

**Sermon given by Tom McGowan on April 3rd 2011
at East Longmeadow United Methodist Church**

Lord, give me the strength to speak Your Words in the way they were meant to be understood. Heavenly Father, may those gathered here today understand more fully Your Words and their true meaning. Amen.

My grandfather loved grocery shopping. But not for the reasons you think. He lived on Belmont Avenue at Oakland Street and was right across from the supermarket. He'd walk across the street, get a grocery cart and work his way through the store. He would walk up and down the aisles putting his grocery items in the cart and looking for his prey. P-R-E-Y! He would look for an elderly husband and wife walking the aisles and were very intense about their shopping. When they weren't looking he would slip some bizarre food item into their basket and continue to follow them around the store to see who would find the package of tripe, or pig's tongues, or canned lima beans. Inevitably, it would get to the checkout counter. They'd be emptying the food items from the cart together and eventually one would pick up the strange item, look curiously at it and exclaim to the other, "Why the heck, would you get this stuff!" The spouse would look at the other and say, "I didn't get that; you must have picked it up! Why would you get that?" And the blame game would begin. This was going to be a catastrophic time in their life. My grandfather, who followed them to the line just stood behind them with his Cheshire cat smile.

Last weekend several of us went to City Reach. With hope and fear we met several folks who are homeless living in Boston. This has to be a catastrophic time in their life. Through it all they call themselves "Urban Campers". Think about that one for a minute. They have a sense of humor in the midst of adversity. We met:

Brenda – a middle-aged; single mother of five; all who are grown. Spoke her mind, without hesitation. Homeless herself. Had three to five year relationship with man who was also homeless. One night, he stabbed her repeatedly in the chest and torso. Spent several weeks in the hospital healing. She showed us some of those scars. Her message--Trust No one! Interestingly enough, though, she was there that night and helping younger people to understand.

Mike and Sue – married, no children. Mike was homeless at 13 in Boston. Was able to survive that and found work. Went to visit his sister in California several years ago. Was mugged and stabbed while visiting, and spent 13 months in hospital and rehab. Met Sue and stayed, got married and both worked for the state. Recently, both were laid-off and moved back to Boston and remain homeless. Mike and Sue live on the street because there is no system, either in CA or MA or any other state in the country to his knowledge, which will allow married couples who do not have children to take an apartment together. He is working with a couple of ministers to write a letter to the governor and state legislature to change that law.

Kirk – former investment broker; never married. Made tons of money, had expensive cars, big house, partied every night during the height of the economic boom and did cocaine. Lost everything. Remains homeless, found God and loves his life more than ever.

Renaldo – Cuban born. Immigrated to US at a very young age. Was a truck driver in Florida. Lost his job due to the economy. Went to New Orleans to help with Katrina victims and work construction.

Lost his job and was headed to Texas to find work as a truck driver again. He met God at the bus station. God said not to go to Texas; go to Massachusetts. He could not understand why, but came to MA. In his efforts to get his license he needed medical clearance. During the exam, it was found that he has glaucoma. MA is the state that will treat his condition as a homeless person. That's why God called him to MA, he believes.

Holly – Several groups went out in the city on Saturday morning. Holly was in one group just ahead of our group. We met up with her group at one of the little parks where the homeless congregate. The two groups intermingled. She approached me and asked who I was and where I was from. I told her who I was and I was from EL. "I haven't seen you before. That's quite a ways from here! How do you know my name?" I told her I read her name tag. Then she realized that I was with the Methodists from EL and she spent the rest of the day apologizes to me for considering me to be homeless. We had a good time with it.

If I can use a euphemism: Who are they blaming for what got thrown in their grocery cart? No one! A common belief is to think that a calamity or suffering or catastrophic event is the result of some great sin. How about this instead, Christ is using the "Urban Campers" to teach us about faith and to glorify God. People sometimes suffer, or are they?

Each of these people has found God. They are working for their fellow man and woman. Heck, I think they were working to save me. To give me the strength to love and understand God even more.

In John Chapter 9, we see a glimpse of the reactions by Jesus based on the actions of others as they learn of His healing power. He heals a man who was blind from birth, giving him sight, and sending him off. The former blind man is astonished by the different reacts of the people he encounters. You would think this was a catastrophic event in their lives rather than love and joy. It led to surprise, skepticism, disbelief, prejudice, and a fear of excommunication. Fortunately, these reactions helped the man to grow in his understanding of the One who had healed him. In his mind it's simple, I don't need to know why or why not I just need to tell my story and trust God.

It's not hard to see that the miracle was not about the blind man no longer being blind? The true miracle may be in what the blind man experienced with his new found sense and was able to capitalize on it to reach a clearer understanding of the One who had healed him.

To those who remained open and recognized how sin had truly blinded them from knowing the truth, he gives spiritual understanding and insight. If you want to know more about Jesus, keep trusting him in every area of life.

If God took suffering away whenever we asked, we would follow him for comfort and convenience, not love and devotion. Ask God to give you strength and clear perspective on what is happening. Don't be afraid to tell the truth. You don't have to have all the answers. What is important is to know how He is working in your life. Trust God.

Tom McGowan
Sunday, April 3, 2011