

“The Power of Love”

John 12:20-36

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I receive a lot of human interest emails, the kinds that tug at your heart. Do you know what they have in common? For the most part, they are about people helping people. The greater the sacrifice, the more it pulls our heart strings.

These are the kinds of stories that capture our attention and inspire us. They are also the ones we eagerly share with family and friends.

Joyce is a hairstylist in Burlington, Massachusetts. She is working on her day off each week cutting and styling people’s hair at no cost to them, which is about a seventy dollar savings. She is doing this for the people in her community who have lost their jobs in this recession. This is her way of boosting their self-esteem and helping them to look good for job interviews.

Don owns and operates the Blanchard Oil Company in Orleans, Vermont. One of the things his company does is deliver fuel oil to homes and businesses. Most of his customers are locked into a rate for the year and they did so when oil prices were very high. He is breaking these contracts and renegotiating them at a lower rate, saving his customers thousands of dollars. Thus far, it has cost him over \$40,000 in lost revenue.

Lisa has started a program called, “Birthday Wishes.” With the help of children and other adults, she provides a birthday party for children that live in homeless shelters. When a child’s birthday rolls around, she and her friends go to the shelter with decorations, presents, cake and ice cream and throw the biggest party that child has ever had. Her organization has expanded and now services 65 homeless shelters in Boston and other parts of Massachusetts.

Matt owns the Whistle Stop restaurant in Birmingham, Michigan. Many of the people in his community have lost their jobs. To help them through these tough times, he has adopted a “pay what you can” policy in his restaurant. Customers pay what they can when they check out and if they cannot afford to pay anything, they eat free.

Steve owns the Gem Theater outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Textile mills in his community have closed, throwing thousands of people out of work. Every Wednesday evening, he opens his theater, free of charge, to anyone that wants to come. When asked why he would do this, he replied, “I want to help people take their mind off of their problems for a couple of hours by doing something fun. As a community, we must survive together.”

Why do stories like these intrigue us? It is because we are drawn to people who care for others. We tend to have profound respect for those who go out of their way to help even strangers. We share their stories, hoping they will become contagious, because we know if they do that our world will be better.

I get the feeling that Jesus believed this, too, and staked his life and ministry upon it. I feel this way because of what he said to his disciples at the end of this discourse about his impending death. “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” John 12:32.

I must tell you that out of all the things that are in this text, which is one of the richest in John’s entire gospel, this was the sentence I kept returning to last week and mulling over in my mind.

You know what impressed me most about what Jesus said? It was his confidence. He was absolutely certain that his death on the cross would capture the attention of people from all walks of life and radically change their lives.

I believe one thing that reinforced my interest in this part of our text is that I knew this was not the first time Jesus said this. It was actually the third time he referred to being “lifted up,”

which, according to Dr. Alan Culpepper, metaphorically described his death and its effect. You don't repeat something three times unless you believe it with all your heart.

Why was Jesus so confident that his death would capture people's attention? He knew that people are drawn to people that care for others, and his death revealed a level of compassion and courage rarely, if ever, seen.

For you see, his death was totally unmerited. Even Pilate knew that he should not have been crucified. He was an honorable man who died trying to make this world a better place to live. He died for a noble cause, the pursuit of justice and peace, and knew that people would be drawn to him and his story because there is something very powerful about sacrifice. It touches peoples' hearts and inspires them as nothing else can do.

It has certainly inspired musicians like Isaac Watts to write songs about Jesus' sacrificial love. The last verse of "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" moves me each time I hear it.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Whose act of compassion and courage moved you and changed your life? What did they do that touched you so deeply and made you re-evaluate your values and priorities? Have you told their story?

This week, I have been telling Frank Zachman's story. Frank died early last Friday morning. The celebration of his wonderful life will be this afternoon in our sanctuary.

Frank has inspired all of us with his courage and compassion. He valiantly fought his illness for eleven years, never complaining or rolling in self-pity. To the contrary, he lived each day to the fullest, reaching out to others to help them through tough times. I cannot begin to tell you the number of benevolent checks he has written, visits he has made or prayers he has offered on behalf of others. Only eternity will reveal the scope of his compassion.

Doesn't Frank's example inspire you to do more? It does me.

Who needs your help right now? Who needs you to be courageous and compassionate? Whose heart is as troubled as Jesus' was in this text and needs you to walk with them along their journey? What could you do that might change the way they live the rest of their life?

Are you willing to do it? It's not easy, is it? Helping others can be messy and usually means we have to set aside our own agenda and sometimes our hopes and dreams. Like Jesus, we have to say no to self so we can say yes to others.

Who can help you do this? I believe the one who talked about planting a seed in the ground so that it can produce a lot of fruit can help you. He's the same one that gave his life so that others could live a better one. He's also the one who helped Frank to be such a good role model for all of us. I am confident He will help you if you ask. Join me in doing that now.

By the way, if you were the subject of a human interest email, what would your story be?