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December 28, 2008

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PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

Acts 8:26-39

Our text this morning is about an encounter between the disciple Phillip and an Ethiopian eunuch. It occurs as Phillip has left Jerusalem on the road to Gaza. After this encounter Phillip will head north into Caesarea. If you recall, in the gospels, much of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing occurs on the way to somewhere. The book of Acts will later say of him (10:38) that "he went about doing good and healing." So, like the Christ he preaches, Phillip has ministry on the way. Phillip's ministry is like Christ's in another way as well. Christ reached out to those who were outside of the religious establishment – sinners, outsiders, and Romans. And Christ taught the parable of the Good Samaritan. When our story occurs Phillip has just finished proclaiming the gospel to Samaritans and is now sharing it with a man from Ethiopia. With Phillip and the other disciples the book of Acts will trace the movement of Christianity, as a sect within Judaism, largely confined to Israel, as it spreads throughout the world. The gospel is to be proclaimed to everyone. The message and love of God is for everyone.

Let's look for a moment at Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. As Phillip travels on the road toward Gaza he comes across a man reading a passage of Scripture. As Phillip hears the man reading – it was customary to read aloud in antiquity – he asks him if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch says that he does not, and asks Phillip to come and join him in the chariot. Starting with the suffering servant passage that the man is reading, Phillip then shares the gospel of Christ with him. The Ethiopian then asks to be baptized and so Phillip baptizes him. This all seems to take place rather quickly. However, the eunuch is on his way home from spiritual pilgrimage in Jerusalem and is reading from the prophet Isaiah. The man was searching for God, and rejoiced in the fact that he found him in Christ.

Several things about Phillip are worth noting. He too was on a spiritual journey – a journey to share Christ, to share what he had found. It meant enough to him to be on the road for that purpose. In his travels he went from Samaria (8:5), to Jerusalem (8:25), to Gaza (8:26), to Azotus (8:40), and to Caesarea (8:40). There are basically two ways to spread anything in which you are greatly interested. The first is to live it yourself, and the second is to talk about it. The living is a prerequisite for the talking. The way to make anyone realize the value of something is to first value it yourself. I am reminded of something St. Francis said, "Preach the gospel always, when necessary use words." Phillip gave his life to preaching the gospel. When Phillip hears the Ethiopian reading, he asks him if he understands what he is reading. Phillip takes the time and effort to understand the man's situation and then helps him from where he is. Yet beyond his actions he also uses words to do so. The story illustrates the importance of both actions and words.

I suspect that many of you have heard of Norman Vincent Peale. He was a minister who is probably best known for his book The Power of Positive Thinking.

His father was a minister as well. Norman once recounted a Christmas Eve he spent with his father when he was 12 years old. They were out shopping on Christmas Eve. His dad had loaded him with packages and he was tired and cross.

He was thinking about how good it would be to get home, when a beggar – an unshaven, dirty old man – came up to him, touched his arm, and asked for money. The beggar was so repulsive to Norman that he instantly recoiled. Softly his father said to him, "Norman, it's Christmas Eve. You shouldn't treat a man that way." Unrepentant, Norman replied, "Dad, he's nothing but a bum." His father stopped and said, "Maybe he hasn't made much of himself, but he's still a child of God. Take this dollar and give it to the man. Speak to him respectfully and tell him that you are giving it to him in the name of Christ." Though still somewhat reluctant he approached the man and said, "I give this to you in the name of Christ." As the old man stared at the dollar

bill a look of appreciation came over his face followed by a grateful smile. In that moment he no longer appeared to Norman as a dirty, unshaven old beggar, but as a fellow child of God. Then with a gesture that was almost courtly, the man took off his hat and graciously said, "And I thank you, young sir in the name of Christ." All of Norman's irritation and annoyance faded away. He had seen the transformation that comes over people when you think of them as children of God. Norman Vincent Peale counts that as his Christmas discovery that year – human dignity lies hidden in every living soul, waiting to shine through if given the opportunity. As a general rule, I think that anytime we affirm someone else's humanity, we affirm our own. And conversely, anytime we demean someone else's humanity in some way we demean our own.

Sometimes a word can have a powerful effect on our lives. I remember the words of my youth minister during my senior year in high school. He encouraged us to live our faith outside of our close circle of friends. It took a little while, but the thought remained within me and eventually took root. I actually began to look to do good. At school, there were times when I would eat lunch with a young man with spastic paralysis, walked with a hitch, and ate lunch most days alone. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to eat lunch by your self everyday. And so I ate with him and spent part of my lunch period with him on many days. And when I did, to some degree I shared in his loneliness. My friends did not abandon me. I still hung out with them afterwards, and they even ate with us a few times. It did sometimes make things a little awkward though.

Around this same time I held a job at the Barley & Rye restaurant. One cold, winter night after work I was giving a co-worker, whose car had broken down, a lift home. I dropped him off around 11:30 pm. While heading home I came across a car that had stalled in the middle of 7th Street (right up here near Caswell). In the parking lot beside the road, a young couple stood with a small child. I stopped and the man and I pushed the car out of the road, while the mother held the child. I wondered what they would do now so I offered to take them home. Mother – "We don't live too far. Thank you so much." Me – "Just tell me how to go." The man directed me into Grier Town. Going into Grier Town a little before midnight on a Friday night wasn't on my agenda for the evening, but if I had it to do over again I would do the same thing every time. I will never forget how sincerely they said to me "God bless you, God bless you." as I dropped them off at their house.

This incident has stuck with me through out the years. From time to time I will still help someone whose car has broken down. Last winter I helped two middle-aged women move their stalled car out of traffic. These days most of us have cell phones and one of the women's husband was on the way. But still, I think they appreciated not to have feel self-conscious about blocking a lane of morning traffic for 15 minutes. Plus, I got to hear her northern accent saying, "You're such an angel."

Of course, helping others is not always so easy. It doesn't always go so smoothly. And truthfully, you aren't always looking to help. Working at a church you can become a little cynical about people asking for money. People come by about once a week – more frequently in the winter. We hear all sorts of stories with varying degrees of truth to them. With this background I knew just what to do when a couple of years ago when a homeless man made his approach to me in a parking lot on South Boulevard.

Man – "Excuse me."

Me – "I don't have any money for you."

Man – "I just need a ride to the homeless shelter."

Me – "All right, I can do that. I'll give you a ride."

Man – "Thanks man, you're good people. I'm Crazy Larry...Two nights ago my brother got me a hotel room. It was awesome man. I just sat in a chair all night long changing the TV station. I think I wore that remote out. I didn't sleep a wink. It was just so good to be in a warm place watching TV. Its cold out there man...Chilly Willie, Chilly Willie. I need to give you my brother's number when we get to the shelter."

Me – (I'm wondering why it is that I need his brother's number and why does he want to give it to me at the shelter) "Why don't you just write it down now?"

Larry – "Can you write? I'll hold the wheel."

Me – (I decide to play along. And what's more, I thought it would be funny to speed up when he was holding the wheel)

Larry – “Whoa! Slow this monkey down.”

A little amused with myself, I get the number down, resume steering. The last laugh on this day would be Larry’s though. As we arrive at the shelter I stop at the top of the driveway.

Larry – “Oh go on down there, right down in there.”

I don’t really want to go down the driveway. I’m not sure how easy it will be to turn around. And at this point, looking at all the homeless men down there waiting, I know I don’t want them to see the tag on my car that reads “Lee Gray.” (Talk about making yourself a future target). Nevertheless, I take him down there. And when I do, I find out why he wanted to be dropped off there. Larry is greeted by a chorus of homeless men, “Chilly Willie! Chilly Willie!”

“You are the man! Front door service.”

(Bowing down) “I’m not worthy. I’m not worthy.”

It seems that homeless men like praise and recognition from their brethren.

All and all the experience wasn’t so bad. He got a free ride. It only took me 5 minutes out of the way. It made a good story. It didn’t really bother me that he got the better of me in a sense. After all, I deal with people in his shoes every so often. Larry deals with people in my shoes all day, every day. So the experience wasn’t so bad, and yet it was a little hallow in some respects. While there was some joking, each of us remained untouched and basically left as the same person. Larry essentially affirmed in his own mind his identity as a clever, wily man of the streets, and he had it affirmed by others. There was no moment of two souls touching like Norman Vincent Peale’s encounter on Christmas Eve.

I’ve thought about what I could have done differently. To begin with, I didn’t choose the encounter. I wasn’t seeking to reach out. In fact, when he approached me, my thought was about minimizing personal cost. I was largely unconcerned with a man who choose pandering at his profession. But we all know that to be loving doesn’t necessarily mean to give a person what they want. As I’ve thought about what I might have done, I thought about an encounter between Jesus, the one went about doing good, and the rich young ruler, who approached Jesus in the hope that he would affirm his goodness. When the rich young ruler wanted to justify himself, he pointed out that he had keep all the commandments to the letter. Jesus then told him to sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and follow him. The rich young ruler hadn’t done wrong, but what good had he done. And Jesus did not spare him the telling word, when only the telling word would do. It should also be noted that Jesus looked upon him with love when he said this (Mark 10:21). Perhaps what was needed on my part was a telling word, a word that could only come by taking in his situation and having real concern. Perhaps I could have said, “Larry, do you plan on living in the streets all your life? What could you do if you put your mind to it?” I don’t know what immediate effect such words could have had, but if I had said them out of genuine care for him who knows what seed might have been planted. When Phillip encountered the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza, he was ready for the word he received, but not everyone is ready. Whether Larry deserved it or not, whether I could have actually helped him in that moment or not, it is never a bad thing to simply care. I wonder when was the last time anybody actually cared for Larry, rooted for him, or hoped that he might someday make something of himself.

Some of you may know that I have a mentally handicapped sister. Her name is Beth. When Beth was younger she used to participate in the Special Olympics. While some participants in the Special Olympics are quite athletic, others are not. Beth would fall in the latter category. Nevertheless, she loved to participate – not so much because of the actual events *per se*, but because of the support and encouragement she received while participating. And because of her gentle personality, she had an entourage of fans that followed her from event to event. Her most common events were the ball toss and a walking race of about 50 feet. Often the heats only had two or three participants, thereby guaranteeing that everyone would receive a ribbon for first, second, or third place. The ribbon was only of marginal interest to her though. What made her day was the clapping, cheering, and positive attention she received during the event. One day she was one of two people in a walking race. As the race started Beth got out to a slim lead. She maintained this lead right up until the finish line. However, as the race neared its conclusion, as the cheering and clapping grew louder, Beth got caught up in it. She had to stop and clap some herself – 2 feet from the finish line. The other walker went right past her and

won the race. I'm not sure Beth even knew. I know she didn't care. She had been given lots of attention, encouragement, and praise. Nothing better was going to happen that day. Who she was, what she was doing mattered to some other people.

Last winter, I was standing in the pharmacy line at Rite Aid. There were 5 or 6 people in line. Among those in line were a mother and her mentally handicapped daughter. Everyone was waiting for their turn and everyone was silent - everyone except the handicapped girl, who wasn't real loud but was actively engaging her mother. To some degree this seemed to amplify the silence of everyone else. A lot of times people just don't know what to do in this situation. I began talking to the girl and her mother. I asked the girl how old she was and where she went to school. The girl was delighted for someone to notice her. The mother was too. I told her mother that I had a mentally handicapped sister and we talked a bit. Maybe it was my just perception, but everyone else in line seemed to relax. It was a small thing, an easy thing for someone with my background to do, but well worth doing. All I had to do was start the conversation; and as it turned out I enjoyed the exchange every bit as much as they did.

While people don't always know how to respond to the mentally handicapped now, the general awareness is much higher than it was some 20 or so years ago. Throughout the years my parents have made acquaintances with quite a few other parents of mentally handicapped children. My mother had one such acquaintance confide to her and incident which happened to her. She was in the grocery store checkout line with her child, and people were pointing and laughing at her child. She got so embarrassed that she just got her child and left, leaving a full grocery store cart in her place in line. If we were to have seen this incident, we could chose to focus our attention on being angry at those who laughed at her child. And no doubt, while the ignorance might be pardoned, the insensitivity was uncalled for. Yet we would do much better to focus our attention on caring for the mother and her child. She knows her child is different. She doesn't have to be told. What she needed to know was that it was OK for her to live a normal life and bring her child out in public, to know that she wasn't homebound, that people didn't expect her to hide her child - her child.

The mother's pain was unavoidable. And while her reaction could have been different, it was certainly understandable. Think for a minute about the difficult moments you've had in your life. At these moments there is nothing more important than the simple presence of someone who cares. What if no one had laughed at this child? What difference would it have made? To me her reaction suggests that, prior to that point; she had already struggled with this. The real difference could have been made by someone affirming her child's humanity, her child's identity as a creature of God. I guess not being mean is not being mean, but there is no substitute for reaching out.

Do we really care about other people? Do we care about them beyond simply how they fit into our lives? Do they matter if they don't really affect us? They do. And they do affect us. I would guess that each of you, somewhere along the way has been touched by an observant stranger or acquaintance. We are called to live beyond ourselves, to live beyond me and mine. Of course we all have primary responsibilities to those close to us, but random acts of kindness can remind us that there is meaning to be found in all of life, that something more matters beyond my immediate need or obligation. There is more to life than the next item on my agenda. The practice of doing them, of seeing ways to help others, makes us more loving in all of our living. And isn't that the purpose of faith? To make us more loving? And when we practice random acts of kindness we do it by choice. We choose to show someone else that they are beloved, and in doing so, we are reminded that we are beloved as well.

The last time we were gathered in this sanctuary it was Christmas Eve. And, as we traditionally do, we turned down the lights and starting with the Christ candle we lit each other's candle. Gradually the room became aglow with the cumulative effect of each person's light. That is the way with sharing the light of our Lord. When we share it our own light does not diminish. None of us can solve all of the problems that are out there. We can't even solve the problems of one person, even if it is ourselves. What we can do is to be more loving in

general and to embrace God's light more fully however we can. One concrete way to do this is to practice random acts of kindness. And so, as we head into the New Year, that is what I invite all of us to do.