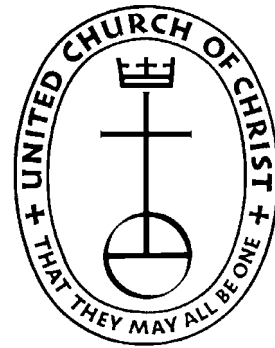


An Empty Locker and Shaya's Home Run

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
March 14, 2010



This sermon shows how much the little things we do can matter. As busy and complex as our lives may be, we know that our souls have been made in such a way that only honesty, goodness and kindness bring meaning and value to our lives.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
March 14, 2010 (#1395)
Reading: Jeremiah 1:1, 4-7; John 6 (selections)

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

An Empty Locker & Shaya's Home Run

In the Hebrew Bible the Book of Jeremiah tells the story of a courageous prophet. Listen to how that story begins, understanding it uses the Hebrew word "Yahweh" for God:

The words of Jeremiah bin-hilkiah, a member of the priestly family in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin. Now the word of Yahweh came to me and said: "Before I formed you in the womb, I chose you. Before you were born, I dedicated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

I said, "But Sovereign Yahweh. I don't know how to speak I'm too young!"

I suspect many of us can identify with Jeremiah's initial reaction to his challenging calling. We live in difficult times. Humanity is destroying the environment in which we live; changing the climate itself because of our conspicuous consumption. Our world is plagued by fierce and bloody warfare and our nation is very much a part of that. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, Islamophobia and a variety of evils continue to exist and hurt people.

So how do I, a lone individual, make any kind of difference amidst such massive and serious problems? Like Jeremiah, it is easy to say, "I can't do anything, send somebody else."

But then there is this story from the Gospel of John. I think everything in John was shaped by an early church community to fit its own theology. The stories aren't historically accurate, but that doesn't mean they are not meaningful stories.

Soon after Jesus' death an oral tradition clustered together stories of wondrous things Jesus had done. The tales passed from one storyteller to another. Then it's likely the stories were written down. John and Mark both seem to have drawn from the same written source for this particular story. Then Matthew and Luke used Mark as their source. John alone has a child in the story, and that's what interests me. So listen to John's words:

Jesus crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and a huge crowd followed him. He climbed the hillside and sat down there with the disciples.

Jesus saw the crowd approaching and said to Philip, "Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?" Philip answered, "Not even with two hundred days' wages could we buy loaves enough to give each of them a mouthful."

One of the disciples, Simon Peter's brother Andrew, said, "There's a small boy here with five barley loaves and two dried fish. But what good is that for so many people."

Jesus said to them, "Make the people sit down." As many as five thousand families sat down. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and gave them to all who were sitting there; he did the same with the fish, giving out as many as they could eat.

When the people had eaten their fill, Jesus said to the disciples, "Gather up the leftover pieces so that nothing gets wasted." They filled twelve baskets with the scraps left over.

Now why was this story important to John? Biblical scholar Dom Crossan thinks there were two different Eucharistic or sacramental traditions in the early Jesus' movement, one combining bread and fish, the other bread and wine. In the earliest icons of the Christian movement, it is the disciples joined in a common meal of bread and fish that prevails. And that may be why John told the story the way he did.

But I want to look at the child. In my imagination, I see a number of folks traveling from Galilean villages to listen to this social revolutionary, this unique peasant sage, Jesus. They probably carried some food for the day. And I like to think it was the example of the young boy willing to share his food, that inspired others to share – and soon there was enough for everyone.

It was that simple act of sharing that made a difference, that simple act of kindness.

Let me tell you some contemporary stories.

Rabbi Paysach Krohn wrote about a father who spoke at a benefit for the Jewish Center for Special Education in Brooklyn.

The father said that he and his son Shaya, a student at that school with learning and other disabilities, walked past a park one day where some children were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?" Shaya's father didn't imagine they would, but nevertheless approached one of the boys and asked. The boy said, "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. He can be on our team and we'll try to let him bat in the ninth inning."

With a broad smile, Shaya put on a team shirt. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team pulled within three runs. In the top of the ninth inning, Shaya put on a glove and went to right field. No hits came his way and he was ecstatic just to be in the game.

In the bottom of the ninth, Shaya's team scored again. With two outs, the bases loaded, the winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to bat. Do they let him bat and give away their chance to win the game? They did.

Shaya didn't even know how to hold a bat, much less connect with the ball. As he stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing the other team was putting winning aside, moved in a few steps to lob the ball softly so Shaya could make contact. On the first pitch, Shaya swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher took more steps forward to toss the ball even more softly. Shaya hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher.

The pitcher could have easily thrown the ball to first. Instead, he threw the ball over the first baseman's head. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, "Shaya, run to first!" Never had Shaya run that far, but he made it to first base, wide-eyed and startled.

Catching his breath, Shaya awkwardly started towards second, struggling to make it. The right fielder, the smallest guy on the other team, now had his chance to be a hero. He could throw the ball to second for the tag. But he understood the pitcher's intentions so he, too, intentionally threw the ball high, over the third-baseman's head. Shaya ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases.

As Shaya rounded third, both teams and all the spectators were on their feet screaming, "Shaya, run home!" He ran home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as a hero.

Should the players have treated him just like anyone else and not deliberately helped him? Was their behavior condescending and patronizing? Well, Shaya's father didn't think so. He said, "That day the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love into this world."

What they did was not big and dramatic – but it made a huge difference in the life of Shaya and his father.

The second story comes from John Schlatter, author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

Mark, a junior high student, was walking home from school one day when the boy ahead of him tripped and dropped all his books along with two sweaters, a baseball

bat, a glove and a tape recorder.

Mark knelt down and helped the boy pick everything up. They were walking the same direction, so Mark helped him carry some of that stuff. As they walked, Mark discovered the boy's name was Bill, that he loved video games, baseball and history, that he was having trouble with his other subjects and that he had just broken up with his girlfriend.

They arrived at Bill's home first and Mark was invited in for a Coke and to watch some television. The afternoon passed pleasantly, then Mark went home.

They continued to see each other around school, had lunch together occasionally, then both graduated from junior high. They ended up in the same high school where they had brief contacts over the years. Then three weeks before graduation, Bill asked Mark if they could talk.

Bill reminded him of the day years ago when they had first met. "Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so many things home that day?" asked Bill. "You see, I cleaned out my locker because I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away some of my mothers' sleeping pills and I was going home to commit suicide. But after we spent that time together talking and laughing, I realized that if I had killed myself, I would have missed that time and so many others that might follow. So you see, Mark, when you picked up those books that day, you did a lot more, you saved my life."

Again it was a simple act – helping pick up some dropped books, responding kindly to a stranger in need. But it turned out to be a life-saving act.

I have told the story before of Vedran Smailovic. At the height of the Balkan war, twenty-two people were killed by Serbian mortar fire while standing in line outside a Sarajevo bakery. What could Smailovic, a cellist with the Sarajevo symphony, do to respond to that atrocity? He could play his cello. For the next twenty-two days, Smailovic brought his chair and cello to the bombed-out shell of that bakery each day at four o'clock. There he played an adagio to honor each person who had died, even as Serbian shells continued to crash around him. It was a simple act but became an incredibly powerful symbol of resistance.

College professor Rafael Martinez retired in Solana Beach in San Diego County. He felt sad when he saw immigrant workers standing on street corners seeking work. He started taking them a few sandwiches; then Rafael's friends gave him clothing to take to the migrant camps. Soon others wanted to help too and new organization was

born that ministered to and sought justice for undocumented workers. An incredible amount of good resulted from one kind person making some sandwiches.

When I lived in southern Africa, Mrs. Seghaise, an old woman, a pastor's wife from a remote area, sought my help. She and her husband were terribly poor. He received no income for his church work; just sometimes a little food. Mrs. Seghaise wanted me to write to America for money, not for clothes for her family or school fees for her grandchildren – no, she just wanted two large metal pots. Why? I asked. She lived on the border of what was then Rhodesia. Refugees, fleeing the civil war in that nation, a lot of them children, would pass through her village en-route to one of the refugee camps. Mrs. Seghaise had started feeding them, creating her own soup kitchen. She, who had nothing, wanted to help these strangers in need.

Again, nothing big and dramatic – cooking a meal for frightened people fleeing from a war-torn country.

Listen to words from Rabbi Harold Kushner: “While many of us tend to see the world as divided into the holy (the realm of the religious) over against the profane (the ordinary), theologian Martin Buber taught that the division is really between the holy and the not-yet-holy. Everything in God's world can be holy if we realize its potential holiness. One of the fundamental teachings of Judaism is that the search for holiness, for the encounter with God, is not confined to the synagogue. Everything we do can be transformed into a Sinai experience, an encounter with the sacred. The goal of Judaism [and I would add Christianity as well] is to teach us how to bring God into the ordinary and make the ordinary holy.”

He went on: “God is the answer to the question, why should I be a good and honest person when people around me are getting away with murder? God is the answer not because God will intervene to reward the righteous and punish the wicked, but because God made the human soul in such a way that only a life of goodness and honesty leaves us feeling spiritually healthy and human.”

He continued: “Nature's great law for all living things is not the survival of the fittest but the principle of cooperation. Plants and animals survive not by defeating their neighbors in competition but by learning to live with their neighbors in such a way that everyone prospers. God is the force that moves us to rise above selfishness and help our neighbors.”

Phillips Brooks was Dean of Boston's Trinity Episcopal Church in the 19th century. He once wrote that we live in a time when the heroes have done all they can, and now it is up to those people who work steadily, quietly, largely unrecognized by the

world at large, to bring something of love, peace, justice, kindness and grace into the world.

And William James, the great Harvard psychologist said, "I am done with great and big things, great institutions and big success. Now I am for those tiny invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of human pride."

Tiny invisible molecular moral forces – like the child offering to share his bread and fish, like the baseball players welcoming Shaya, like Mark helping Bill pick up his books, like Vedran Smailovic, Rafael Martinez and Mrs. Seghaise.

The choice is ours -

Even amidst the challenging busyness of our everyday lives; even as we seek to balance the demands of work, family, friends, community and church – we know that our souls have been made in such a way that only honesty, goodness and kindness bring meaning and value to our lives.

So

- Each of us can choose to be one of those tiny invisible molecular moral forces.
- Each of us can help make the ordinary into something holy.
- Every day, each of us can make a difference.
- Each of us can help mend a wounded world.
- Each of us can become a vessel holding and then sharing God's love.