

“One Small ‘Clink’: The Ministry of Mission Outreach”

Mark 12:40-44

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For the past several weeks we have been considering God’s vision for the ministry of Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church. This week we look at the ministry of Mission and the role it plays in the life of faith. It is easy for “the church” to become self-absorbed and to put a lot of effort into programs for members and care of members. Care of members is an important element of our communal life. As disciples of Christ, though, we are called to reach out to people beyond ourselves. As persons gifted with material and educational wealth, we are also called to care for those around us who are in need. Often this means those outside our membership, outside our doors. The healthy congregation seeks to balance inreach and outreach.

This morning I share with you a story of a mission trip which turned out to be transforming for all involved. I think it demonstrates the power of hands-on mission for our life of faith.

In today’s gospel Jesus tells about the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. The temple treasury had a collection box that was in plain view of everyone in the temple. It was apparently made of metal. Everyone could tell who the big donors were---all you had to do was listen to the sound of the offering clanging in the metal box.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything---all she had to live on”.

It was a sultry afternoon in San Antonio, Texas. A hundred degrees in the shade. We had been working outdoors all morning. None of our youth group was too excited about going back to the San Antonio Metropolitan Ministries, which in a few short days we had come to know as “the SAMM”. We had all spent a good part of the day before sorting through mountains of clothing there.

It was kind of amazing to see what people had “donated”. We could imagine people dropping their offerings into the battered brown

dumpster. Clang! There's a broken toaster. Bang! There's a dented pot. Swish! A bag of used army uniforms. As the coffer fills, the sounds become more muffled. It becomes harder to guess what someone is putting in. Hard to tell how much someone might be leaving behind.

Many cars and SUVs drive up to this drop off. If you had the time and were so inclined, you might find it interesting to see who was dropping off what. At times the line for donations would be long. Many in large, shiny vehicles might drop off big bags of usable clothing, housewares, or even appliances.

There were a lot of good, usable items, for the most part, but there were also some pretty nasty donations and some really weird ones, too. The moldy, dirty sack of clothing. The underwear with holes in it. The pink sequined ball gown. Don't forget the tiara. Our group's #1 favorite, though, was the size one metallic blue vinyl pants. We got quite a laugh when one of the guys decided to model these skin tight britches for the rest of us.

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The day before we had worked with a cheerful young woman who was a paid employee. Victoria was very grateful for our help. She was literally getting buried in piles of clothing. Today, Mary was our fearless leader.

Mary was probably about retirement age. A trim, petite woman, she was all business as we set about doing our work. Mary wore some cool silver jewelry, I noticed. She used a cane but she got around pretty well. Even though I know she *was* grateful for our help, I couldn't help but think she was a little too eager to get out of this hot, dusty place and let us take over.

Mary wasn't a paid staff; she was a volunteer. As soon as our youth group got settled into a rhythm of packing and sorting, serving and helping, Mary left. "THANKS!" she called to us as she set out on her way, no doubt off to home to get a glass of iced tea, to get cleaned up, to begin to prepare dinner.

I didn't think any more about Mary, and I wouldn't have. It was one of those chance encounters where you meet someone you will probably never see again. And unless you have had a very negative encounter, these people pass in and out of your consciousness. They are background to the more pressing noises of life.

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The next evening, we all gathered on folding chairs in the church basement. We were all a little nervous. Waiting for the next event, listening for the next set of instructions. This would be a gathering of homeless people *and* church members, the weekly “prayer picnic” where we would pray together, hear each others’ stories, and share a meal together. About fifty people were gathered in a large circle.

I saw her out of the corner of my eye, but I couldn’t quite place her. She looked vaguely familiar. . . It was she who spoke first. “Oh, hi! Aren’t you part of the youth group that was volunteering at SAMM yesterday?” She was very pleasant, probably not so hot and tired as she had been yesterday. It was Mary. I noticed her pretty silver jewelry, again. (This time I think I even coveted it.) She smiled and told me how much she had appreciated the help yesterday. She said how wonderful it was that the kids had come all the way to San Antonio to do this work. She asked a few questions, we talked for a bit, then it was time for the prayer meeting to begin.

The meeting went on for a long time. The group spent a *very* long time responding to Julia’s tearful questions about how to relate better to her mother. One by one, the group members offered their advice and commiserated with Julia. One by one, the group facilitators waited and watched each individual leave their words, their best advice, as a gift to Julia.

Some of the advice sounded like a clanging cymbal or a noisy gong, more like the person offering advice needed help of their own. Some advice didn’t even make any sense. It just didn’t fit.

Others spoke a quiet trickle of soothing words offered to comfort Julia. These words made just a small clink. By the end of the long discussion, quite a pile of offerings had amassed at Julia’s feet.

The meeting ended, we served dinner, then we sat down to join the group. I struck up a conversation with a man who was working at the Salvation Army, in exchange for a bunk. A sixty year old man living in a dormitory. I couldn’t even imagine living like that.

Then I turned to Mary, who had just sat down across from me. She was wearing a brand new t-shirt emblazoned with the words, “Austin City Limits”. This caught my attention. I asked her if she was from Austin, and she said no, “we just got a big donation of these t-shirts. They’re really nice. I wanted to give some to the kids. Do you think you would have time to stop by and take some?”

I thought to myself, “Yes, those are nice t-shirts. The kids would like them”. But I didn’t think we would get a chance to stop by. I explained how we were going to spend the next day at Fiesta Texas, and then we were leaving. I didn’t think we would have time, but if we did, we would stop by. “I’ll hold some back for you.”

And she asked me what else we had done during our time in San Antonio. I told her, we had worked at the Daily Bread ministries distributing food. She said, “Oh, that’s a great organization. I contribute to it every time I can”. And I told her we had worked at the San Antonio Food Bank. Again she replied, “Another good place that helps people. You know, I really try to give back to the community and support these organizations. It’s so important.”

She had asked me so many questions I wanted to find out more about her. So I asked, “In what part of San Antonio do you live?”

For the first time she hesitated. “Well, as of tonight I am on the streets again. I do have a friend who has an apartment where I can go to take a shower, so it’s not so bad. I am trying to take care of my handicapped son. He went through a plate glass window when he was seven and he’s in a wheelchair. I really am doing ok. God has blessed me so much.”

And it all came pouring out, how she had been hit by a car and injured and couldn’t work, how she had thought about moving to Mexico but then she would lose the \$480 a month she got from disability and even though that’s not much to live on, it’s better than nothing. . . How she volunteers at the SAMM, how she tries to help others less fortunate than she.

And in an instant I was flabbergasted and amazed. I was humbled and moved and astounded all in one moment. Because you see, until that moment I am not really sure I believed this story of the widow and the tiny copper coins. I figured it was one of those parables, one of those teaching stories that Jesus told to make a point. I never had believed it could really be true. In all my life, I had never met someone who had so little giving so much. And there, across the table from me, eating hot dogs and chips and speaking to me of charitable works and giving donations, there she was. A homeless woman dropping her two small copper coins into the treasury.

My eyes teared up and I told Mary how much her story had moved me and she said. “Now, don’t you start crying because then you will make me cry. I am going to be just fine. God will provide. But will you

do something for me? Will you just remember Mary in your prayers, will you do that?" And I nodded, speechless, for once.

Oh, yeah, there's one more thing about Mary. She's a widow.

All the way home, on that long drive, I kept hearing the sound of that one small clink. I hear it still.