

U2Charist Sermon
March 4, 2008

The past week has been so busy and crazy preparing for this service and catching up on other office work after our youth mission trip to East Kentucky. As many of you know who work with youth or are youth yourselves, you know that trips like these are full of unaccounted for zaniness. Whether it be saran-wrapping a 16-year old to a chair, mud-fights so brutal that mud gets in your teeth, deep-frying oreos as a late afternoon snack, or dance parties in the evening until we adults finally set a bedtime. Trust me, the kids did not allow the work to get in the way of their fun. Even if they spend their days hauling railroad ties for an erosion wall, or building a back deck on a mobile home, or handing out food at a local food pantry, they were always able to find ways to entertain and be entertained. But I have a feeling that it's not the goofy memories that draws the kids back each year, or their desire for more community service hours, but instead there is something more deeply powerful and transformative about the interaction between our youth group kids and the local people of Neon KY.

One evening, the youth discussed the poverty they witnessed, how they saw people collecting a few cans of food from the food pantry to last for an entire month. Or people doing their regular household shopping at the Dollar General in town. That evening, they had one of those great philosophical teenage discussions where they were also able to place the poverty they witnessed in the context of the extreme poverty and hunger that exists throughout our world. 1 Billion people living on less than \$1 a day, 12 million children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Africa with that number expected to climb to 18 million by 2010, over 77 million children not

enrolled in primary education, over half of whom are girls. Listening to their astonishment, they and perhaps now us too can't help but ask – how did we allow the world to get to this point? With all that we are capable of today – how can we not help the plight of the poor with our advanced technology and modern capabilities?

Martin Luther King Jr said *"The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty."*

I believe what often keeps us from dealing with extreme poverty and hunger is that we rarely have to stare it in the face. For many of us, we have the choice to look away, to live in comfortable, safe, and protected communities. For most of us here in the affluent suburbs of Boston, we are isolated from the hardships that our brothers and sisters face each day trying to find healthy food, clean water and warm shelter.

Our position is not unlike the villagers of Gerasenes. They too lived a comfortable and safe life. Within this comfort, they feared any outsider or any perceived danger. They feared the potentially harmful man on their streets and they did not want the man they believed to be filled with demons to be their next door neighbor. So they banished him to the graveyard far away from the regular operations of village life. He did not see passerbyers nor he did not eat at a table with others. He did not live in a house but

instead among the tombs. He was unclean and dangerous so he had to be secluded. They put effort into making sure he remained apart and alienated. They only felt safe and protected knowing that the man full of demons resided in the graveyard, and not within their own village.

We too push people to the margins. There are people that are directly separated from us - in prisons and in slums - and then there are those we indirectly separated through blame, prejudice, and shame. Our separation and isolation of particular individuals and communities often say more about us than they do about the people we banish. For what was it about the man with demons who lived in the graveyard that scared the villagers so much? Was it that he was brutally honest? And we are all so afraid to be real and authentic. Or was it that he was dirty? And we are so concerned with being clean and showing any imperfection. Or was it that he was unpredictable? And we are all so in love with conventionality and patterns of how things “should be”.

The psychology of family systems theory believes that in an unhealthy systems people have the capability of scapegoating their issues, illness, and wrong-doing on to one particular individual or community who is declared to be the sick or evil one. This happens when those in the system do not want to confront their own problems so they blame one person or group for the source of their issues. If the sick individual happens to become well, the system is often thrown off balance and reacts in anger because they are no longer able to blame or scapegoat.

So when Jesus crossed the boundary into Gerasenes, he threw off the whole village. He angered the people by going to the margins and healing the man with demons. Jesus did not stay in Galilee for his entire ministry. He did not sit around waiting for others to come to him and be healed but instead, he went to the marginal places and met people where they are. I believe that the gospel calls us into those marginal places where we feel uncomfortable and awkward, where the tradition and ritual is not our own and most of all, where we have something to learn.

In that marginal space, those of us who are so in love with our own power become powerless. We enter into a space that makes us extremely vulnerable. When we are no longer scapegoating and blaming, we give ourselves the opportunity to examine what's really inside of us and to ask ourselves what we are so afraid of.

After leaving the Marines, George Hill became addicted to drugs and alcohol. He soon found himself on the streets of Los Angeles, living homeless on skid row for 12 years. "I can't even begin to tell you the misery of rain," he says, "I don't even care how slight the rainfall is, it was misery beyond belief." George goes on to describe days of sleeping because the weather is warm enough to sleep and nights spent wandering and moving so he doesn't freeze to death. On one particular occasion George was sitting on a bag containing his blankets and jacket begging for spare change. A homeless man approached him who was so dirty to George that was unbearable. His hands were black, except for his knuckles and joints where the bone had rubbed through the dirt. He had rags tied on his feet and his hair was matted in two big, nasty dreads. The very dirty homeless man

reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar in change and said to him “Here man, I feel sorry for you.”. George couldn’t believe that the man who looked and appeared much worse off than him gave him everything he had. It was that moment that changed everything for George. He used the money to buy a bus ticket to a hospital psych unit.

George Hill’s healing and transformation came about in the most mysterious and unexpected ways. It came not from a rich person giving him a dollar, but instead it came from a homeless man who gave him the only dollar he had. It was the least of these that not only gave George money, but hope to live and to get help.

Now, it wouldn’t be a U2charist service if I didn’t address the music and influence of U2. This idea of transformation through service in the margins, the core justice argument of the Gospels, is something that is witnessed in the music of U2 and the activism of Bono.

In Bono’s speech at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington n 2006, he said:

“God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.”

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It is not enough to sit in our walled communities and write a check. We need to go where the pain and hurt is. Go to wear the marginalized live and dwell. Not because we might be able to help or because we can fix their situation but instead because that is where God is....in the slums, in the silence, in the rubble. And that is where our own transformation lies. We have something powerful to learn from those we have separated from ourselves for so long, from those we have blamed and scapegoated, from those we have relegated to the graveyard.

I think back to the youth again. The reason mission work, like the trip to rural KY, is so meaningful is not the pranks, the dancing or the mud, but it is welcome and the generosity we found in the margins. Eating dinner in a small rural church, where they prepare a meal for 50. Being recognized by name and welcomed as family. The gratitude and humility we find from those we serve. And yes, it is difficult to accept such unbridled love and care.

I think too of Bono's words from the Prayer Breakfast in describing this work, "It's not about charity, it's about justice." It's not about charity, it's about justice. How true. It's more than giving to feel good, it's giving of one's self to transform one's self and the world. That's the gospel, isn't it? That is the work of Jesus, that is the work of our greater missions, that is the act of the unclean man giving a dollar and hope to a homeless veteran.

To conclude, I want to tell a story from the One campaign. This story is about Agnes, a Ugandan nurse, who left nursing to raise her eight children

when her husband died in 1992. After she discovered that he had died of AIDS, she went to be tested – and discovered that she too was HIV positive. She then learned that she had unknowingly passed on HIV to her youngest child in childbirth. He died at age 6 and she holds herself responsible for his death. Her eldest son, who is not HIV positive was teased at school and treated as if he too had AIDS. He suffered severe depression, ran away from home and has never returned.

But Agnes refused to give up. She planned ahead for her family, in anticipation of her death, compiling a “Memory Book” for her children, filled with stories about her, her character, her family and about her children when they were growing up. But she also looked for a way to give her life meaning, and help prevent others from suffering what had happened to her. Her experience in the margins helped her stand up for justice.

She began to volunteer for a community AIDS organization called TASO. TASO volunteers, many HIV-positive like Agnes, work in neighborhoods all around Kampala, teaching people and families how to prevent HIV/AIDS and providing support to the sick and their families. Agnes herself is now on anti-retroviral AIDS drugs which have helped her stay healthy and keep working to help the vast majority of Africans who have no access to those lifesaving medications. Her story is one of strength and service. For in this story, God is working. God is with her as she is with them.

Yes, God is with us if we are with them, in the margins, in the slums, in the graveyards. Let us follow the example of Agnes and go to the marginal places to serve and be with others. Let us follow the example of Christ who

lived his life on the margins, healing those in need. Let us go where the streets have no name to find God working in mysterious ways. And Let us be transformed, as only we can be, through the giving of ourselves and the serving of others. Amen.