

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Sunday, August 6, 2017

Judy Mongiardo

Family Promise: A Community Response to Family Homelessness

Good morning. It is a pleasure to worship with you this morning. Thank you from all of us at Family Promise Metrowest for your role in our mission which serves families with children who have no home. I especially want to recognize, Matt Crane, Director of Christian Education, for bringing our program to the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury and Nadene Worth for her role as your volunteer coordinator.

I am humbled to be speaking from your pulpit. I pray that my meditations will do justice to the way God's word was heard and lived into by all those who created and all those who sustain Family Promise.

The passages read from Matthew's Gospel take place just after Jesus receives news of the death of John the Baptist, his cousin, at the hand of King Herod. In his grief, he withdraws from the crowds to be alone and pray as was his custom. But the crowds followed him. Filled with compassion, he turns away from his grief, to tend their needs and cure the sick. The day was long but as days are when spent with Jesus, it was filled with miracles of healing.

However, the disciples aren't thinking miracles when they realize that it's night fall and there is nothing for the crowd to eat. They see a problem for which they see no solution.

The only way out is to let the crowd go and fend for themselves in the neighboring towns and villages. So they ask Jesus to send the people away.

Jesus' answer is not what they expected at all.

"They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat."

"What? It's impossible, Jesus! We have nothing but five loaves and two fish." We've all been there at some time or another. A problem to solve without enough resources: not enough money; not enough time; not enough help.

The disciples were keenly aware of the reality.

But five loaves and two fish are not nothing. They are something indeed: a meal for a family.

When the disciples gave what they had to Jesus, he took it, he blessed it, he used it – and there was enough.

I do not know how the miracle happened, but I do believe that when we offer what we have to Jesus, a new- unexpected- reality comes into being.

So it was with the creation of Family Promise. There was an overwhelming problem with no easy solution: thousands of families with no home and nowhere to go. All state shelters were filled and many in need did not even qualify for state shelter for they were over income.

A solution came from the experience of one woman with one sandwich. Her name was Karen Olsen, a consumer products manager with Warner Lambert, who was rushing to a meeting in New York City when she spotted a homeless woman she passed many times before. This time, for some reason, grace of God or divine intervention, she could not pass her by. Instead she bought a sandwich and handed it to the woman. Her name was Millie. Karen realized she was hungry for food, but even hungrier for companionship.

The experience changed Karen and prompted her to do more. She learned there were thousands in her home state of New Jersey who needed help, particularly families - the largest growing segment of the homeless population. She knew it would take a community effort to reach so many people. So she organized the community.

She met with religious and lay leaders who like the disciples in Matthew looked at the resources at hand. They offered what they had: houses of worship with empty classrooms for overnight lodging; volunteers to supply nutritious meals and hospitality; community buildings for offices and Day Centers

In the model they created, a host congregation furnishes safe, temporary lodging and nutritious meals for up to fourteen guests one week about every three months. Support congregations assist them.

Social service agencies refer families. A local Day Center is the families' home address: it is where they shower, do laundry, care for children and seek employment and/or housing with the support of professional staff.

Volunteers also offer their professional expertise. They read to children; tutor English as a Second language; lead financial literacy workshops; teach interviewing skills. They donate furnishings for apartments.

In the end, everything families need is supplied from food to clothing to medical co-pays to transportation and child care. This enables families to save 80% of what they earn so they can regain their sustainable independence.

Since 1988 these precious offerings have been blessed and multiplied by God so that today there are over 200 Family Promise networks in 43 states across the country who have served over 750,000 individuals.

The seeds for Family Promise Metrowest, one of four networks in Massachusetts, were planted when Wellesley Village Church and Christ Lutheran Church, Natick, were inspired to use their resources to address the growing problem of family homelessness.

Because of the high cost of housing, Massachusetts has seen the 4th highest increase in homelessness among all states in the nation.

And the face of homelessness today is often not what we expect. The average age of a person who is homeless in our state is 8 years old. Let me repeat, 8 years old. Approximately 41,000 school age children and 40,000 preschool children are without their own home.

A small group of us shared the Family Promise story with congregations throughout Metrowest. By 2008 we had 13 congregations committed to host families one week at a time four times a year and 8 congregations willing to support them in that role.

First Baptist Church, Natick, a very small congregation, had few volunteers, but they offered what they had which was space in their building to use as an office, a living room for our families and a spot to build one bathroom. Shawmut Design and Construction Company donated their building services and the Barnes Fund of the United Church of Christ gave a grant for the building materials. With donations from our member congregations, we had the resources to hire staff and welcome our first family on October 15, 2008 at the Pilgrim Church in Sherborn.

As in Matthew's gospel, when we offered what we had in faith to God those offerings were multiplied. Today our congregations number 50: 19 hosts and 31 supports: churches, synagogues and mosques from 12 towns including 4 congregations here in Sudbury. Our volunteer pool of 3,000 crosses all age groups and includes individuals from those congregations, civic organizations, businesses, schools, and the community at large.

This year, our Annual Walkathon, which is our largest single fundraising event, attracted 1,000 walkers and raised over \$150,000. This was more than our first year's budget.

In fact, nine years after our opening, we are thrilled to be able to purchase a new day center in Natick which will allow more space for our families, including three showers, a quiet area for study and offices for meetings. We anticipate a move in early 2018.

When we offer our resources in faith to Jesus, we experience marvelous changes that seemed impossible.

There is the story of Yusuf, Jane and Joviah. They arrived from Uganda in October, 2013 winning a lottery to immigrate to the United States. Yusuf obtained a full time job through Family Promise connections. Jane studied to become a certified nursing assistant, coached by FPM volunteers when she studied for her exams. She enrolled in ESL classes at Mass Bay to complete her prerequisites for an LPN program.

Their daughter, Joviah, attends FACE preschool at Fisk United Methodist Church, one of our host congregations. She will begin public school kindergarten in September.

Today, Yusuf is a passionate spokesperson for Family Promise. He recently joined our Board of Directors and represented FPM at the national conference in California last spring.

There are 100 more families with stories and blessings of their own; families who have been served by Family Promise Metrowest since our opening. And there are the stories of our volunteers who have been changed by their service.

There is the story of Zack, a high school student who began volunteering at the Day Center with his parents because he had to fulfill community service hours, but he stayed and committed every Sunday afternoon for the past four years because of his love for our children. A talented musician, Zack not only entertains our little ones with his guitar playing, but he has instructed our children to play. Because of his experience, Zack developed a website, *Kids Empowering Kids*, to connect the families of children in shelter with high school students interested in giving lessons in music, sports, or the arts. He is leaving us a legacy as he goes off to college.

When you open your heart to a neighbor, invite that neighbor in and experience the transforming power of God's love, you cannot help but be called to further action. At Family Promise we have a deeper understanding of the importance that stable housing has on individual and family economic outcomes. We know the importance of skill development, education and training for success.

We launched our transitional living program in 2012 which allows us to move qualified families to housing sooner by providing them with subsidies for rent, transportation and child care for up to two years in addition to ongoing case management and classes.

In 2015, we created Steps to Success, our comprehensive employment program, which assists families in reaching their highest earning potential. Intensive case management is provided along with subsidies for education, training, day care and transportation removing the barriers to pursuing career objectives.

Its first year was a tremendous success:

- 18 individuals were served.
- 100% drew from our network to assist with their education and employment goals
- 79% participated in some educational program
- 5 adults are now employed at mid-level careers with full time jobs and benefits

Our program is not easy. It is challenging on every level for our families, especially given the length of time it takes to find an affordable apartment. This is by far the greatest hurdle our families now face once they have met their goals.

Massachusetts has one of the most expensive housing markets in the country. More than 158,000 households are spending more than 50% of their income towards housing costs.

With the tremendous increase in property values and the lack of new land for development, builders are creating housing that will bring a substantial return on their investment. House prices and rents are out of the range of the lower wage earners.

The median rent in Framingham for a two bedroom apartment is now over \$2,100/month. If a parent earns even \$16 an hour, the most they can afford is about \$900/month. They are the very ones who hold jobs critical to keeping our communities going: day care workers, certified nursing assistants, prep chefs, and office administrators.

Family Promise is committed to effecting a change, so that everyone who works full time has a safe, stable home.

Sue Crossley, our Executive Director, created an affordable housing committee of Natick developers, landlords, citizens and non-profits to address this issue. Because of them, our first collaborative project is underway. It is a two-family house owned by the Natick Affordable Housing Trust on Bacon Street, which will rent for below market value and will be designated for our families. A \$30,000 grant from Wellesley Village Church's recent capital campaign, is helping to bring our newest dream to fruition. All the carpentry, electrical and plumbing work is being completed by students from Keefe Technical School. We anticipate an opening later this year.

Our goal is one such project a year. For this we will need the imagination, dedication and resources of all in our extensive network.

Today, I invite your participation to be an agent for this change, to trust that when we give what we have to Jesus, it will be blessed and multiplied in ways beyond our understanding.

