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The First Congregational Church in Old Lyme  
Sermon: Reflections on the Run: Sharing Dignity over Quiche and Coffee

Texts: Mark 8:1-10 11/3/24

I don't know how many of you subscribe to Snapchat but this might well be described as a Snapchat sermon. Snapchat is that instant messaging app where you post quick pictures and messages that are put up instantly and last for a short while.

I'm seeing in my mind's eye and heart, a mini slideshow of moving Snapchat images from our Breakfast Run last Saturday. Can't quite believe it was just a week ago! In a moment I will invite some of our PF Youth group to share their reflections and what remains for them from the experience

Thanks to many here at FCCOL We had a huge support...helping us behind the scenes as well as the 36 participants, chaperones and students.

I can still see the mountain of black plastic bags and scattered coats on the Sheffield stage filled with winter clothing donations to be sorted and Renee Gosman and her family took charge of organizing the chaos into sensible manageable piles. And she did that with a smile on her face.

I also watched as the day before the Run, 10-12 teenagers assembled over 100 sandwiches of turkey and ham and cheese in our church kitchen under the detailed instruction of Captains Mary-Gardener Coppola, Cari Blanchard, Wendell Webber and friends.

I see another image from 6:15 am on Saturday morning as we piled into cars for the Run. Some travelers had to sit with toiletry kits stuffed at their feet in their minivan for the guests we'd soon serve.

Pulling away from the curb on Ferry Road, everyone buckled in for the drive. Some turned on the soundtrack to Hamilton and belted a few familiar lines as dawn began to lighten the sky for our journey. A favorite lyric from the musical comes to mind: "*Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now.*" ( Lin-Manuel Miranda, Hamilton: The Revolution)

The 1001 preparations we had were all deeds of love that somehow led us to our assigned location at Chelsea Park at 28th/9th Ave on Manhattan's West Side.

Nothing quite prepares you, even if you've done the Run many times before as I have or as Carleen has for the line of people snaking around the block as you pull up alongside the park. My heart pounded as I scanned the traffic quickly for a parking spot and had to circle again.. Luckily our other drivers were able to park and unload kids, tables, and donations.

This year, the crowd of 80- 90 plus felt enormous and I heard they'd been waiting for hours. One guest named Donovan, shared that he'd been in line since 6 am when the church shelter at the corner released everyone. "In by 10 pm, out by 6 am" that's the rule" he said.

I'm reminded of the Feeding of the 4,000 gospel passage from Mark that we just heard. Jesus found himself with a "hungry crowd" on his hands. And his heart was breaking....what did he do? He fed them. He fed them with bread and fish. He fed them with dignity and hope. He fed them with presence and consideration for their physical bodies. He and his followers blessed the crowd until they all became a communion of souls. Bread was first though.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, *“There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”*

Our church has been doing the Breakfast Run for something like 16 years. Carlene’s granddaughter, Anna Bjornberg, was two months old when her mother, Emily, co-led the first Breakfast Run!

In many ways, it has become a partnership of FCCOL, started by former Associate minister Amy Bruch, *The Midnight Run* is the organization dedicated to finding common ground between the housed and the homeless. It coordinates over 1,000 relief missions per year, in which volunteers from churches, synagogues, schools and other civic groups distribute food, clothing, blankets and personal care items to the homeless poor on the streets of New York City. The banner on the website reads, “Bringing community and justice to the streets of New York City since 1984.”

That human exchange, that “economy of dignity” rather than the exchange of goods, is the essence of the Midnight Run mission.

We know that the Midnight and Breakfast Run’s are not a solution to systemic homelessness. Nor does the one day a year event make that much of a difference in the lives of the people we meet to bring coffee and sandwiches to...

But our intention and hope is to offer an immersion experience for our young people so that they, too, will be changed by the sharing of dignity over slices of quiche and cups of coffee.

Our intention and hope is to help them to see and become a living gospel story in which they are the Jesus in the crowd, asking someone what they take in their coffee and looking each person in the eye.

To see the real human person beneath the oversized layers of hoods and coats many guests wear. To learn that folks waiting for food have no room of their own let alone a closet. Anything they own they must carry or wear at all times. Or drag around in huge plastic bags as we saw some did.

Our volunteers come to see people on the streets as persons, not a commodity or a statistic. And the unsheltered men and women with whom we interact propels each one of us to go beyond the gripes and concerns of our daily lives and see into the heart of someone rendered invisible and unworthy by our society.

Sure, the drive is long, especially on the way back. Yes, we have unhoused people here, too, and not enough housing stock. And urban poverty right down the street. And families that come hungry to our church every Saturday morning to shop at the food pantry. But there is something powerful about leaving your own backyard and traveling to a different neighborhood that opens up your heart. Whether that neighborhood is in Old Lyme, New London, NYC, Alabama, Haiti, West Africa or beyond.

“Come and see”, Jesus taught his disciples. (John 1:30)

A couple of weeks ago, a treasured theologian by the name of Gustavo Gutierrez passed away at the age of 96. He was known, is known, as the “Father of Liberation theology” for his profound work with the poor of Latin America. Gutierrez was credited with giving us a new way to do theology back in the 80’s that recognized a God who takes the side of the poor and vulnerable.

I remember hearing him speak once at Boston College, my undergraduate alma mater. Humble, prophetic and funny, being in the presence of this Peruvian professor felt a little like meeting “God”...though he’d reject that assertion I’m sure.

Gutierrez displayed the same childlike spirit that Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu exhibited. He delighted in teaching and college students and always talked about what he called “God’s preferential option for the poor” and the “ethics of encounter” with one another in particular to those whom Jesus came expressly to be with...the last, the least and the lost.

Gutierrez believed that the first responsibility of a human being is to offer humanness to one’s neighbors. Full stop. And to reflect upon the ways that we ourselves are poor. Gutierrez’ invited us to live out a theology of accompaniment, one we practice here very deliberately. The practice of accompaniment is highly personal and deeply relational. Accompaniment of the lonely poor involves walking with—not behind or in front—but beside a real person on his or her, their own particular journey in his or her own particular place and time, at his or her own particular pace.

“If I define my neighbor as the one I must go out to look for, on the highways and byways, in the factories and slums, on the farms and in the mines—then my world changes. This is what is happening with the “option for the poor,” for in the gospel it is the poor person who is the neighbor par excellence.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Gutierrez, *“the poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. Hence the poverty of those in most need is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand we go and build a different social order”*<sup>2</sup> — Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*.

So, ultimately that’s our task. To accompany one another side by side, with respect and with dignity and at the same time to work together to change the system. Many we met in Chelsea Park last Saturday, like Donovan and Tony, two men we spoke to, were examples of what Gutierrez called people of *“disrespected dignity”*. And our task, our call, as followers of the gospel is to change that in whatever way we can. And allow ourselves to be transformed in the process...that feels especially crucial to name and experience right now as we prepare ourselves and pray for the state of our country with Election Day ahead of us.

In the meantime, we can offer another hot cup of Joe and a smile to whomever we meet on 28th street, and ask “How do you take your coffee?”

(Youth Group students now share their reflections Joseph Kazadi, Noah Brant, Henry Kyle, Ellison and Colton Lodge, Ben Lott, Miles Coppola,, Zoe Eastman-Groessel)

<sup>1</sup> In the Company of the Poor: Conversations Between Dr. Paul Farmer and Father Gustavo Gutierrez, (2013)

<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (1979).