

From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...

August 2, 2015 – Ridge Sunday

What We Have to Offer

1 Thessalonians 1:2-5

Proverbs 15:30

Rev, Julie G. Olmsted

I always say that a person is “saved” when they turn from what they can get in life to what they can give. What can I give back to life vs., “What have you done for me lately?” There was a powerful slogan about four decades ago for the American Negro College Fund that has become part of the American Psyche, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” We could take that further and say that a life is a terrible thing to squander. When we wake up to the fleeting wisp that is what we call a life, we hope to be blessed with the understanding that we all have the invitation to be a blessing to this world...or a burden.

Somewhere in his life, D.L. Moody had this realization. A reading of the opening words in his biography D.L. Moody: A Life, by Kevin Belmonte, shows this auspicious dawning of awareness:

The first meeting I ever saw [Moody] was in a little old shanty abandoned by a saloon-keeper...I saw a man standing up, with a few tallow candles around him, holding a negro boy, and trying to read him the story of the Prodigal Son. A great many of the words he could not make out, and had to skip. I thought: “If the Lord can ever use such an instrument as that...it will astonish me.” After that meeting was over, Moody said, “Reynolds, I have got only one talent: I have no education, but I love the Lord Jesus Christ, and I want to do something for Him.” – William Reynolds

[At this, Julie is informed that Kevin Belmonte was in the congregation, having been invited to present a talk on the relationship between D.L. Moody and Francis Schell, the benefactor of the Chateau and the Schell Memorial Bridge by the Friends of Schell Bridge at their Annual Meeting. "Be still my heart!" she explained. It took her a moment to recover... :-)]

Moody was rough, in manner, in background and in culture. He struggled with

reading and writing. He was born poor. What did he have to offer? From first glance, not much. From what I have read, and what I have heard, Moody had a very hard beginning in life. I won't go into it much, because most of you know far more than I do, but one thing I want to distinguish about what Moody had to offer the world, was that in his early life, he had some kindnesses that affected him deeply. The aging minister Oliver Everett of the First Congregational Church here in Northfield took time to smile at him, pat his head, see him as valuable and treat him with respect. He also brought food to the family and spent hours with them, letting those nine children know they were valued and loved. Who knows if that was the defining element that sparked the desire "do something for the Lord Jesus Christ," but I imagine that it was certainly germane.

In my own life, I have tender memories of teachers, both in school and Sunday school, who were kind and gentle and respectful and loving. When the Cuban Missile crisis was in the news, it affected me deeply. I was worried about my family, about myself, and about the world. One afternoon I went to speak to my sweet beloved teacher Mrs. Montgomery. Mrs. Montgomery had rosy cheeks and wore pretty brooches and smelled of Cashmere Bouquet. I came to her and the tears began to fall as I told her of my fears. She held me close and told me that everything would be all right. She told me that God loved me and would keep me safe no matter what. I believed her and I will never forget the comfort she offered me in those very frightening moments that overwhelmed me as a little girl.

I have seen kindnesses from this very congregation that mirror the Reverend Everett's back in Moody's difficult childhood, and the kindnesses shown to me in my young life, filled with the pain of divorce, alcoholism and domestic violence. Teachers, pastors, church women and men and various neighbors, all showed me kindness as a child, and made me want to be in a position to "go and do likewise" for others, one day when I was in a position to.

Kindness is a priceless offering to a young person, or an old person, a disabled person, or even just a person with a need, a person struggling to get through to the light. It was that precious dawning of awareness that Moody had in a shoe store in Boston on April 21, 1855; that priceless knowledge that someone loved you so greatly that your every misstep was covered by that love. An awareness of a love that just to get a taste of it was to turn your life around from one of getting to one of giving and offering every gift you were ever blessed with to the world around you. Moody was offered kindness and that was what he offered the world.

Jesus says to his disciples in John 14:12: Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these,

because I am going to the Father.

You and I might have ideas about the qualities of leaders and what they have to offer. We might think they are powerful speakers. We might believe they have superior intelligence. We most certainly would think they have a lot of higher education, credentials, powerful friends in high places, and major connections that can trigger great results with just a quick phone call, a stroke of a pen or a tap of a key.

But a real leader, I am asserting today, is merely someone who sees that something is missing, and then provides it. D.L. Moody saw many things that were missing. His family was in need of support; he provided that. Young boys were in need of love and understanding, a good role model and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. He provided that. He saw young people in Northfield who were missing an education, training about life and character, the love of God in real human form. He did not sit back and criticize others, saying, "Why doesn't someone do something?" He didn't hold back because he didn't have those "classic" leadership qualities. He started the Northfield schools and convinced others to go along to support and offer what they had as well. He did not sit and idly dream. He noticed what was missing, then dreamed up a way to provide it. He didn't do it alone; he evangelized others to jump in and do it with him. He offered whatever he had: kindness, boldness, fierceness, and a love of God. Mostly, he offered himself. Moody's life was an offering.

D.L. Moody's life was a testimony to John 14:12. He did not work to get ahead, as much as he took what God gave him and went about putting it to use with a boldness and a fierceness that was fairly astonishing. D.L. Moody did not squander his life. And when he was gathered to God, Moody left behind the gift of inspiration, the chance for education for thousands, and untold numbers of women and men who passed along the idea of generosity, selfless service and love of humanity to generations that came after them. That includes many of you who sit here in this sacred place this morning. And my question today is, as we ponder the words of Solomon in Proverbs, the letter of Paul to the church at Thessalonica, the prediction of Jesus to those first bumbling but loveable disciples, and the great offering of the life of D.L. Moody, What do we have to offer? If Jesus said that you and I will do greater things than he did, if Moody proved this to be true, What do we have to offer?

When I surveyed the salad bar luncheon on Wednesday, everyone running around, serving others, laughing, working in the kitchen, sweating, smiling, twirling, chopping, dipping, scraping, washing, drying, and every other thing I can't think of that you did (because you do so much that nobody sees), I had to smile and give thanks, deep thanks, just as Jesus did for his disciples, just as Paul did for the seedlings of the church that he and others planted, and just as Moody no doubt did,

countless times, when he looked around at God's people doing small and great acts of loving service for the community and the world.

And I am excited by what's possible. I am eager to see, along with all of you, what is missing in our community. I am excited to see what may be possible and then imagine ways to provide it. You and I, year-rounders, summer Ridge folks, folks we have met and have yet to meet, each and every one of us, are the ministers of this community. I have the title of "pastor/teacher," but make no mistake: we are ALL the ministers. That is our credo. That is our stand. That is our offering.

The Good News of our faith isn't just something we study. It isn't just something we hear about and try to understand. The Good News is something that we are. It is something that we offer when we give of ourselves. You and I can be Good News, wherever we go. Our lives are an offering.

Greater things we will do, says the Lord Jesus. Together, with a shared vision, with a refusal to be stopped, with a commitment to be the Good News, and with a twinkle in our eye, you and I can be the leaders and empower the future leaders of the beauty and the majesty of this land and the great history that lives today in the trees and the hills and the wind of Northfield. We can see what's missing, determine what's possible, and then find ways to provide it. I invite us all to be engaged in the inquiry of what's missing, as individuals and as a body, and then with boldness and fierceness, imagination and love, provide it. That's what we have to offer. Hallelujah. Amen.