

"CALLED TO DO WHAT WE CAN DO"
(Remembrance Sunday Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Mark 12: 38 - 44

// Whitwell is a community of about 1600 people -- almost exclusively white and Christian -- nestled in the rural mountains of Tennessee.

About ten years ago, the principal of Whitwell Middle School wanted to help her grade 8 students learn more about the world, and to be tolerant of people who are different than they are.

So the class began a project to learn about the Second World War, focusing on Nazism and the Holocaust – a word which most of them had never heard before.

After reading about Norwegians wearing paper clips as a sign of resisting the Nazis, they got the idea of collecting paper clips, one for each of the 6 million Jews killed during the war.

The project took off.

They wrote famous people and organizations who began sending them paper clips.

The Washington Post sent a couple of reporters to find out what was going on.

Some Holocaust survivors drove from New York to meet the students, and share their personal stories of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

Before it was finished, 29 million paper clips flooded into the town, each mailing with poignant letters and photos and personal stories of connections with the Holocaust.

They were now faced with a dilemma. What to do with all those paper clips...

Someone suggested trying to get a German railroad car from those war years for a memorial in which to house the paper clips and tell the story.

Remarkably in time one was found, a cattle car that had transported Jews to the death camps.

Today it sits in the Whitwell schoolyard, filled with paper clips from all over the world, representing not only the Jews who were killed, but also the homosexuals, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Gypsies, and other groups that were targeted during that hate-filled time. //

As I watched the documentary on this project, it struck me that what these Grade 8 students were teaching me was that we simply must do what we can to tear down walls of hatred, and misunderstanding, and injustice in our world.

We do what we can do... just that...

Is that not something of what we are about today?

We are about honouring those who put their life-plans on hold, and did what they could to make this a better world, especially in the face of the evil that is war.

Many, far too many gave their young lives in this grand and noble cause.

Many, far too many, returned with bodies broken, and spirits so scarred that time has been unable to heal them.

Painful though it is, we pause today because we must – honouring the memory – lest we forget!

But it is not only those in uniform we honour today.

We also enfold in our gratitude those whose experience of war was not on the front lines,

but included ration coupons, the heart-wrenching separation of children from their parents,
 the wail of air raid sirens,
 the town band playing “God be with you till we meet again” as the troop
 trains pulled away from the station,
 the visit of a neighbour with the telegram everyone dreaded.

Because we must not forget how war impacts the whole human family.

// One of my vivid childhood memories is gathering on Remembrance Day at the Cenotaph on the
 main street of our town. It was, as you may remember, both a school holiday and a business
 holiday back then. Huge throngs of people gathered at the eleventh hour on the eleventh
 of November. The town band played somber hymns.

Lines and lines of veterans paraded with pride.

Prayers and readings were offered by various clergy.

Two long minutes of silence.

And then the laying of the wreaths, representing almost every organization and group in town.
 But in the midst of all the pageantry and colour of the occasion, do you know what I remember most
 vividly? -- the moment when the Silver Cross Mother laid her wreath on behalf of all the women
 in every community who like her, had lost a son, or a daughter in the war.

For me, as a child, the Silver Cross Mother fighting back her tears was the most striking symbol of the
 personal impact war has upon us.

Laying that wreath was an expression of all she had to give, for the sake of a greater good. //

The gospel lesson today shows us another woman offering all she has to give.

Jesus is sitting there across from the Office of the Temple Treasury, watching those who have
 come to put money into the temple coffers. Many are obviously people of means.

With great flourish they call to themselves as much attention as they can as they
 deposit their substantial gifts.

“See how generous we are?” they seem to be saying.

Not many people notice her – but Jesus does.

She shuffles along in her “goodwill garb”, the broken straps on her sandals flapping on the stone
 floor, her head covered in the black shawl of the widow in mourning.

Unlike the rich who made a show of their presence, she does not look around to see if anyone is
 watching. She simply moves along to do what she can -- to make her gift -- two small
 copper coins.

It is just worth a penny, her gift – throw-away change for others in the line.

It is the kind of coin that some stores have in a dish near the cash register. You have seen the sign,
 “If you need a penny...” Just a penny.

It wouldn't make any impact on the temple budget – not really. Just two copper coins...

But according to Jesus, this poor widow has put in more than anyone else.

“Out of her poverty, she has put in everything she has, all she has to live on...” Jesus says
 to his friends.

We are called to do what we can do – just that.

The widow's penny is a candle in the darkness, a sign of hope.

Each veteran whose memory we honour today,

each person who, in the words of the poet, “danced the skies on laughter silvered wings”

in the RCAF, or slogged through the fields of Europe, or in the rice paddies of the
 far east, or searched for submarines in the North Atlantic;
 each is a candle in the darkness, a sign of hope...

Each person who in the 40's worked in factories, or looked after children, or rolled bandages for
 the Red Cross, or wrote to soldiers overseas;

each Silver Cross Mother;

each Colin Walker, who is today the very age of those who went off to war,
 and who challenges us to honour and remember;

each person who respectfully notices those repatriating cortèges as they make their way
 along the 401 from Trenton to Toronto;

each time Remembrance Day renews our resolve to simply do what we can do -
 each is a candle in the darkness, a sign of hope.

We honour today the legacy of those who are willing to do what they can do...

// You will not know the name Emerson Lavender, but he was a friend a mine,
 a man of great integrity, highly respected member of my former congregation.

Emerson died about a month ago.

After he retired from a distinguished career in education, he wrote a book entitled *The Evaders* - the
 story of downed Canadian airmen who, with the help of ordinary Dutch, French and Belgian
 people, evaded capture in enemy territory by being passed on from one link in the chain to
 another, until they managed to get back to England.

The Evaders would not have survived, if it had not been for the Helpers - ordinary farmers,
 grocers, housewives, everyday folk who were simply prepared to do what they could.

By and large, these "Helpers" were not sophisticated folk.

They had not studied a Manual on how to be a Helper,
 had not earned a certificate that said they were now qualified.

They just did what they could, without counting the cost, or the risk to their own safety.

I suppose in the overall scheme of the war effort, hiding a single airman in the hay loft for weeks at a
 time meant little, when you think about the big picture.

It was perhaps just a penny....

And yet without that gift, without that link in the escape-route chain,

without those ordinary citizens simply doing what human decency called them to do,
 thousands of individual lives would have been lost,

and our world would have become an even more savage and brutal place. //

Each Helper was a candle in the darkness of the war - a sign of hope.

Maybe that is the key - never to lose hope that this world can become more beautiful, more life-
 giving, more peaceful, more just, more holy.

// I am inspired by Martin Luther who once said that "even if I knew the world would go under
 tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree."

It is that kind of unquenchable hope that shapes this day of remembering... //

We do what we can do... little things that make a difference --

wearing a red poppy this week,

praying for our troops in Afghanistan and indeed wherever they are in our world...

Little things that make a difference:-

gathering millions of paper clips,

a Silver Cross Mother laying a wreath,

a poor widow contributing a penny,

ordinary "Helpers" caring for "Evaders" behind enemy lines,

a young man's reflection calling us to honour and remember...

We do what we can do... just that...

// May I leave you with the words of a 13th century Italian named Francis. These familiar words continue to be a manifesto for peace, a "game plan" for us even in our own day, if we are to begin to create the global village of earth God dreams is possible for us. You know the prayer:-

"Lord, make me a channel of your peace...

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy..." //

Don't know where to start?

Lift those words off the page, and make them part of your life.

This Prayer of St. Francis,

this manifesto for peace is a place to start --

a way of engaging God so we can do what we are called to do...

Amen! May it be so!

[Hymn 676 "God make us servants of your peace..."]