

Alain Spitzer, April 27, 2014

“What Love Does”

My invitation to speak today probably comes from some type of relationship that I have established over the years with people who are mostly homeless, struggling with mental illness and with substance abuse.

More importantly I would argue that much of what I have learned over the years comes from my work with an organization called the St-James drop-In Centre in downtown Montreal. I have been there for the past 10 years now, and although I have worked elsewhere beforehand (Salvation Army, World vision, and various churches, Streetlevel), it is probably at the drop-in that I have been best placed to grow as a person and try to figure this social justice thing out.

Now let me point out from the start that upon my arrival in this field 13 years ago, I had many questions that needed answering, and many years later I have very few answers, and many more questions. Having said that I believe that St-James (and I) for all of the efforts we have committed to the plight of the poor have had limited impact in actually resolving these injustices, but we do remain fully committed to this search for honest relationship that is reciprocal and ‘life giving’.

We are striving to walk alongside people who are perceived (by their circumstance) to have little if any value. It is a journey that has no known end, and our community probably understands better than most that the greatest miracles will not happen in our life time, that things are far more complicated than we would like to admit, and that all of this is a process.

But in community we have a great ability to share our love with each other, and that would probably be the most important thing of all.

So a defining marker that many of us have been through at some point or another is that we are them and they are us, that we are far more alike than different, that it is a mutual relationship and when you get to that point, it changes everything in how you approach your commitment to serving those who are less fortunate. Suddenly it’s not them and me, it is just US ; and if anything is going to be achieved, we are going to have to get there together (i.e : ‘If you want to travel fast, travel alone, but if you want to travel far, travel together’).

Our hope for the church would be for the church to be ‘ALL IN’ (all chips in). What I mean by that is that we would like to see greater long term commitment,

and not what we often call compassion tourism (Move away from ‘petting the poor’, and embracing relationship with them).

Now one of the things that has been particularly formative for me is a relationship that I developed years ago with a roundtable called StreetLevel.

A wonderful group of people not so much interested in petting the poor as developing meaningful long term relationships with them, and I believe that collectively they are involved in some of the more meaningful social justice movements in Canada.

And they would be the first to recognize that it would simply be better if we did not need to exist (as organizations that serve those who are less fortunate). That we could just close down all our organizations and let *neighbours take care of neighbours*. Something that is increasingly rare in the societies that we live in.

Having said that, this journey that I have been on, and that hopefully others are on, has been a true blessing to my family and I. This is not to say that there have not been struggles, indeed there are more than I could have imagined, but this journey has truly opened our hearts to the injustice and hardship that many of our street friends are on, and opened our eyes to the many gifts that they have to offer. And this has led me to change the way that I think about folks who are less fortunate, and the choices that I make on a daily basis.

2-My hope is that today could be the starting point for something special that is all too rare in the Church today (Social justice & service tie in very well in the ‘being the church’ series).....

During this time I would like to share some verses that strike me as incredibly important, and draw from some personal experiences that I have been through over the years while working with folks who are less fortunate than I.

I think that story is what drives us, and I know that for me it has been key to my continued support of the people that call St-James community.

(***Refer back to selected scripture for this Sunday***)

Indeed if I believe that good theology are good thoughts about what we feel God believes, then I believe that this social justice thing must be greatly important to God.

In fact it is centrally important to discern whether this social justice thing is just our idea or his.

So let us look at some passages that have personally captured my heart :

OLD TESTAMENT READINGS:

ISAIAH 58 :6-9

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? **7** Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? **8** Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. **9** Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Old Testament notes: There was no **need** in life under the covenant ; Long term poverty in the old testament was quasi inexistent (from a scriptural perspective) :

- Every 7 years all debts were cancelled
- Every 50 years all land returned to their owners
- And for those who were extremely poor, all landowners were to set aside a significant part of their land and their crops for those who were poor.

In fact in Old testament writing, excluding prayer (study of Torah), generosity & service were perceived as the most important trait that one could act upon. So one thing is certain, Gods commitment is there; and yet ‘his chosen people’ struggle with his will, and move away from what is right!

And we see his frustration at our shortcomings in most of the minor prophets :

AMOS 5 :21-24

21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. **22** Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. **23** Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. **24** But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In the wake of our inability to follow his will, he sends his son (move on to New Testament).

NEW TESTAMENT :

As a reaction to our fumbling around with his will, and our inability to recognize what he feels is important he sends **his son fully human, fully God.**

And what does he say :

LUKE 4 :18-19

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, **19** to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

What is he (Jesus) saying ? *What my Father wants done gets done !!!!* And I am here to make sure that everyone understands that. Basically, he is bringing to the world *‘the good news’*.

And he follows that up with what to me is one of the most powerful statements that the Bible has to offer : (read both passages, but it appears 6 times in the Bible).

MATTHEW 22:36-40

36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37** He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

MARK 12:28-31

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” **29** Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; **30** you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ **31** The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

What a wonderful statement he makes ; what does he emphasize :
To love God and to love your neighbour are one and the same ; there is no greater commandment !!!

Share Kevin M. story :

Kevin is a good friend of mine. We grew up in the same neighbourhood, went to the same Church, and in most cases had the same opportunities.

The difference between Kevin and I however is that while I am speaking about this, he has spent most of the last 20 years on the street. Homeless, addicted, a manipulator.

In the past couple years through a relationship that we have invested in, I have seen Kevin leave the street, find housing & work, and then relapse again into drugs, gambling, spent some time in prison, he almost died from HIV, he has sued me, stolen from me.....we have been through more ups and down together than I could have ever imagined as possible.

And yet many years on, we still see each other on a regular basis (at the moment he is back in housing), struggle through the highs and lows, and the frustration and happiness that come with these relationships. Do I know what the future holds for him ?

The answer would definitely be No. However we are as committed as ever to walking alongside each other in the hope that we can make things 'right'. It is that love that we have for our 'neighbours' that enriches both our lives. It is a reciprocal relationship that enriches us all (God calls us to such relationships; an investment in a whole new reality in a whole different 'kingdom').

LUKE 10 :25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" **26** He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" **27** He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." **28** And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

What does this passage say to me ?

That we are commanded by God to seek justice for all people regardless of who they are. This commitment to justice & love is a difficult one to follow, and many a times in my journey I have felt discouraged and just plain run down. And yet despite the sacrifices and hardship that we are called to take on, this is not a sentence; it is a privilege to sacrifice part of our lives (or all of it) through service.

And yet it remains such a difficult thing to do doesn't it?

Reference Jackie Pullinger (St-Stephen's society in forbidden city of Hong Kong):

After 40 years of true and complete service to some of the world's most addicted and vulnerable people, what does she say :

« Bringing the gospel gives life to the receiver, but death to the giver ».
« If that is what happened to Jesus , then why would we think that it will be any different for us »

The message that Jesus delivered to us is a great leveler isn't it?

So needless to say it is quite the challenge to serve people that have been broken and discarded by their environments; there is nothing romantic about serving people who are so broken, that they themselves no longer have much hope.

Bringing love to those who are less fortunate comes at a great price, and yet there is no other way. To sacrifice one's life for our neighbour once removed, twice removed ... is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. It is not something reserved for a small minority of street workers, missionaries, etc ; **we are ALL called to this.**

And in fact it would be a whole lot easier if we could each just take a small part of this circumstance that is poverty, and share our love to those stuck in it.

In such a situation there would no longer be much of a need for something like the drop-in and the people that serve within its confines...and I think I speak for most of my friends with whom I work when I say that we would happily look for other forms of employment....we are not that attached to the work, we are attached to the people.

I mean you can teach this, you can learn this, you can study this, and we can spend endless years developing programming that seeks to resolve all of the poverty in our communities, but without love there can be no true social justice. That is because charity is not the opposite of injustice; in fact charities increasingly thrive in the more unjust societies around us (reference). Charity is not a substitute for action on inequality, love is.

Refer this idea of 'Shalom' :

We need:

- To make amends
- To make good
- To be (or to make) peace
- To restore (i.e : What does God say about broken pottery?: I am going to take this pottery, restore it, redeem it, make it right, and bring glory to it!
- Peace
- Prosperity
- . Wellness

Is that not the very definition of Shalom?

I would like to share with you the story of a dear friend who I believe was of great influence on the organization that I work for, and the people that work and serve there. His name is Robert Bull, and he passed away a few weeks ago after a short fight with brain cancer.

He was a big man, full of story and humour who many years following the death of written journalism recycled himself as a volunteer extraordinaire, and much of the benefits of his commitment were felt at St-James.

I had the privilege to speak at his funeral, and struggled in the days beforehand to write something that I felt was representative of his life. What was I to pick out from all of the stuff that he had done?

After much reflection, I came to the conclusion that despite the many achievements that he had attained throughout his life, the most relevant impact he had was upon the lives of people that our societies all too often cast aside.

So let me say a few words about him :

« he was a kind person who cared about others, and was very generous with folks who often were not treated very well by mainstream society. In his humanity he made folks who were less fortunate feel valued, and his encouragements led many of them to find hope in the smallest of achievements. He was a person of deep rooted faith, and yet he never imposed his beliefs and opinions onto others. Much of what we are allowed to do now to serve Montreal's less fortunate people is possible because of the sacrifices of those who came before us, and no one did that better than him.

His faith was not an intellectual faith but a lived faith. It was not abstract and compartmentalized to Sunday rituals & traditions. It was lived every day of the week while he served those who needed us most.

He was also very counter-cultural ; he did not celebrate societal norms of success such as personal achievement, getting ahead at other people's expense, competition, and other forms of individual achievement.

For him inclusion, forgiveness, cooperation, sharing & taking care of one another were paramount, and he believed that all lives deserved to be celebrated. Even in his last days in hospital in pain and near death, when folks visited him he was always quick to ask how they were doing, how so and so was getting through various challenges, and rarely spoke of himself ... he was generous to the end »

What I learned in those last days, is that many people will achieve great success in life, but all too often will end life poorly. Rob finished well and without regret.

His absence remains a loss to me and to all of those who love the drop-in, but more importantly he leaves behind a reminder of what a legacy of love and service looks like.

Let me end this meditation with words that have been of great inspiration to me, and that were written by St-Francis of Assisi :

« Remember, when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received, only what you have given : a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice, and courage ».

We are not sentenced to serve, but privileged to answer his call ; and whatever change will come to those who need us most will not come solely through me or Ron, or Rob or anyone else who has committed their lives to service, but through all of us....let us be the Church !