

“Can We Really Change the World?”

February 26, 2017

Loving Large series – Mardi Gras/Fat Tuesday and Hands-on missions

“The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in.” I read those words this week, and as we finish this series on “loving large” move forward into Lent, they were powerful for me.

We hear Jesus’ words again about loving God and loving neighbor - this time from the Gospel of Mark. As we’ve focused on loving large we come to the ultimate question: can we really change the world? Do we believe that our mission is true: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? Does loving really transform the world?

Over the past few weeks, we’ve claimed that our world isn’t meant to run on power or greed or money. We were made to love God and to love neighbor. And even as we talk about love, we have to be clear that “love” is overused. It’s lost some of its power for us. And yet, we were made to love and love in a big way. Love can change the world.

Mark Galli of *Christianity Today* wrote an article in February 2012 about the progress of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, established in 1990 with a timeline through 2015. The first goal was to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

In the 1980’s, roughly half of the people in the world lived in poverty. As of 2015, that number was down to roughly 14% percent. That number still represents over 800 million people, so the work isn’t over, but the progress is amazing.

Galli is clear that the change didn’t come because of aid programs or massive donations directly. Galli says it wasn’t micro-enterprise programs, child sponsorship, or wells being built. At least three-fourths of the change can be traced to economic growth in India and China.

With massive populations, both nations made decisions that opened their countries to globalization, which has led to remarkable economic growth. The wealth trickled down to the lowest economic strata of their societies, and poverty has been reduced.

I realize that we’re in the midst of spirited discussion around global trade and economic issues in our country, but I offer this because it matters for us as the church. Despite our best efforts, it was macro-enterprise in India and China that brought much of the world out of poverty. It wasn’t followers of Jesus.

Does it mean that our efforts don’t matter? When I give my time to feeding hungry people, working on homes in disadvantaged neighborhoods, reading with kids in school, serving on a mission trip, or volunteering to help others, does it make a difference? When I give my money to ministries that I’m passionate about, does it matter? When I

invest my energy in causes that ultimately help others, does it really matter? What about our call to reach out to the poor in our world?

Our primary task is not to rid the world of poverty. I think that's part of our call, but it's not the first thing. When Jesus was asked, "What is the most important thing we can do?" He didn't say, "Eradicate the world of poverty." He said "The most important thing is to love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor in a radical way."

Jesus even said, "The poor you will always have with you." We will never, by our efforts, eradicate the world of poverty. God has an anti-poverty plan for all time. In the meantime, we know that poverty will be a reality.

Does this mean Jesus doesn't care about the poor? Absolutely not! Jesus talks about what we are to do for the poor all the time. When Jesus announced his ministry, when he came into the Temple and read from Isaiah, he chose the passage about "good news for the poor."

He said that when we take care of the poor, we are serving him. If we follow by example, we see that Jesus was touching, feeding, and healing the poor. Everything about Jesus says if we're not working with and loving those who are less fortunate than us economically, then we are totally missing the point of what it means to follow him.

So which is it? What are we supposed to do with Jesus' words? Is it, "The poor will always be with us," or is it, "Do everything you can to serve and love the poor?" The answer is yes. Friends, the reality and call of Jesus claims that the poor will always be with you, **and** do everything you can to serve and love them.

Notice what Jesus says about what we're supposed to do in our world. Everything else hangs on this: Love God first, and love your neighbor. This will lead you to do all kinds of world changing things, things you never thought you would do. Consider what we can do as we share love with the world.

We've shared in worship and witnessed to the power of God at work when we lift up God moments. I think about the Kingdom assignment that touched so many lives and moved so many people last fall. I think about Gary's story of others responding to what we're doing together today as we make blessing bags and decorate lunch bags for kids. I think of shoes and boots for kids who need them, school supplies for teachers, and small acts of kindness and grace that are never known except by those who give and receive, but they happen every day. Love makes us do things we didn't believe were possible, and these things can be world changing.

Why do we do these things if our purpose isn't to have a world with no poverty? Why do we love and serve the poor?

We do it because it's what Jesus did—and we are his followers. You do what the one you follow does.

We do it because he told us to do it—and he is our Lord. He is the One to whom we are ultimately loyal. We may not eradicate poverty, but we serve the poor because he told us to do it.

We do it because it points people to what God will ultimately do. When we experience God's love, when we give to others in God's name, when we go to where the needs are and respond, when we open ourselves to our community, when we give generously, it points people to something bigger. It points to a bigger motivation. It says to a world that is trying to run on what it wasn't meant to run on like money or power, "No!" That's not what the world is all about. It's about love, God's love for you and me – for all.

God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus, and whoever believes in him will have life. Our world is messy and distracted, but God has an ultimate plan to end poverty, and that's what Jesus is talking about when he talks about his kingdom or God's kingdom. For as much as Jesus talked about money, he talked even more about the kingdom of God.

And the one who asked Jesus the question about what is most important, after hearing Jesus say, "love God and love your neighbor," says, "Well said; you are right; this is more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Jesus replied, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The closest we get to the Kingdom here on earth is loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbor in a radical way, and love changes the world.

Friends, our challenge today is two-fold. First, I invite you to consider how you might get involved in loving people in an ongoing way: serving at MAP Food Pantry or Clothing Closet, Supper House, reading at Ross Park, visiting people who are lonely - the options are endless.

Second, I invite you to participate in our hands-on activity before or after you get your coffee. You can fill a blessing bag that will bless someone at the Rescue Mission or decorate a bag that will bless a child through Kids Food Basket. Each day, 800 children in the Muskegon area receive a sack dinner. Each bag is special and meaningful to them.

This is our witness of God's love in our lives. We act in love because we've experienced love. And we pray that our actions would be a sign and witness for others that point to God who loves them – making disciples for the transformation of the world. Thanks be to God! AMEN.