



## ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

### **It's Your Choice**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Zelda Kennedy

February 15, 2009

Let us pray,

*Eternal God, great Creator, help us to listen with not only our ears, but with our hearts; help us to feel your words deep within our souls and then send us out to be your presence in the world. Amen*

Today's lessons reminded me of one of the stories used by one of my colleagues taken from the book *Sowing Seeds of Faith in a World Gone Bonkers*; by Larry Davies:

"He writes the check-out line at his local grocery store was long and he was in a hurry. Seeing another line nearby nearly empty, he walked over and stood behind the only customer still to make a purchase. A young twenty-something woman was holding a small basket with fifteen to twenty jars of baby food. There was nothing else in the basket: just baby food. "This is great," he thought. "She'll only be a minute and I can be on my way."

The clerk took the woman's check for seven dollars and forty-three cents and efficiently typed in the numbers and slid it in the proper slot on the register. At this point the cash drawer was supposed to open and a receipt printed, but not this time. A light began to blink: "See Manager." The clerk called on the intercom for the manager while running the check through again on her register. The same sign kept flashing: "See Manager." "Oh no!" thought Davies. "Not another delay. I'm in a hurry and don't need for the register to break down."

When the manager arrived, however, he didn't even look at the cash register, but instead picked up the check and began to talk to the customer. Davies could feel the muscles in his stomach tighten as the reality of what was happening struck him. The check for seven dollars and forty-three cents was no good and the manager was quietly saying she could not buy her baby food here. The clerk quickly set the groceries aside, closed her account and began to ring up Davies' purchase.

"She should manage her money better!" Davies tried to convince himself while leaving the store. "She's probably an alcoholic or a drug addict." But his flimsy excuses would not erase the picture in his mind of a grocery basket with jars of baby food.

Davies writes, "At this point, I want to finish the story by writing how I approached the manager and offered to pay for the purchase of the baby food. It was the right thing to do.

I didn't have much money, but I could afford seven dollars and forty-three cents. Instead, hiding my light under a bowl, I turned my head and walked away. There are no acceptable excuses. I had a great opportunity to help someone and walked away."<sup>1</sup>

Does this story remind you of a similar experience in your life? It certainly reminded me of the many times in which I had opportunities to do something and chose to walk away because I didn't want to get involved. I justified my behavior by choosing to think there were so many people out there, who were dishonest, it was better to do nothing. Just, who can one trust, anyway? Besides, why should I choose to extend myself?

In today's gospel Jesus not only extends himself, Jesus teaches us some wonderful lessons about choices. At first glance, the gospel appears to be only about the healing power of Jesus. However, I believe it's deeper than that. Mark has a leper approach Jesus. Therefore, I believe learning about leprosy during Jesus' time will help us to understand the profound nature of this story. Someone once wrote, "In Jesus' time leprosy was far more than a disease to be healed. Being branded as a leper was not just a diagnosis. It was a cultural death sentence.

Those infected were forever forbidden to participate in normal social life, and were not allowed to come within fifty yards of a clean person.

Those infected had to relinquish family ties.

Those infected had to abandon all social relationships.

Those infected had the human touch exorcised from their lives.

The enforced isolation required by Levitical law made a physical disease into a spiritual disease, both for those suffering from leprosy, and for those who imposed the law and turned away the lepers in their community. Those with leprosy had their spirit hollowed out by loneliness and isolation. Those who cast out the lepers had their spirit hardened and callused against compassion for another."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, to kneel before Jesus the leper disobeyed the law and demonstrated a sign of hopeful desperation, "If you choose, you can heal me." Mark 1:40 (*Inclusive Bible*) And what does Jesus do, knowing the law, and also knowing the hopeful desperation of the leper? Jesus chooses to heal through touch. "Moved by compassion, Jesus reached out a hand, touched the person with leprosy and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.'" Mark 1:41 (*Inclusive Bible*)

Now, I can dwell on the significance of Jesus extending his hand to touch the skin of the leper, especially since in Jesus' time no one touched lepers. I can also dwell on how Jesus changed the life of another human being through his healing. Instead, I want to focus on Jesus' choice to heal, and how what we choose to do can impact the lives of others. Jesus, in his compassion, set the example for us by simply saying, "I do choose"

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sowing Seeds of Faith in a World Gone Bonkers*, Larry Davies

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, "I'm a Leper. You're a Leper"

I read about a story about a New York City police officer investigating a case. Dialing the phone one day of the investigation, he somehow knew before he had even finished that he'd made a mistake. The phone rang once, twice - then someone picked it up. "You've got the wrong number!" a husky male voice snapped before the line went dead. Mystified, the officer hit redial. "I said you got the wrong number!" came the voice. Once more the phone clicked down. "How could he possibly know I had the wrong number?" the officer asked. As you know, an officer is trained to be curious and concerned. So he dialed a third time. "Hey, c'mon," the voice said. "Is this you again?" "Yea, it's me. I was wondering how you knew I had the wrong number before I even said anything." "You figure it out!" The phone slammed down. The officer sat for a while, the receiver hanging loosely in his fingers. He called the man back. "Did you figure it out yet?" the man asked. "The only thing I can think of is nobody ever calls you." "You got it!" The phone went dead for the fourth time. Chuckling, the officer dialed the person back. "What do you want now?" asked the man. "I thought I'd call - just to say hello." "Hello? Why?" "Well, if nobody ever calls you, I thought maybe I should."<sup>3</sup>

Even in his humor, the police officer said, "I do choose."

One of my colleagues once wrote, "God can use people who care and people who are committed. I'm a living witness that God can use people like me---beat up, beat down, used and abused, weak, weary and wayward, hurt and hellish, walked over, walked on, and walked away from, kicked to the curb, ostracized, criticized, victimized, and like [many of you,] paralyzed. Paralyzed by my past, paralyzed by my haters, paralyzed by my fears, but 'God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, love and of a sound mind.'(2 Tim. 1:7)."<sup>4</sup>

I agree with my colleague. I believe "We know that we are created to serve and love one another, but the pressure builds and the temptation to seek revenge is strong and we simply forget who we are and what we are purposed to do and be in life"<sup>5</sup>.

Let me share a story about Michael Wayne Hunter who was put on death row in California in 1983, in San Quentin Prison. During his third year on death row something happened. One day, while getting ready to spend time exercising when the guard said, "You're going to miss Mother Teresa. She's coming today to see you guys." Yea, sure, he said, "one more of those designs they have on us." A little later, as there was more commotion about it, Hunter thought it might be true, that Mother Teresa was actually coming to see them.

Another guard said, "Don't go into your cells and lock up. Mother Teresa stayed to see you guys." So Michael jogged up to the front in gym shorts and a tattered basketball shirt with the arms ripped out, and on the other side of the security screen was this tiny woman who looked 100 years old. Yes, it was Mother Teresa.

---

<sup>3</sup> Brett Blair and staff, "When God is at Work"

<sup>4</sup> Derek Pickett, "Men the Lord Can Use," The Africa-American Pulpit, Spring 2008, 50.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Long "Whispering the Lyrics"

This hardened prisoner wrote about his experience, he said, "You have to understand that, basically, I'm a dead man. I don't have to observe any sort of social convention; and as a result, I can break all the rules, say what I want. But one look at this Nobel Prize winner, this woman so many people view as a living saint, and I was speechless."

Michael said an incredible vitality and warmth came from her wizened, piercing eyes. She smiled at him, blessed a religious medal, and put it in his hands. This murderer who wouldn't have walked voluntarily down the hall to see the Warden, the Governor, the President, or the Pope, stood before this woman, and all he could say was, "Thank you, Mother Teresa."

Now listen to what happened: At one point Mother Teresa turned and pointed her hand at the sergeant, "What you do to these men," she told him, "you do to God." The sergeant almost faded away in surprise and wonder. He couldn't believe Mother Teresa had just said that to him.

That day was a turning point in the life of Michael Wayne Hunter. This San Quentin Death Row prisoner was cleansed by that experience. Life changed. Suddenly there was meaning to it. So drastic was the change a new trial was set and the death penalty was not sought. The verdict was guilty on two counts of first-degree murder and a new sentence was given: Life - life, without the possibility of parole. The prosecutor did not seek the death penalty because Mr. Hunter was now a model prisoner and an award-winning writer. He was one other thing: A testimony that through others, Christ still chooses to heal still chooses to touch the untouchable; still chooses to make us whole.<sup>6</sup>

Although, it was Mother Teresa who made the difference in Michael Wayne Hunter's life, you don't have to be a Mother Teresa to make a difference in people's lives.

Many of you and your families have received prayer shawls from the formerly known knitting ministry, which is now known as the prayer shawl ministry. Some of you are familiar with the story of how this ministry began. Well, the ministry would never have happened - if not for three people who chose to make a difference.

When Onnolee Sullivan and Kip Petit first approached me to ask if I would use their shawls, I was just a little reluctant - especially since I had not seen the shawls. Of course, I wondered what they looked like. What if they were unattractive? What if they weren't shawls at all? What would I say to these women? Well, once they unveiled the basket of shawls, I was astounded by their beauty, softness, and warmth. I immediately said, "Yes!" The knitting ministry was born.

Some time later, Onnolee died and Kip relocated. I wasn't sure what to do. I certainly couldn't knit and even if I tried, it would mean about one shawl a year, if any. Someone told me about Toni Larsen. Well I approached Toni, who quickly informed me that

---

<sup>6</sup> Brett Blair and staff, "When God is at work"

she was not a knitter. She said, “I crochet, and I am willing to facilitate the ministry, however the name will have to change because it will not be just a knitting ministry.” Last year, through Toni’s leadership, we wrapped 106 prayer shawls around persons of our community because Toni said, “I do choose.”

In the past five and a half years, my life at All Saints has been challenging, rewarding and for the most part, joyful. There have been days when I’ve left completely exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually, and it was good. However, due to deaths, layoffs within our community and changes in our ministries, the past three weeks have been my most painful experience since my arrival. While I share this with you, I know that many of you are hurting. However, I want you to know that we are hurting too. I wish I could wrap a huge prayer shawl around this community and say the pray that accompanies each shawl, “Dear God, bless this shawl with faith, hope and love. Grant this shawl the ability to comfort, heal and give strength where it is needed. Amen”<sup>7</sup>

I have said before, and still believe that choosing to live in truth with faith can transform us into a community that will “renew our commitment to bring more love, more kindness, more open-heartedness, more non-violence, more peace, more social justice, more environmental sensitivity and more gratitude into the life we live; into our encounters with others and into the world that we are helping to change and shape. This is the time to rejoice in the goodness of all that we are and all that we have been able to experience.” This is the time to embrace our experience and choose to heal the grief and pain. ***It is my choice and it is your choice.*** This is the time for all of us to shout, “I do choose” and then go out to do something life changing!

Amen

---

<sup>7</sup> Prayer Shawl Ministry prayer - attached to each shawl given away