

Isaiah 58:9b-11 (King James)

⁹If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; ¹⁰and if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: ¹¹and the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

Low Interest, No Interest

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: November 2, 2008

Thomas R. Hathaway

Text: *Isaiah 58:9b-11*

I want to enter today's text by way of an experience that most of us have probably had at one time or the other. So the other day I went to the Coop in Harvard Square. You know, I had some overpriced books to get for class. I purchase my books, have them in hand and start heading home. On my way, I pass a guy sitting on the ground with a cup in front of him asking for change. He's obviously poor, in need of shower, food, and a lot of other things. And I am walking by and I think to myself, "Pssh. Dude, I can't afford to give you any money. Do you know how many loans I have to pay off."

You see, it wasn't so long ago I got out from undergraduate school. \$39,000 dollars a year. Before I even got to Harvard my brain was already worth \$156,000 dollars, much of that funded by student loans and leaving me sitting on a big fatty pile of debt. This concerns me greatly as I'm told that ministry is not the most lucrative field out there – but I am also told that these loans are the lowest interest loans anyone will ever see in the course of their life. I'll still be paying a good amount of interest when all is said and done, but comparatively speaking, I guess they're low interest.

Now here's the ironic part, while I am walking by this guy, moaning about these low interest loans keeping me down, this guy on the road is suffering from a much greater problem, no interest. If we were talking about no interest loans, he wouldn't be sitting on the cold pavement, he'd be up, clicking his heels and in the Coop with rest buying Harvard paraphernalia. It would truly be a beautiful thing.

But we are talking about a different kind of no interest. The kind of no interest in which probably a good 800 people walk past this man during the course of a day, and out of those 800, maybe 2 or 3 people pay him enough notice to give him a dime. They have no interest. He's been on the street for years now, addicted to drugs, addicted to alcohol, with no access to facilities to help him break this cycle of abuse that is killing him and leaving him destitute on the street. The government, most of our churches, have no interest. I am on my way to get a Harvard Divinity School sweatshirt that costs around half a year's tuition in and of itself and pass by this man thinking *I* have no money. But really, I have no interest. I think I am suffering from low interest loan payments; this man is suffering from a no interest existence.

Homelessness is an epidemic of immense proportions in America, an epidemic that surrounds us completely even as we stand today in the middle of the richest, most powerful and arguably the greatest civilization this world has ever seen. I stand before you dumbfounded at how it came to be that by conservative approximations there are 600,000 and by broader estimates up to 2.5 million homeless living in the United States today. And these are not people who have simply resigned themselves to the leading lives of poverty on the streets. According to statistics from the National Coalition for Homeless People 44% percent of homeless persons have engaged in paid employment in the last month. What's more, did you know that 40% of homeless males are veterans of America's armed forces. They are patriots who are left to rot in the

streets by the selfsame country they were willing to give their lives to defend. More disturbingly, 10.3 % of America's homeless population is comprised of elderly adults and Boston alone saw about a 40% increase of elderly homeless persons in recent years. And with our economic situation as it stands, more and more elderly Americans will be faced with decisions of whether to eat OR have medicine. Whether to pay rent OR have access to health care.

Let me tell you the story of one Ms. Barbara Harvey, a resident of the ultra-affluent city of Santa Barbara, California. Ms. Harvey, at 66 years of age, was forced into homelessness because she lost her job as a notary and couldn't afford to make her rent payments even with social security payments and a part-time job. Barbara ended up sleeping in her car for 3 months before she was able to procure housing. With food, energy, housing, and medical costs all on the rise stories of this nature make us question just how far away each of us are from the streets. I pray we recognize that we are where we are by and only by the grace of God. Maybe stories like this will begin to raise our interests.

I will confess to you today that I personally had no interest in the problem of homelessness nor did I understand its pervasive nature in the Boston area until I become involved with the Outdoor Church, a ministry started in this very congregation. It wasn't until I walked around, handing out sandwiches, socks, and praying for people in the street that I realized that poverty is not a problem for those lowly peoples in the impoverished nations of Africa and Southeast Asia, a problem far removed from my own experience, but rather one that very literally sits at my doorstep.

I would like to tell you today about the good work of which you, North Prospect Union are a part. Most of you are aware of the sandwich-making that goes on here the 2nd Sunday of every month, but I'm not sure if everyone is aware of what happens to those sandwiches once they leave the church. For those of you who do not know, the Outdoor Church is, above all else, a church – one that holds two worship services, one in Porter Square and one in Harvard Common every Sunday. These services are not just for homeless people, but for people who for a wide spectrum of reasons feel unwelcome or too ashamed to attend a regular church. At these services there is a reading of the weekly text, a time for community reflection on that text, participation in communion. It is after these services that the sandwiches that you so lovingly make come into play.

When worship is ended I join Jed and his posse, load up coolers with your sandwiches and walk a predetermined route through Harvard and Central Squares. Here we minister to about a hundred people on a given Sunday. On this route we come across two kinds of people. There are those who recognize a good deal when they see one and will come up and get their sandwich, juice and socks, talk just enough to make it look like all personable like, then say "God bless you" thinking that's what we want to hear and go back from whence they came. This is a phenomenon, if you've never heard of it, called a "soup kitchen conversion." The idea is that the more you tell the nun serving the soup about how much you love Jesus, and how much Jesus has done for you in your life, the deeper she will dip her ladle into the pot and the more meat you'll get when she pours your soup. Come to think of it, it's actually a pretty good strategy – I suggest you give it a go at the next church dinner. But the point is that you do see that kind of people and it indeed a little disappointing.

Much in contrast to these ignoble few, are the majority of the people to which the Outdoor Church ministers. These are people who are all too aware of the disinterest of our

society and who truly appreciate a warm, non-judgmental ear to which to talk. These are people who will say, and I quote, “We are trash. We are nothing. I drink. I do drugs but I want to change and I am trying to stop. You really have a lot of love to be doing this” Unquote. These are people who ask for communion. These are people who want you to pray for them because they can’t seem to pry themselves away from an abusive relationship or because they have recently lost a loved one. These are people who see the sandwiches that you make at this very church on the 2nd Sunday of the month as the blessing that they are, a sign of God’s love for them. The beauty of God is that God works through people. God works through people to help people.

How many times in your own life have you been in a hard place, nowhere to turn, and God sends an angel to you in the form of a good friend or neighbor. I want you to turn to your neighbor and say “God loves you, and is working through you.” That is the concept by which the Outdoor Church runs and the foundation on which all of Christendom is built.

This is an idea that I would like you to take home. This is something for your church doggy bag: this idea that God works through people to help people. Today we started with a famous hymn we all know, This Little Light of Mine. I dare say there is not a Christian in this country that does not know those famous verses. We sing it. We know it. We love it. We’ve committed it to our hearts. But we don’t think enough about what it means. What is this light and where does it come from? Today’s scripture tells us quite clearly how this light is made to shine, listen to it one more time: *If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; and if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday*

This is not a light thrown off by a fire kerosene and matches. The prophet Isaiah says in no uncertain terms that the light of God is made to shine in a person through their acts of mercy and love toward the outcasts of society. When we reach out, when we take an interest in those who have not been blessed with our station, with our societal placement, with our... luck – is when God’s light is able to shine into the darkness of the world through us.

So what is it we are supposed to do? We will not be able to eradicate homelessness in our lifetimes. We cannot help every person who is out on the streets. Today’s scripture reading commands us not to spend our money, nor our food, nor any of our other material resources. There are any number of other verses that will direct you as such. Some versions of the bible do in fact translate this verse to read “give food to the poor” but Hebrew scholar Jan Koole tells us that the original Hebrew of this verse says to give of your substance, not in the material sense, but in the internal sense. That is, to give of your being. Thus here, the prophet Isaiah commands us to something much more than giving just of our material goods. We are not to give JUST of our money, not JUST of our food, but here he calls us to give of our of souls... “*draw out your souls to the hungry.*” We must spend ourselves, our physical, mental, and spiritual energies on those afflicted by the injustices and cold inattention of this world.

In other words, we are called to be a high interest people. We are told we should have our interests so highly staked in the downtrodden of this world that we can be said to be drawing out, our souls. Now here is where the metaphor gets really good because I know that there is someone saying “With all this drawing out of my soul, the credit line of my heart will be overdrawn in about a week’s time.” Now let’s read again verse 11 where it says: and the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.” What Isaiah is

saying here is that when you give of your soul with such generosity and good will, with such interest, when you invest in those lower down on the economic and social ladder than yourself, God will keep your dividends coming. God's economy of love operates on a philosophy much different than our current failing, capitalist, economy. It's not a plus minus proposition. If you expend love on the afflicted it does not mean you will have less love or energy to expend elsewhere. Rather, through God we have an infinite surplus of love. God throws our sense of economy on its head and proclaims that the more you give, the higher your interest, the more you will have to give.

What does this mean for you as you walk down Mass Ave? Well, you may have loan payments, mortgage payments, kids in school, grandkids in school, all sorts of things just eating away at your bank account and may not actually have money to spare. I hear you, I am right there beside - you thank you Harvard. Instead I ask you, in whatever way you can, be it making sandwiches on the second Sunday of the month, be it volunteering at soup kitchen, or working at a food or clothes pantry, I ask that you commit yourselves to having interest in those worse off than yourself. We don't need people to just give dimes to those in need; we need people willing to change ours into a high interest society... **for ours is a high interest God.**