will our legacy be? How will our lives make a difference?

Or, as David Brooks puts it, do we care only about our resume virtues -- the balances in our bank accounts, the awards and accolades we've received -- or do we care about our eulogy virtues -- the ways we will be remembered, the qualities we embody, the caliber of our relationships.

Finally, it's a matter of conscience that draws us into the life of the church, the place that bears the name and the mark of Jesus. Here's the truth of it. We live in a world in which terrible things happen.

A family from Syria spends years on the run, trying to find a place where they can survive. They live in three different villages in Syria until they decide they have to leave their homeland. They live in Turkey for three years. The father works at a construction site. He's paid \$17 a day. The family cannot live on that income, so they decide to leave that country too.

Abdullah and Rehan Kurdi, and their children, 5-year-old Galip and 3-year-old Aylan try again to leave violence for safety, to make their way together in a community where they could build lives of dignity, where the children could grow up in peace. With the help of family overseas, they scrape together 4000 euros (about \$4500 U.S.) to pay the smugglers. They board a 15-foot boat under the cover of darkness, and they leave Turkey for a nearby Greek island. Rehan was terrified because she does not know how to swim.

Only four minutes into their journey, the waves became so high that the captain panicked, dived into the sea and fled. Abdullah took over and started steering; the waves were so high that the boat flipped. Abdullah held his two children, one under each arm, which was where they died. Rehan, their mother, also drowned.

Three-year-old Aylan's body washed up on shore where it was photographed; his red t-shirt, blue shorts and little black shoes seen around the world.

Abdullah said, "I did everything in my power to save my family, but I couldn't. My kids have to be the wake-up call for the whole world."

And that's why we're here. Because there are only two ways to live in a world where almost unspeakably horrific things like this happen. You can distract yourself with superficiality, comforting yourself with the notion that there's nothing you can do about the world's problems anyway. Live your life, watch TV, go shopping, take care of your own family and friends, read a book. Distract yourself. OR you can be a part of the world's community of the faithful who are trying to make a difference. Here we tell the stories that are difficult to speak and to hear, because these stories deserve to be told. Here we pray, knowing that there is power in millions of prayers being spoken. We support the mission work of our church, which combines with other faith communities, and together we are able to provide relief and assistance and hope.

It may not sound like much. But if we can be a part of the solution, we are making a difference.

Our worship theme is based upon the story of the starfish thrower. It goes like this. One day an older man was walking along the beach, right after the tide went out, noticing all of the starfish that had been left on the shore because of the tide. He decided to save as many of the starfish as he could. He walked along the beach, gently picking up one starfish after another, and flinging them back into the water. A younger man looked at him and said, "What are you doing?" "I'm putting the starfish back in the water before they die." The younger man looked at the beach that was littered with starfish and knew it was a ridiculously difficult task. "But that's impossible. You can't possibly save them all. If you're out here all morning, you won't make a difference." The older man didn't stop. As he picked up another starfish and tossed it into the water, he said, "I'm making a big difference to this one."

Can we solve all of the injustices in our world? Can we even solve the problems of Cleveland, of one city? That's not the right question. Here are two alternative questions. One: "Can we make a difference for good?" and Two: "How do we want to spend our lives?" We can deny problems and become distracted from them, or we can use our God-given talents to make a difference for good. The choice is ours.

Last week we heard Jesus' parable of the great banquet. We learned that Jesus is not interested in judging us or keeping anyone out of God's realm. But there are natural consequences. If we walk away from God, we'll miss out on life in the kingdom. Today we read from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, reminding the people of Israel that God expects us to live and act in a way that promotes justice. Jeremiah compares people who live justly with people who live unjustly. There are people who do what is right, treating others fairly, and there are people who cheat others and take advantage of the weak. What happens to us if we choose to live unjustly, selfishly? What happens to us if we care only about ourselves? It's not a matter of eternal punishment; it's a matter of making our own hell, here on earth.

We're beginning to learn that what happens to one or some of us affects all of us. When one part of the world suffers, we all suffer.

How do we want to spend our precious lives? The writer Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it this way: "To laugh often and much; To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social

condition; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

Can we hear the world’s wake-up calls coming from the grief of a parent whose beautiful child’s body was found on the beach? Can we try to be a wake-up call for the world?