

DESPAIR AS OPPORTUNITY

sermon

I preach often about joy. I even begin each service with reminding you that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

But what about sorrow? How can we possibly live with joy in a world filled with suffering and sorrow? Our world is in such turmoil—war, starvation, terrorism, pollution, genocide. Our hearts hurt. How do we find joy when there are many large world problems? How can there be any joy when there is so much suffering and pain?

We show our humanity by how we see ourselves; not as apart from others, but connected to others. God created us and said, “Go now, my child, you have freedom.”

And God has such incredible reverence for our freedom, that God did not program us like robots. So, we are capable of the most awful atrocities. I can give you a catalogue. God weeps; we all weep.

Then we say, “Enough. I want to try to do something.” We have a fantastic capacity for goodness, especially goodness based on our faith.

What can we do to bring about change to a situation that is horrible? We might not be able to do a great deal, but we can start where we are. Do what you can where you are. And yes, be appalled. If you are not angry, you are not paying attention.

The fact that there are still starving children in the year 2026 makes me angry. With the resources we have, childhood starvation should be like polio, basically eradicated. 8,000 to 10,000 children die every day to hunger related causes. A death of a child each second, over 3 million children die each year to hunger.

That upsets me. That is why I have been a supporter of Bread for the World since college, 1980. I pray, I write letters, I make calls, I

give money, I do what I can to stop hunger in my own little way.

It would be awful if we looked at the world's horrendousness and we said, "Ah, it doesn't really matter. What can we do?"

What can we do? We can be distressed by the awfulness of it all. Being distressed is a wonderful thing. This is the greatness of how God designed us.

We can be distressed about someone who is not even family in a conventional way. It is incredible just how compassionate and generous we can be. Just as we have great capacity for evil and sinfulness, we also have great capacity for love and concern.

Someone asked me last Sunday after the worship services, "Pastor, why do we list all of those people and places in the prayer concerns?" He said, "You are asking me to pray for places where there is war, pray for the incarcerated, for addicts, for migrants. It overwhelms me."

It is overwhelming. But as followers of Jesus, we do not have the opportunity to look away and not be overwhelmed. We can ignore some things, but we cannot ignore those in need, those suffering. Overwhelmed-ness comes with knowing Jesus. God bless your overwhelmed-ness!

Pray, weep, learn, volunteer, give, go on a mission trip, serve with local groups like our food pantry or KARM or Salvation Army. Get involved politically. Canvas, organize, protest, strategize.

I know you. You are the person who does the difficult thing because it is the right thing. The world moves forward because of what you do.

You are the person who looks for ways to embrace responsibility instead of searching for places to cast blame. By doing so, you transform problems into opportunities.

You are the person who seeks to understand when so many are merely shouting empty platitudes.

You are the person who cares enough to listen and who listens enough to care.

It is not easy to do what you do, to be who you are, to live out your beliefs. But you know that some things are more important than merely making the easy choice.

You are the person who does not seek praise, but who would like to know every now and then that you are appreciated and that your work matters. Well, look around. See life being lived and know that life itself appreciates what you do more than any person could ever verbalize.

You are the person who makes a difference whenever you have the opportunity to make a difference. You live as if your life matters, like your faith in God matters.

There is an important old church word: *evangelism*. Evangelism is how you see the world and how

you try to make a difference in the world because you are a follower of Jesus. Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.

And church is where it begins. The church is our home base for making the world a better place, for learning to be like Christ and bring Christ to the suffering of the world.

Evangelism is when you don't just attend church, but you love the church. Serve the church. Invite people to church. Worship Jesus with the church. Encourage with the church. Participate in the church. Pray for the church. Be the church.

If the church ever gets as passionate about what we are for as we are about what we are against, we could win the world.

And while I'm on the topic of church. There are many people in our community who would gladly worship, serve and grow alongside us if they simply knew what our church offers. Often, the greatest barrier is not resistance but lack of invitation.

Each of us represents this church every day through our words, attitudes and actions. How much do we value the ministry of this congregation? How much do we treasure the message of Christ our church proclaims? If our church has encouraged us, supported us and helped shape our faith, that story is worth sharing.

Being enthusiastic does not require a polished speech or sales tactics. It simply means speaking honestly about what our church means to us and inviting others to experience it for themselves. When we take our faith seriously, when we take our church seriously, we talk openly about our mission to love God, love others, serve. We open doors for others to discover this community and this hope they did not know they were missing.

This church is a place where it is okay to not be okay. Sunday is not a place to showcase our perfect lives. It is a time to show up with our biggest hurts and hang ups. A place to lean on our friends and God.

Here's the difference between church and religion. Religion shames people for having dirty feet. The church kneels down to wash them.

Someone wisely said that life is a series of little miracles. Notice them. This is how we, as the church, work against the world's suffering and despair. Oftentimes, we are too busy to stop and reflect and act on what is going on around us in the world, especially a world with such large overwhelming problems. The little things are where we begin.

Sometimes we may be called to do great acts of kindness and make great sacrifices. But this is not usually the case. Usually, we have the opportunity for small acts of love. We are called to make small

sacrifices. The significance and power of these cannot be understated. Little acts of love and service add up.

Simple little acts of love can be done by anyone, child or adult. In any area of life. Just one act, one word, one prayer, one sacrifice can make a profound difference.

There was a young man who went through our Sunday School and confirmation program.

Unfortunately, when we went off to college he developed a drug habit. His life spiraled out of control and the courts ordered him into a drug rehab center.

It was the right step for him. Because in recovery circles, small things matter. Small things matter. Like each morning in rehab, he was forced to make his bed.

No big deal, right? Well, for him, it was a big decision. It was something he had never done before. Never made his bed before, so this little decision was a big decision in learning to order his life.

He told me that he continues to make his bed even now, every day, years later, because, he says, it is a sign of being committed to getting better. He does it on purpose and it strengthens his resolve to make his life have purpose.

He told me that as he smooths out the sheet wrinkles, he feels God is helping him smooth out some personal problems as well.

A smooth sheet, a made bed. God likes small things. That is one of the things you will discover when you read the Bible. God's specialty is to take insignificant smallness-es and turn them into amazing strategies.

Like the people we read about in the Bible who felt inadequate and scared. Yet God called them to be leaders and asked them to take big steps forward. Like the young shepherd David who became Israel's greatest king. Like teenage Mary who became the mother of our Lord. And like a boy with a small lunch who gave his meal to Jesus who blessed his

meal and fed 5,000. Small things do matter.

Very few of us will have some sort of impact over 5,000 people. Most of what we are engaged with is fairly small stuff. God enjoys the beauty of fairly small stuff.

It is Jesus who taught us the importance of a small glass of cold water. That even a cup of water given in his name to the least of the people that we encounter can be something that God values so much that Jesus considers it service to himself. Little acts of service are honored in the eyes of God. The little things, the interruptions, the hassles, the unexpected things. These things are the will of God for us.

Maybe we can't change the suffering of the world by ourselves, but we can respond as Jesus would respond.

May God help us be attentive to the large mega-issues of the world: hunger, poverty, terrorism, the environment, wars. There are so many problems, so much despair.

And may God help us be attentive to the little things of life. To the opportunities to reach out in Jesus' name to someone in need. May God continually provide us opportunities to love and serve.

God is real. God is present and in this place. Go from here this day and be Jesus to the world.