

Today we recognize people like Joe Martindale. Joe is not a PATH volunteer but he very well could be. Joe grew up in Brooklyn, NY, one of nine children in a Catholic working class family. His father was a longshoreman and although they weren't poor, they didn't have anything extra. Joe benefitted from a good education, attended college, and then got a law degree. Joe was a lawyer on Wall Street, an executive with JC Penny, and ended up spending most of his life as a health care consultant.

Joe was surrounded by ambitious New Yorkers. To most of the people he worked with, "billable time was everything." He says the pressure to have a lot of billable time and develop new business pushes lots of people over the edge in how they run their lives.

But Joe always knew that there was more to life than the bottom line. He remembered the working class people from his boyhood neighborhood, those who were barely able to keep food on the table. He also remembered the important lessons he learned from his parents and school about caring for others who had less.

Joe and his wife Mary have consistently given away a large portion of their income to alleviate poverty in their community and around the world. They donate anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of their income to causes that fight hunger.

Joe and Mary volunteer at an overnight shelter in NY run by a local Methodist Church. He says he is inspired by his fellow volunteers, everyday kind of people, he says. He is inspired by how they work to keep this ministry going even when many of them are struggling to survive themselves.

For more than 20 years, Joe and Mary have worked at that shelter. Recently an old woman came to the shelter. She struggled to get down the stairs to the basement shelter. Like the others, she has been living on the streets and came in for a hot meal and a place to stay for the night. Joe asked her how old she was. "I am 89," she replied. Upon hearing her reply, Joe thought to himself, "We live in the United States of America. No 89 year old woman should be living on the streets."

Many folks in the room are like Joe and Mary. They don't make a big deal about what they do. They volunteer on a regular basis at PATH or maybe elsewhere serving people in need. They do this because they are steeped in our Scriptures. They know the stories of how in the gospel of Luke Jesus announces at the beginning of his ministry what he is here to do. He quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah about how he has come to "preach good news to the poor, he has been sent to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The people here who make arrangements to volunteer in our community to serve others know the beatitudes in Luke about how Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They know the stories from the Old Testament prophets who called Israel to task when they did not take care of the widows, orphans, and the poor among them.

They know the story of Ruth, a story set during a time of great famine or how Joseph was used by God to see that God's people were fed during a time of food insecurity. They know the story of the rich man and Lazarus and how the rich man suffered eternal punishment for showing contempt for Lazarus while they lived on earth.

It is clear that when one reads the Bible, it is clear that working for a just and fair world where everyone has a fair chance to live and prosper is the desire of God. And it is clear when one reads the Bible that God calls upon God's people to do whatever we can to work for that kind of world. A world where an 89 year old woman does not live on the streets in the United States and a world where a 5 year old child in Sudan does not die from malnutrition related diseases.

Yes, we are called to do whatever we can to work toward the type of world that God desires this world to be. But the task is so overwhelming and so frustrating. Many of us are overwhelmed by the statistics. The stats that tell us that 40 million Americans live in households where there is hunger. The stats that 96 billion pounds of food is wasted each year from grocery stores, bakeries, and homes. That 20% of commercially grown produce never makes it to the marketplace. That we live in homes that we throw food away because it is spoiled because we forget about it in the back of our refrigerator.

But hunger today is not just about statistics. It is about real people. And there are many people here who know what it is like to live on meager resources. I have heard some of you talk about eating only a potato for a meal or a tomato sandwich being a delicacy. Others here know the pain of having to tell someone "no" when they arrive too late for that morning's delivery of food. Others know the difficulty of telling someone that, "no," there is no money to give away at this time to cover your expenses.

When you are faced with that kind of overwhelming sadness and frustration, it is easy to walk away and ignore the problems around you. To live in the utopian world where you do not see the problems around you. To live in our exclusive neighborhoods where we do not need to try to solve the problems that are in the world around us.

I just finished reading the book, “No Future Without Forgiveness” written by Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. Tutu talks about how in South Africa the government set up the apartheid system so that middle class whites would not ever have to see the poverty neighborhoods that the blacks lived in. The structure was set up to keep the ones with power from feeling any type of guilt or sense of responsibility for the majority of residents of that country.

It is hard to put yourself in the midst of the pain, and sadness, and injustice of the world we live in. It is much easier to spend the day playing a sport or shopping in a nice shopping center. But the God that we worship calls us away from our comforts. The God we worship has a care and compassion and desire for justice for those who are poor.

So if we want to be where God is at work, then we need to be in the messy places of our world. We need to be with those who are outcast, put down, and struggling. We need to work in our community to overcome the injustice that leads to so many living in poverty while others live in wealth.

Today we have a Scripture from 1st John. We have been reading through 1st John here at ACPC. This letter or sermon is written to a first generation church that is having some conflict with one another and these words are written to give them guidance in how they are to be church. Today we read about how to be a Christian means to love your brother or your sister. That to love is not just to say those words but to show love by one’s actions. These words are written to them because obviously they are not showing love to a brother or sister and they are not showing love by their actions.

Serving folks in our community is not just about doing good. It’s more that an act of service. Serving folks in our community is about living out the Scriptures that have been provided for us. Serving folks in our community is about living out the words of Jesus to love our brother or our sister. Serving folks in our community is about putting your words into action. Serving folks in our community is about being in the places where God is alive and revealing who God is.

Do not be discouraged in serving others. Even though there are many days you want to say, “Why bother.” Instead, be reminded, that as you serve the needs of others, you are indeed placing yourself right in the midst of God and God’s kingdom here on earth.

Keep up the rigorous and difficult task of serving the children of God.

Remember, blessed are the poor, for that is where the kingdom of heaven can be found. AMEN.

-Beckman, David, “Exodus from Hunger: We Are Called to Change the Politics of Hunger,” WJKP, 2010

-Text: I John 2:7-17; 18-22

-Given: April 29, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian as we honor PATH volunteers