

August 7, 2011

“Hit a Wall of (my) Indifference”

Rev. J. Daniel Lewis

Hit a Wall of (my) Indifference

Matthew 19:16-26

Pent 8 A

Sermon by J. Daniel Lewis
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I was participating in the conversation, but really, at the same time, I was having a conversation of my own chunking through my head. The XM radio station had faded into the background; even the people in the van - were there, but only a distant second to my churning thoughts.

About half-a-mile from our destination, the population of the neighborhood had changed. The shadows were long - the daylight was sort of, half in-between, much like my thoughts. I WAS RESPONSIBLE for a carload of youth, not to mention a rented vehicle, AND feeling a little pressure for the outcome of the evening. Those were all outside the confines of my mind.

In the short few days leading up to that moment, I'd already seen a great number of people who looked and behaved differently than I. I'd already overcome a few personal barriers by knocking on the door of an unknown neighbor to see if he'd be willing to relocate his car away from our shifting ladders and lopping paint.

I'd heard that the place we were staying, was just a short walk from the corner of Florence and Normandie, where 19-years ago, riots followed the acquittal of officers who beat Rodney King. I slept in a room, where outside the windows, I still heard the voices and commotion each night of a neighborhood that wasn't sleeping.

The day before, I stood with my fellow travelers, under the towering, jewel-embedded monument as I quietly stammered over the centuries of recorded history connecting the gravel under my feet to the gritty tensions that sparked race riots in the Watts neighborhood in 1965.

As a pastor, I had explored far-reaches of my own and other's psyches. I've sat with sick and dying, victims of accidents, and sometimes victims of plain life itself. Those things become manageable once you understand what a hospital room smells like, learn your way around the county courthouse, or keep a supply of relevant pamphlets in the top desk drawer.

The neighbor I bothered four-days in a row, was more than happy to move his car. The gym floor in Vermont Square became a comfortable resting place - those outside voices becoming soft white-noise once I decided I could allow it. The beautiful structures called Watts Towers, glistened as the tallest of artwork, being seen by newbies with perhaps similar wonder as those who watched them originally raised by their creator.

I had learned that the stories of gangs and boogie men and such had their heyday a decade before, and that families had begun taking the security bars down off their houses - and as some of US did that week, were putting fresh paint here and there, turning an old reputation into a promising new village.

All of this was piling up behind the clear lens that often keeps me safe from reality by filtering what I see so that it still will imprint safely with what I choose to still believe.

That evening, unsure if cops would stop me for a u-turn, while baggies were exchanged for cash a few feet from our parking meter - "Stay close," I uttered, confident enough to remind, yet perhaps, still revealing enough, that I was uncertain of the next few minutes.

Central City Community Church of the Nazarene sits on the northwest corner of East 6th and South San Pedro in Las Angeles. The half-block from our car to the non-descript green door was real. Real in a way that includes sites, and sounds, and smells. Real in a way that includes people, other people - some of them looking at us, some of them looking away, some not looking at all, probably wishing the tourists would be on their way.

It was real in the sense that I was there, not part of a news story or pastoral prayer, but present to see, hear and smell. Once inside the green door, the brightness warmed my fears slightly. Tony and Lucy came over to greet us. They've hosted the Wednesday night homeless karaoke in Skid Row for fourteen years. They put me, I mean they put US, at ease. About ten minutes later, the doors were opened for a swarm of people, many of them the residents of the neighborhood - who literally live down the street.

There was a lot of smiling going on in that non-descript interior room that transforms into a worship service on Sunday morning, and transforms into a karaoke coffee shop on Wednesday nights. I dismissed my urge to sign-up when I saw the residents flow toward the songbooks, along with our youth and the youth from several other groups flipping through the plastic sheets that curiously had their own way of landing on the sweet sounds of Motown.

Several hundred smiling people in a room warmed-up with James Brown and the Jackson Five, helped me forget that I had ever arrived with an ounce of trembling.

Then as I was looking one way, a figure sat-down in the chair next to me and placed a hand on my knee. I looked up to see a familiar face, a friend of mine, Beth, who's also a friend to many of you. She and her husband are active in the ministries of Central City Community.

While the crooning continued all around us, she started a conversation with me I didn't know I was going to have. I admitted to her, I had no idea what her ministry was like in that place. Beth stared at me straight in the eye, "Jesus said the poor will always be with us. BUT, WHY?"

She continued to answer to her own question, thankfully, because I had drifted off into a comfortable, deliberately un-analytical place. She said, "I don't believe he meant that the poor would be with us in a segregated way. We are the Christians, and the poor will always be WITH us," as she gripped my arm to emphasize her point. "I gain so much more than I have to offer," she said. I learn about being Christian from them daily. "I LOVE THESE PEOPLE."

It was the words, "I love these people" that snapped the last resistant neuron in my brain that was barricading the wall of my indifference.

Even later that evening back at our home base, the adult staff were unpacking the experience with site director Terry and spiritual director Jennifer. Jennifer had been attending the homeless karaoke off and on for a couple of years. Between them, they conferred, this had been the first time in memory that the youth had not selected to sing "Don't Stop Believing" by Journey, an observation that reflected some of my thoughts... "Is there a difference between singing TO the homeless and singing WITH the homeless?" "Is there a difference between ministry TO the poor and ministry WITH the poor?" I believe part of my revelation for the week was that it's possible to minister TO the poor and keep a safe, impenetrable distance. It's nearly impossible to minister WITH the poor and not, as Beth passionately stated, lose your heart - as you fall in love with humanity.

When you see another person aside from stereotypes, prejudices, and whatever it is that fear does to the human heart, it's impossible to remain indifferent. We heard several people that week repeat this golden rule, "Don't judge me until you've walked a mile in these shoes."

Closer to home, I remember a conversation with the children of our church families who prepare meals once a month for the dinner at Sumner Elementary. It's a free meal for whomever shows up, no questions asked. Many people are there because it's difficult to feed themselves or their families due to economic challenges.

One of our younger youth talked about playing with the other kids after the dinners. He said, "They are my friends," and became defensive at any suggestion that they were different from any other kids his age.

Jesus said, the poor will always be WITH us. The world certainly seems convicted in its efforts to perpetuate poverty. But, perhaps what Jesus said is even more true today, because he knew so deeply the character of our human hearts. The easiest thing to do, to understand another human being personally is still so utterly frightening to most of us that we build fortresses of systems so that we'll hopefully never have to face those fears.

Those fortress walls could be a sanctioned city neighborhood like Skid Row, a systematic encampment of the homeless that helps me avoid being affected.

Those walls could be a catty game of strategy, something akin to the two-sided "Battleship." Except that the entire world is watching as players sluff-off shots with exaggerated drama while each strike takes a house away from a family, or pulls teachers from our local schools, or adds disproportionate tension to neighborhoods just trying to take the security bars down off their windows.

Those walls could be a large number of United Methodist Churches with a majority of members traveling over 10-miles to attend worship, because they've moved from the neighborhood and their church membership no longer reflects the people who live nearby.

Those walls could have been a rich young man trying his best to do what was right and having heard a stranger utter the words he feared most, "Detach from your possessions, and share your wealth with the poor."

Those walls could be my wall. Standing on one-side is a man who says to himself, "I care," yet that same man finds it reassuring to keep the wall erected regardless.

Beth had that conversation with me a week ago because I was there for karaoke and she was there to pray with people; because the smiles and music in the room had walked right up to MY wall; because I was the only one aware of my wall, and the only one who could do anything about it - or so I thought.

I share this story with you this morning, first to let you know, I'm still a spiritual work in progress. Also, with the hope that you may identify with any small part of it. The human condition is not much different from the time of Jesus' teachings. Maybe that is not because a poor person can't find a meal, or a homeless person can't get a job. Those things seem endemic to our human condition. Maybe the poor will always be with us, because of my walls of indifference and perhaps yours as well.

None of us can be the best we can be, our nation and church cannot be the best it can be when we exist at the expense of any other. One night last week the 'OTHERS' became 'WE' and I felt fortunate to be included.

Perhaps you have stories to tell as well. I'd love to hear them.