

February 7, 2021

Mark 6:7-9

⁷[Jesus] called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

So here is the story. On Saturday morning, January 30th, I packed up my car and headed out to the church a little before 11:00. I had arranged to meet a reporter from the Newport Daily News in order to talk about my overnight and advertise Amicable's Homeless Awareness Overnight. Marcia was to watch me set up my box, ask me about the church's mission, and take photos.

Driving to the church building my mind began to think about what I would preach about. I wondered what scripture passage I should use. As I wondered, I glanced in my car's rearview mirror, checking on any traffic, and could not see past the large foam cushion. In my car were two large down sleeping bags, a small pillow, three thin, foam cushions, each the size of a twin mattress, a roll of duct tape, a very large plastic tarp, two buckets of small branches and kindling to start a fire, and lots of fire wood. The handwarmers and trail mix snack would come with me later that evening.

It was the glance in the rearview mirror and my inability to see beyond all my stuff (notice the tribute to George Carlin) that I knew instantaneously today's Bible lesson: "take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics."

I was preparing for a homeless awareness experience with a car full – mind you, not a shopping cart full or suitcase full, but a car full – of stuff. Not only was my car full of stuff for my overnight, two large boxes and a burn barrel were awaiting me at the church, as well. Questions arose in me. What homeless person has these luxuries? And, where was the gospel in the comforts I was bringing with me?

These accusatory questions were compounded by the fact that I was being encouraged to postpone this overnight experience by a week, because I was facing what could prove to be the coldest night of this winter. My response to these encouragements was: What homeless person has a choice about what night they will spend outdoors?

These instantaneous questions were followed by, what for me was, an even harder question: Where is the gospel in all of this? For here I was setting my box up at a time convenient for the reporter, because I wanted the maximum amount of advertising I could find; because I wanted Amicable Church in the news. My fear was, albeit briefly, that my overnight is nothing more than an advertising stunt, designed for maximum exposure and maximum profit.

So, where is the gospel, the good news in all of this? It is hard to separate out my ego and God's will; my ego and God's good news.

From its beginnings twenty-one years ago, the goal was to raise awareness of the stain of homelessness in our world. We wanted to bring attention to this, as a church, so that it would be seen as a statement of faith about God; a faith founded on a belief God wants everyone to be sheltered from life's storms.

What helps to make our faith statement so powerful is that we not only tell stories with pictures, we speak with this world's currency: money. Each year we ask people to make a financial donation, which goes to support agencies seeking to end homelessness. As I hope you know, people sponsored my overnight with financial donations that will be going to First Step Inn in Fall River. They not only house people who are homeless, but work with them to help them transition into permanent housing.

I will be honest with you. I worry that my motivation for doing these overnights is to have newspaper articles written about this, which then feeds my ego. And, unconsciously, perhaps that does play a role. But I am convinced God uses even my imperfect motives for perfect good.

I say this with all humility, for over the years our overnights have raised not only awareness about the plight of homelessness, but tens of thousands of dollars to support those seeking to create affordable housing and changing laws to benefit those caught up in a death-cycle of homelessness.

More than even this though. Our Christmas figures on the front lawn and our yearly Homeless Awareness Overnight have told people in our community and our state that church is more than just about judging a person's behavior or gathering with friends. There are many people who do not know churches like Amicable exist. Churches that welcome those deemed as outcasts; churches that concern themselves for those left out and left behind.

I am surprised that, even twenty-plus years after the United Church of Christ's God Is Still Speaking campaign, people do not know welcoming churches like Amicable exist. This is why I am so grateful that newspapers, like the Newport

Daily News and the Sakonnet Times, are willing to help us get the word out about our ministries and our welcome. This may, indeed, be an advertising stunt, but it allows for maximum exposure and maximum profit – in support of the agencies, who are helping to end scourges like homelessness.

These are just some of my musings around the burn barrel Saturday night. Because of my tarp-wrapped box, my two sleeping bags, my three foam cushions, and, most especially, because of the burn barrel and wood supply, I had a very comfortable night out of doors. And even though I had more than a staff, sandals, tunic and bread, I hope God, and Jesus, would agree that I, in the name of Amicable Church, had shared the gospel; the good news of welcome to all.

I will be eternally grateful for how you, Amicable Church, have allowed me to live out and share our welcome in these attention-grabbing ways, even when I have needed more than a staff, sandals, and bread. May God continue to bless us as we seek to live out and share God's good news of welcome and inclusion. Amen.