

MISSION POSSIBLE: EXTREME NEIGHBORLINESS

I Corinthians 12:14-27

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In the city of Leeds, in England, on the first day of school this fall, a student was waiting for the bus to go to her first day of high school. But she was waiting on the wrong side of the road, and so she had missed her bus. She was visibly upset and caught the eye of a city bus driver going the other direction. He told his passengers he'd be back in a flash, he stopped his bus and ran across the street to help her. After determining that there was only one way she'd get to school on time, he called a cab for her, paid for it, and showed her exactly where she should wait. Then he scurried back to his bus and his waiting passengers, one of whom said, "I'm happy to get to work a few minutes late if it means witnessing something like that. My faith in humanity has been restored." It was such a simple thing, but one sign that there is a movement alive and active in the world right now, a movement towards compassion, a movement that is bringing people together for good.

This past Wednesday evening, a group of high school students, youth group advisors, and parents went with our youth director Nate Taylor to the Islamic Center of Cleveland for an event called "Teatime for Peace: Where There's Tea, There's Hope." They sat around tables and engaged in conversation, breaking down stereotypes one cup of tea at a time. Muslim teenagers talked about their experiences with our students. Nate told me that by the end of the night he saw the teens sharing cell phone numbers and social media information with each other. The goal of the evening was to build bridges of faith by focusing on similarities and celebrating differences.

The instant that it looked as if Houston was going to be in the direct path of Hurricane Harvey, the man known in Houston as “Mattress Mack” turned his two furniture stores into temporary shelters. No one asked him to; it was his idea and his pleasure. As the city started to flood, he posted a video online with a simple message: “Come on over.” He gave out his personal phone number. (Keep in mind that Houston is the nation’s fourth largest city, with a population of 2.3 million!)

Hundreds of people took him up on his offer. During the crisis, Jim McIngvale (that’s his real name) told a reporter, ““We sell home theater furniture that you watch TV in, they’re sleeping on that. They’re sleeping on recliners, sleeping on sofas and love seats. We have sleeper sofas, they pulled them out and slept on that. They’re sleeping on hundreds of mattresses throughout the store. They’re sleeping on the couches — wherever they can find a place that’s comfortable, and God bless ‘em.” When some of the storm’s victims couldn’t make it across flooded streets, McIngvale dispatched his large delivery trucks and drivers to collect people and bring them to safety.

“We put out a Facebook feed that we were going to rescue people, because there was so much need,” he said. “The city and the local authorities did a great job; they just couldn’t get to all the 911 calls.”

He quickly reached capacity - 400 people were living at both of his stores. He has done this before — during floods last year and when Hurricane Katrina hit 12 years ago. He built his stores on elevated concrete to make them floodproof.

McIngvale also had food for the evacuees — and he invited them to bring their pets, too. “Think a slumber party on steroids,” he said.

He has continued to provide assistance in the weeks following the immediate crisis, his stores serving as donation drop-off centers, his trucks delivering supplies

throughout the region. It is his faith that motivates him, he says. “My faith defines me. It’s who I am. How am I going to let my people drown? It’s as simple as that. I am not going to let my people drown.”

There was nothing simple about what Jim McIngvale did. I can think of a dozen reasons why it wasn’t a good idea for him to open the doors of his stores, and give out his personal phone number. How would he guarantee the safety of the people staying there? How would he make sure no one walked out with anything? What if some of the furniture was ruined? And can you imagine the number of people now who call him, asking for money? But he lives on faith. He makes his decisions based on faith, and he has now become one of the most shining examples of courage and neighborliness in the face of crisis.

Some people describe the times in which we are living as a time of “radical pessimism.” Dire concerns about the health of the planet, divisions between people that seem intractable, a sense that we are moving backwards in some regards, threats of nuclear war — these stories make the news seem like nothing but bad news. Our young people are reading books and watching movies about dystopian universes - grim, bleak visions of the world like that depicted in “The Hunger Games”, where children are killing other children as villagers cheer on their representatives. Now I know that sometimes a good story is just that, but I am concerned that we are not providing alternative visions. We are not lifting up the good that exists.

If we don’t believe that a better world is possible, how can we stay motivated to work for peace and justice and the health of the planet?

Alongside the very real concerns about the environment and justice, are we reminding our young people — and ourselves — that life is worth living? That life is a gift from God, meant to be treasured and, yes, enjoyed?

How will we be motivated to make a difference in the world if we have lost our sense of joy in living, our zest, our laughter?

As we begin our worship series, “Mission: Possible”, we begin by considering our attitude about the world, the perspective we hold.

In our passage for today, Paul describes the church as an organism. Each person in the church has a vital role to play in the life and health of the whole. Each part is equal and equally important. There is no hierarchy in the church, no person whose presence is more or less critical. And in the church, variety is not just tolerated; it is absolutely essential. You couldn't live without a heart, but you couldn't live if your whole body was nothing but a heart, either. Diversity is indispensable.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to take this image with you this week. Carry it around with you, and see how it affects the way you think and live. Paul is using the body as an image for the church, and so the church is our laboratory. We start here, and we practice here, adopting this new way of thinking. We look at one another with new eyes. We see our differences as diversity to be celebrated, not issues that separate us. Paul gives us this beautiful compelling image of unity, this vision of the way all of us are bound together - what if that vision can become deeply embedded in us, a part of us, so that we naturally start to think in this way about one another in the church, and then it becomes so much a part of us that we start to think about the world this way...

Some of you remember when Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann preached here last year. He has said that there are fundamentally two ways of looking at the world. You can believe that the world is a place of scarcity, with not enough to go around: not enough food, not enough justice, not enough economic prosperity. If you believe that, then you spend your lifetime grabbing as much as you can. You don't want other people to gain more rights because then maybe you will lose your rights. You don't want to share what you have with others because what if you go hungry yourself? It's as if your life is lived on a giant teeter-totter. If someone else's life gets better, yours is going to go downhill.

But, Brueggemann says, the Bible portrays a world of abundance. There IS enough to go around. In fact, the way the Bible describes it, when one group of people gains rights, there is more justice for everyone. When one group of people is fed, everyone feels more secure. When one group rises, we all rise.

Last week, on the 16th anniversary of 9/11, I found a poem that describes life in New York City, and the simple ways all of us are connected. The poet imagines how her life intersected with the lives of those who were killed, whose names she didn't know:

You passed me on the street

I rode the subway with you

You lived down the hall from me

I admired your dog in the park one morning

We waited in line for a concert

I ate with you in the cafes

You stood next to me at the bar

We huddled under an awning during a downpour

We dashed across the street to beat the light

I bumped into you coming round the corner

You stepped on my foot

I held the door for you

You helped me up when I slipped on the ice

I grabbed the last Sunday Times

You stole my cab

We waited forever at the bus stop

We sweated in steamy August

We hunched our shoulders against the sleet

We laughed at the movies

We groaned after the election

We sang in church

Tonight I lit a candle for you

All of you ("Nine-Eleven", by Charlotte Parsons)

Mission begins with adapting a new perspective, realizing that our lives are connected, that we live in a relationship of interdependence, and that we are called to be part of the good work of compassion that is bubbling up in so many places throughout this planet.