



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Holy Plans

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 30, 2022

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In our Old Testament lesson, the young boy Jeremiah gets his call from God to be a prophet. He has the audacity to challenge God, in essence asking, 'How can you be calling me? I don't know how to speak or what to say. After all, I'm only a boy.'

In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in the Message Bible, God responds, "Don't say, 'I'm only a boy.' I'll tell you where to go and you'll go there. I'll tell you what to say and you'll say it. Don't be afraid of a soul. I'll be right there, looking after you." Earlier God explained to Jeremiah, "Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you."

What makes plans holy? I believe they are plans conceived and bathed in prayer, with little pockets of air dispersed throughout them to give room for the blowing breath of the Holy Spirit. There is a wonderful story of holy plans that happened in a little town in east Tennessee about twenty years ago. Some of you may remember that I told this story in my first sermon here at Calvary. It is a story worth revisiting.

The little town of Whitwell, Tennessee has 1600 people. The town is nearly all white and all Protestant. In the late nineties, the Whitwell Middle School had only 5 African-Americans, one Latino, and no persons of the Roman Catholic or Jewish faith traditions.

Linda Hooper, the principal of the school, noticed that on the rare occasions when the white children met someone of another culture, race, or background, they were afraid of someone they saw as a threat to their very insulated lifestyle in Whitwell. Linda was concerned that this could lead the children to hateful or evil speech directed toward groups of people they did not really know.

So, in 1998, she asked David Smith, the assistant principal, to come up with a project that would teach children how to understand people who were different from themselves. He went to a conference in Chattanooga and came back with a plan – Let's teach the children about the Holocaust - the mass killings of Jews and others during World War II by the Nazi regime of Adolph Hitler. In learning about the Holocaust, the children would learn about a people, European Jews, of whom they knew nothing. Linda, the principal, gave David the green light and they began what they thought would be a simple project of classroom instruction. They were in for a surprise.

David started by telling the students that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. One little boy had the audacity to raise his hand and asked, 'What is six million?' David and the boy's fellow students wondered, 'How can we show this young boy what 6 million is? Maybe there's something small we could collect until we get to 6 million to show just how many that is.'

The students began doing research on the internet. They discovered that during the Holocaust, the people of Norway wore paper clips as a secret sign of protest against Hitler's policy of killing Jews. So, the children decided they would collect 6 million paper clips! They wrote letters to companies, organizations, celebrities, anyone they could think of – asking for paper clips. And the paper clips began coming in. Pretty soon, they had over 100,000 paper clips.

Word began to spread in the Jewish community throughout the United States about the students' project in Whitwell. Many Jews were so touched by it that they not only sent the children paper clips, but they sent personal letters and photographs. A group of holocaust survivors and families of victims even made a bus trip from New York to Tennessee to thank the students of Whitwell and tell their stories.

As the students heard their stories, the paper clips took on a new meaning for the children. They represented real flesh and blood. They represented souls.

Guess how many paper clips the students collected. Twenty-nine million! Supporters of the project arranged for a German railcar that once carried Jews to concentration camps to be shipped to the school to house the paper clips. It has become the Children's Holocaust Memorial Museum in little Whitwell, Tennessee - a town and a school that will never be the same.

The students carefully selected 11 million paper clips to go into the museum and decided to store the rest. The 11 million paper clips represent 6 million Jews and 5 million others killed in the Holocaust. Not only the speech of the students, but that of the people of the town towards groups different from themselves is now very changed from what it once was. It is marked by empathy and generosity toward others.

The students at Whitwell learned that right speech about another begins with a heart of grief. The students didn't just learn about the Holocaust from books. They lived and breathed the story. It was now a part of their story.

The plan that Linda, the principal, and David, the assistant principal, conceived was a good one to teach children about the Holocaust. But they made space in their plan to listen to a young boy's audacious question and to expand their vision far beyond what was originally conceived. Young Jeremiah had the audacity to ask a question, and God made allowances in the plan to grow a boy into a prophet, to give the people a new voice and a new hope.

One of the things these last two years of COVID-tide has taught us is the value of flexibility. It has been amazing to see how God has provided Calvary with gifts at just the right moments, often in

the form of many of you, to live-stream services, to Zoom Bible studies, to check on and encourage one another. God is teaching us to let go of outcomes, trust the process, and be open to

how it may change us along the way. God is lifting us up beyond whatever we see as our limitations to see instead the abundance in our midst and in ourselves.

God is not finished with us yet. Far from it, God is still creating and recreating the world around us, and appoints and consecrates us to be a part of shaping and forming our city.

On this, our annual meeting day, and the day we commission our new vestry members, may we leave room for the audacious child-like question. May we leave space for the blowing breath of the Spirit to make our plans holy.

Amen.