

**Proper 14, Year A**  
**The Rev. Martha L. Hubbard**

**August 10, 2008**  
**St. Paul's, Newburyport, MA**

In our second lesson this morning St. Paul wrote,

*"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

When I read those words again this week it took my mind back to the summer between my second and third year of seminary, when I had the opportunity to work as an intern with a chaplain who was doing street ministry on behalf of the ecumenical community of churches in Downtown Albany, NY. I had lived in Albany and worked as a probation officer there for 4 years before going to seminary, so I was no stranger to the struggles of the urban poor there. And I was grateful for a chance to approach life in that city not as a member of the law enforcement community, but rather as a pastor.

As I anticipated that internship during the last month of the academic year, I envisioned the sorts of ministry encounters I might

have – connecting with people who needed hope and spiritual sustenance. I could be the one to bring the good news! I was ready to do what it would take to really making a difference in their lives. It all had a “Touched by an Angel” sort of sheen to it.

I’m sure you won’t be surprised to hear that is not what I experienced that summer. What I experienced was something very different. First of all, my “job” was not as well defined as I had expected. Other than sitting in the ecumenical outreach office for a couple of hours a day in case someone came in seeking help- which rarely happened, I was sent out to the food pantry and soup kitchens, and to walk around the city streets to meet and get to know people in need. This was really pretty much outside of my comfort zone. I felt clumsy in my interactions in the soup kitchen. I felt like sobbing at the food pantry as I witnessed people of all ages coming in hungry and desperate. I felt awkward speaking to homeless people on the street – what could I say to them? Anything I could think of to say about God or Jesus just came off sounding condescending when I rehearsed it in my head. And I was left

speechless when I was wolf-whistled at or became the object of a drunkard's irrational ranting and raving.

Two weeks into the 8 week internship the street ministry chaplain found me weeping in the office. To my amazement he did not seem at all surprised by my tears. He smiled and said to me, "OK, now we are getting somewhere." That jolted me out of my sobbing! Seeing the incredulous look on my face he told me to relax, that I was right where I needed to be – where he himself had been just a year before. The details of his story put me at ease.

Then we reflected together about the largely unrealistic expectations we had brought to our street ministry and how those expectations had taken a real beating. We wondered together about what our goals in this ministry should really be. Toward the end of that conversation the chaplain said that after a year in the job he had become convinced that God had brought him there, not so much to have an amazing impact on others, but rather to be changed himself. He said that over the year he had been able to befriend some folk who had no other friends, and that he had been able to help in small ways with material needs. But he said he had

become convicted that the only way he could really help the people in need was to get to know their life from the inside and then use that knowledge to work for substantive change in society.

Substantive changes that would mean the people we were seeking to serve and their children would not be trapped in cycles of poverty and violence endlessly.

I was intrigued and I asked him how he went about doing that-being changed and then working for change. He said that the best advice he could give me was *“don’t just do something, stand there.”* He counseled that a ministry of presence would go a lot farther than a ministry of words with the people we were trying to get to know. He also counseled that if I made being present my goal, God would have a lot easier time getting through to me with what I needed to receive to change and grow in my vocation. Years later that advice has not worn thin!

I will never forget one person I met that summer who I do feel spoke the word of God to me. After sharing several meals with me in the soup kitchen, a man who was a Vietnam vet and who was struggling with PTSD and lack of employment said to me, *“Just*

*remember, some of us wear our need on the outside and some of us wear our need on the inside.*" Who was preaching now? The tables were turned and I was hearing Jesus speak through this man.

I began to find myself in a different location in the words of St.

Paul:

*"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

How was I going to hear without this man to preach to me? How beautiful were his tired feet!

The more I listened that summer the more I heard God speaking to me about compassion and justice. The more I looked around, dared to look into faces across the table or on the street, the more I recognized Christ looking back at me, present in the very ones I had mistakenly thought I was supposed to bring him to. They gave me a new facet of truth - the truth that we are all one and that there is not distinction between any of us in God's eyes. The truth

that when any are in need we all are in more need than we want to admit or talk about.

So often we who wear our wealth on the outside avoid the truth of how large the gap between rich and poor has become. I suspect at least part of the reason for that avoidance is the shame we feel and the uncertainty about how to do anything lasting about it. At least that is the lesson I began to learn all those summers ago, on the streets of Albany. But I find there is an incredible freedom that comes when we have the power to affirm that this is not the way that the God we know in Jesus Christ would have it for his beloved children. There is a freedom and a joy we gain in affirming that. A freedom and a joy that spurs us on to become more vocal witnesses of that truth in the places of status and power that we have access to. Witnesses who emphatically trust that the Word that we need to speak is very near us - He is on our lips and in our hearts. He has gotten into the boat with us and is in it with us all for the long haul. The long haul we have ahead as we work to usher in his reign on earth. In his name. Amen+

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