

August 8, 2010

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Living Streams – “Living Beyond Yourself”

I saw a t-shirt with the phrase “Make History” on the front. Don’t we all make history; it’s just that the history we make doesn’t get recorded and taught but, believe me, we make history. What you do matters . . . it always matters.

Do you feel what you do matters? What do you have to offer the world?

Our summer message series is Living Streams.

I love the image from today’s Bible reading where there is this river flowing down the throne of God and running down the middle of the street and on each side of the street stood the Tree of Life. It is an image of life as it says The Tree of Life was bearing 12 crops of fruit . . . why 12? When any Israelite saw the number 12 they would immediately think of the 12 tribes of Israel which, for them, means the whole people of God.

This is an image of the whole people of God flourishing. It says, “. . . The Tree of Life bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.”

What kind of tree yields fruit every month? There is no tree that yields fruit every month. So, this obviously isn’t a botany lesson. It’s trying to paint a picture of the generosity of God . . . the love and compassion of God flowing at the heart of all things where all the people of God are flourishing. And, I love the next image, “And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations.”

Who doesn't believe the nations could use a little healing today? Could Afghanistan use a little healing today? Could Pakistan use a little healing today? Could the Gaza Strip use a little healing today? Could America with its economic struggles and divisive politics use a little healing today? Could Washington DC use a little healing today? Could Bend use a little healing today?

This picture suggests it is the desire of God's heart for all God's children to flourish. There is this river of Grace nourishing the tree of life that it might bear fruit and we are the leaves of that tree for the healing of the nations.

Futurist, Robert Theobald, said the 20th Century was the century of getting ahead . . . technological and medical advancement, economic gain . . . but are we really ahead? What has been the cost? Whom have we left behind?

Theobald says the 21st Century must be the century of healing. And he suggests that will not happen through business or through government but the only way that is going to happen is for average, ordinary people like you and me to begin to see ourselves as healers – begin to see our lives as a source of healing.

What would change if you began to see yourself as a healer . . . as a source of healing to your family, to the community, a source of healing to the nations?

Rob Bell tells the story of when he went to Africa a couple of years ago because he didn't want to ignore and he really wanted to understand the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Every single day, 6000 people die in Africa from a preventable disease.

Rob Bell landed at the airport and was met by a guide, and they had a driver. The guide said to the driver, based upon Bell's request, "Take us to the most dangerous part of the city." Because Bell really wanted to understand the depth of suffering and despair.

The driver said, "That's not a good idea." But Bell insisted so they drove and drove and drove, and it got darker and darker. It became less and less safe. They got to a particular section that seemed extremely unsafe, and the guide said, "Stop. Let's get out of the car. You need to see something."

The driver said, "This is not a good idea. This is not a good idea." The guide said to the driver, "Just pull ahead to the next block and we'll meet you there."

They got out of the car, and they were walking along, and these young girls started coming out of the shadows . . . 14, 15 years old . . . and they're whispering something that sounds like, "Trishum, trishum." Bells asked his guide, "What are the whispering?"

The guide said they are whispering a dollar value. "In American dollars, they are offering themselves to you for the night for only 25¢."

The guide said, "You have to understand most of their parents have died of AIDS, and so they are left caring for the family. There are all of these dependents, the younger brothers and sisters who have no one to look after them other than their big sister. So their sister has worked all day, but she hasn't made enough money to feed her brothers and sisters, and so she has to come out tonight and offer herself to you and others walking by for 25¢ to try to scrape together a few coins to feed her brothers and sisters.

There are no words when you hear a story like that. What if they were your daughters? What if they were the story of your children or your grandchildren?

It's overwhelming, isn't it? What can it possibly mean to be the leaves on the Tree of Life for the healing of all nations when you hear stories like this?

We are called to be healers but, I don't know about you, sometimes it feels like all I can do is get through the day. What could I possibly have to offer the world? It's so easy to get overwhelmed, weary, discouraged.

I wonder if that's how Jesus felt at the beginning of the Gospel story we heard today. At this point in Jesus' life, people had heard about him and were clamoring to hear him speak, to touch him. It seems that everyone has a burning need.

He healed many of them but on this particular day he is weary and discouraged. The disciples had just told him the dark news of the death of John the Baptist, a totally unnecessary death at the whim of a young girl. Jesus wants some time alone to grieve and to find rest. He says to the disciples, "Let's go away by ourselves to a lonely place a rest a while."

So they do. They climb into a boat and sail away to escape the crowds, but the crowd has so many needs, and Jesus is what they need the most. The crowd follows and finally Jesus and the disciples moor their boat and get out into the crowd.

Though Jesus has every reason in the world to look out at the clamoring crowd and feel exhausted, angry, resentful, judgmental or just too tired, Jesus chooses compassion. There is this river of Grace running through his life.

He looks at the crowd, and with those kind eyes sees not a needy mob, but a collection of God's precious children . . . a woman with a sick baby in her arms, a man with a malformed hand, a young boy whose eyes are full of questions as he dangles his lunch basket in front of him. Jesus lays aside his need and focuses on theirs. Even though he's exhausted, he gives what he can give and teaches all afternoon long and into the evening to a crowd thirsty for living water.

Since it is getting late and nearing supper time, the disciples suggest that Jesus send the people away so that they can get something to eat. But Jesus doesn't want to send the people home, so he tells the disciples to give them something to eat themselves.

I imagine the disciples looked at Jesus with overwhelmed, if not disgusted faces. How could THEY who had no money, no food, and no energy possibly feed 5000 people? Even trying would be a waste of their limited resources. Let someone who has more do it, or even better, let these people find a way to feed themselves. But Jesus sends his followers out into the crowd to see what they can find.

Is stepping into that crowd to see what they can find to feed people really so different from stepping into the world around us that is filled with such overwhelming need? I suspect we all know what it feels like to face a hungry crowd, a hungry world with five loaves and two fish. There's nothing really we can do. The need is too big, and we are too small. Healers? I don't think so. Send them away. Don't ask us. We can barely take care of ourselves. There's no way we have enough to go around, so let's just go home and hope tomorrow is better.

But Jesus says to them and to us, "How many loaves do you have, go and see." It's as if Jesus is saying, "You have more to offer than you realize."

What do you have to offer? Look closely! Don't be so quick to discount what you can bring, what God can do through you.

There's a guy by the name of Wayne Elsey . . . maybe you've heard of him? He grew up in really difficult circumstances. When he was 17 in the 11th grade, his life had been so difficult he decided to kill himself. That very week, a teacher of his, Mrs. Bush, pulled him aside and said, "I just want you to know, Wayne, I see something in you. I believe you can make a difference in this world, so don't let the world get you down. Keep fighting. There's a life force in you stronger than your challenges."

She had no idea how healing those words were. She had no idea she saved a life. Wayne Elsey barely graduated from high school and never went to college. He went into the shoe business working for his uncle selling shoes. His uncle fired him. So he went to work for his uncle's rival. Turns out he has a knack for shoes. By the time he was 22 years old, he became executive vice president of Stride Rite. Not one had any idea he was only 22 and never went to college. Shoes just came natural to him. Soon after he started his own company. It was then that he started going to church, gave his life to Jesus and realized his life was part of something much bigger than himself.

On December 26, 2004, the tsunami hit Indonesia. Wayne Elsey is sitting at home watching TV, and he sees the image of a single shoe washed up by a wave, and feel this overwhelming compassion flowing within him and he knows he has to do something. The devastation seemed overwhelming. He realized that he knew people in the shoe business so he started calling around. In a month, he collected 250,000 pairs of shoes to send to people in Asia. It's really clear, God is up to something in his heart. The river of life is running through his veins and he has never felt so alive and joyful.

Then Katrina hit, and again, Wayne Elsey doesn't know why but he knows he must respond. This time he ends up collecting a million pairs of shoes in 10 weeks.

He begins to ask himself, "God, what are you doing?" He calls some people together and they decide to start this organization to help people get shoes.

He starts doing research. Look down at your shoes. There are 300 million children around the world as we sit here who cannot afford a single pair of shoes. Children die every day from diseases like hookworm simply because they don't have shoes. In the U.S. we have 1.5 billion pairs of shoes. We throw away 300 million pairs of shoes every year.

So Wayne Elsey starts this organization called Soles4Souls, and it is now a \$70 million organization. Around the world Soles4Souls gave away one pair of shoes every seven seconds . . . someone right now is getting a pair of shoes because one guy sitting watching overwhelming need on TV experienced this flow of compassion running through his life and he heard his calling to be a healer to the nations.

Their motto is "we're changing the world one pair of shoes at a time."

They recently had a huge celebration in New York celebrating all that God has been doing through them. The guest of honor at this celebration was a very elderly woman who used to be a school teacher who once saw something in a 17 year-old boy who wanted to kill himself. There were hundreds of very important people there and the press, but the guest of honor is this old woman, hobbling across the stage named Mrs. Bush.

What can God do through one person? What can God do through you?

. . . healing for all the nations.

Maybe what you have to offer is something big that can be a source of healing for the whole world. Dream big. Never underestimate what God can do with what you are willing to offer.

Or, maybe like Mrs. Bush, your calling is to encourage and be a source of healing to that one person.

The 21st Century must be the century of healing – we are the healers. More than likely, we feel inadequate . . . not up to the task, but from God’s view of things, we are the loaves and fishes, and our potential is endless.

Jesus said, “Go see how many loaves we have.” What do we have to offer? How might we offer ourselves as healers to one person . . . to the world?

It’s not up to us to feed the whole crowd, to fix the whole world. It’s up to us to trust the river of life flowing through our lives, to share what we have, to feed whatever big or little hunger is right in front of us. And trust that God will do the rest!