

“Piling on the Blessings”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I was talking to Ken Arentson one day and we were laughing, because both of us had served small-town churches, and small towns are not like bigger communities. In a small town, you do have the most radical groups of people. If you ever watched “Northern Exposure” - remember that show from years ago [laughter] - you always have that one wealthy guy who loves being in control of the big fish in the small pond. Then you have that little eclectic person who kind of lives there like a hippie, who just barely gets by somehow. Then you have all of the gossipy people in the café who talk about everyone else. It’s all so rich and real.

In the little town that Jill and I were in, in my first call, all of that was very alive and well, and it was just like “Northern Exposure.”

I want to tell two stories I may have told these before, but they bear repeating for the Scripture lesson.

The first one: It was really a tough moment for me, and it was based on these people in the café who were chuckling and carrying on. You see, this one elderly woman finally died, and she had been just a pain in the community’s backside all of her life. She came to the North Woods to be a hurly girl. Now, without being too descriptive, hurly girlies were women of the night who came there, because of all of the people who were miners up in the northern country. She stayed and met this guy, who was a church member, named Andy. Andy was a wonderful little Finish man. He was just so caring and loving, that she left that life. He accepted her into his home and cared for her, and loved her. But, every so often, this woman would just leave him - just go off. Months later she would return and he would take her back in, as if nothing had happened, clean her up, get her back healthy again and then love her and care for her. He loved her until the day she died.

Everybody else in town just despised this woman, not only for the kind of life she had lived, but also for the way she had treated poor little Andy all these years, And [they] couldn’t understand why Andy would keep accepting her and loving her back. So, on the day she died, I had to give her funeral. Everybody at the café was making bets about what I would say about this woman. [Laughter.] Some people were actually angry that I was even allowing her in the church for the funeral. What I was going to do and how I was going to say this, when it would have been much easier to say, “She is going to hell. Thank you very much. Amen, and goodbye.” [Laughter.]

I was insistent that I was going to give this woman a good funeral, but it wasn’t easy because anything you might miss-state, they were all going to laugh about at the grill downtown - in a town of 600 people. So, I got up there and I was kind of tongue-tied, figuring it out, but then I realized all I had to do was to look into little Andy’s eyes, because everybody else was laughing and chuckling and carrying on through the service, and Andy was just in tears. His sister just held on to him and he cried through the whole service.

Looking at him, I was able to get through that service because, I thought to myself, if Andy could love her after all of the things she had done, all of the horrible decisions that she had made, couldn't God love her even more? If God loved her, then why *couldn't* we? I pretty much said that, in another way, in the service and everybody became very quiet, except Andy, who perked up.

It helped me realize that when there are people in this world who have lived so hard, so rough, and in some cases so horribly; before we cast the first stone, we need to sit back and wonder what their lives must have been like, that put them into that horrible place.

Andy never told me what it was that he loved about her. Andy was a good Finish man and Finish men don't say a lot, but I surmised from all of the stories, that this woman had had a terrible, terrible childhood, and had been abused and hurt, and that she never felt worthy or acceptable.

I figured out that the reason that she would run away and do these terrible things was because she didn't feel herself to be worthy of Andy's love and care, so she would just flee and act out. Then, it made it a whole lot easier to care about her, to pray for her soul, to love her and at least not allow people to make jokes in the town café; because there was more to her and more that she had to endure in her life than, God willing, the rest of us would ever have to experience. I realized that is why God doesn't expect us to cast the first stone.

About that same time, in that same little town, there was a couple who used to always come to church in the summer time. See, northern Wisconsin is kind of a vacation spot. We would have about 600 people in that little community in the winter time and, so, by March everyone was starving, because those of us who lived there year 'round were trying to make all of their money in the three months of summer, when the people - mainly from Chicago - would come up and spend their money and time playing on the chain of ten lakes around the church. So, by spring we were darn happy to see them and by September we were really happy to say good bye. [Laughter.] So if you ever have a lake cabin, and you wonder how people feel about you - the townies - they are happy to see you in the spring and they are really smiling when you leave in the fall.

But this couple finally retired and were going up to northern Wisconsin to hang out and retire, and spend twelve months a year. She was excited, because he worked terrible hours and he would be there all of the time for her, and he was happy because he would get away from all of the stress of work. Well, it was really great right up to the first night they were home alone in that cabin. [Laughter.] She woke up the next morning at about 5:30 or 6:00 a.m., and she opened her eyes. There he was, sitting in the chair, staring at her. [Laughter.] You see, he had worked in Chicago. He was a very impressive man. He had started out as a lowly guy, working at the Chicago Tribune newspaper. He started out selling papers and then got a job there and worked his way up, so that by the time he retired he was in charge of all of the distribution for the Chicago Tribune newspaper for the entire country.

So, it was amazing, but he was up every day at 4:00 a.m. - or earlier - every day for 40 years. He was pumped, man! That paper didn't move without him. And, all of a sudden he went from that to waiting for his wife to entertain him. [Laughter.] So by 9:00 a.m., they are in my office. How about that? She said, "I just thought we needed to talk to you today, so I

don't kill him. We are in real trouble here, and we have to find something for him to do - quickly."

Really, when we sat down and talked about it, jokingly, it wasn't really severe, although there were moments. I really found out that he had been going so strong, so fast for all of those years, he had kind of lost track of his family. They were getting to get to know each other again in a way that was a little scary. But even more importantly, after all that time, he began to realize that his whole life, his identity, his focus, were all on who he was as an employee and his job, and for like a lot of people when they retire, they have to find out: "Who I am, because I used to be my title, and now I'm not anything." And, when you move to a different place and people don't know you, or know you well, and they certainly don't respect you - the smaller the town the less titles matter.

"Who am I and do I mean anything anymore?"

Now the reason I told these two stories is that they actually do connect with each other, because both these people were fighting with what it meant to be worthy. She tried to decide if her entire life was so filthy that, "I couldn't be worthy," and he now, in his retirement is scraping and clawing to keep the worthiness he had always felt.

In both responses, I wish that I had been smart enough in my 20s, as their pastor, to go back to 1 Corinthians 1:3-14 and talk to them about what your identity should be - because most of us are getting it wrong. Our identities are not wrapped up in our work, and our identity is not what we have done or not done. Our identity is based in God's creation of us in God's image; that we are loved, that we are worthy - even when we do unworthy things - and that we don't have to earn our identity. God already loves us in spite of ourselves.

I have said before, I always struggle with what it means to be an Evangelist when we are not trying to drag people out of hell into heaven. And, I think our largest mission - our evangelism as a more-liberal congregation - is to help people understand God's love, God's care for us, the blessings that God gives us.

When you talked today [the three senior highs who reported on the Senior High Mission Trip] and you represented the rest of the senior high youth group on that mission trip, the three of you talked about people, I believe, in those poorer neighborhoods who created violence, and who rioted and tore up parts of Baltimore, because they didn't feel worthy that anyone was listening to them or that anyone cared.

The saddest part about that tearing up of Baltimore, which is not unlike the tearing up in Ferguson, Missouri, unlike the riots in Watts in the 1960s, is that they were tearing up their own neighborhoods. They didn't go to the wealthy areas and tear up the mansions. They tore up their own neighborhoods.

When I grew up in Minnesota, we would watch and just shake our heads, because the Red Lake Indian Reservation, just north of Bemidji, every summer would burn down all of their buildings and then expect us to build them back up. Then they would burn them back down. We sat there going, "Why in the world would they do that? How disrespectful."

We didn't take the time to realize, or even think about the fact that they were trying to get our attention. We rebuilt them, but we never listened to them, to hear why they were so angry and upset. We just rebuilt them and brushed them aside, and forgot about them, until they burned them down next year. We didn't offer them the respect to listen and to show them as worthy.

What you did by going on that [mission] trip, and by being there and listening and developing a friendship, C. J., is to listen to them as equals I think, as Solomon and Mitch were saying, as well. And in so doing, you showed them worth. You gave them an identity that was now equal.

That is what our vision in evangelism is: To reach out and say you are equal with me. You receive the same blessings that I do and now that you feel worthy, because God has wiped you clean, now you take the blessings you have received from a God who accepts you and you offer those blessings to others who need to be lifted up. That's the evangelism: To help people understand their worthiness, and to go out and lift other people up as well. That is an evangelism worth sharing, because it changes lives.

It is so terribly sad that in 92 years, that poor prostitute had never had anyone get through to her that she was loved, that she was worthy and that no matter what had happened to her when she was young, God saw her as loveable, caring and whole. If anyone had taken the time to share that with her she would not have had to flee, to walk out on anything that was good, because of her unworthiness, she would have *known* that she was worthy.

And, my friend who was trying so hard to grasp what his worth would be, was able to find it in the way he cared for the town in which he now embraced and lived; in the family that he felt he had to ignore all of those years; and, now could be the husband, the father, the grandfather and great-grandfather that he knew, now, he wanted to be in the last stage of his life; and, that brought him worth, wholeness and the blessing of God,

That's a message that we need to share. Our youth shared it this week, and it is our task to continue to share that message, so that all might feel the blessedness of what you sang today [directed to the choir]. We ask for that blessing through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.