

SERMON
July 23, 2017
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Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.

On most Saturday mornings, very early, I drive up here to the church complex, listening to NPR. No traffic on the roads as I swing onto the highway from East Norwalk, heading up the connector to Grist Mill Road, then a right onto Belden Hill. I'd taken charge of removing the paper recycling from the church complex, consisting of the office waste, lodged in bins beneath the table in the workroom, as well as whatever cardboard had found its way into the closet off the Parish Hall.

The church complex was almost always quiet at this point. The only time I saw others there was on the day that Stop Hunger Now was in preparation, with Tim Cummins bemoaning the early or late arrival of a truck. Otherwise, all was silence and solitude. I would pull into the circle and park surreptitiously in front of the door to the alcove. I'd retrieve a worn plastic contractor bag from the pocket behind the passenger seat of the car, take up the keys to the church, and let myself in. Not what one usually thinks of as a "church key".

When I was very young, I attended a Catholic school in Elizabeth, New Jersey, odd for a Presbyterian. Elizabeth was a city in its own right, but was primarily a sub-city of Newark. My family actually lived in Linden, a sub-city of Elizabeth. This was the late 60s and early 70s, when Newark experienced great racial upheaval. We have home movies of my sister's first day at the Linden public schools. Viewing the film, you see a crowd of about half white and half African-American kids. Two years later, a similar film of my first day at the Linden public schools shows a different mix, with the majority of the students being African-American. Two weeks later, my sister and I were enrolled in St. Hedwig's. We must have gotten some kind of special dispensation since my family were practicing Presbyterians.

I tell you this story as background for what I remember as my first experience of a "sacred place". It wasn't the school itself. That was an ordinary urban school building. Hulking. Gothic. Kind of gloomy. My kindergarten was in the basement. It wasn't even the church that was adjacent to the school. St. Hedwig's church still serves the town of Elizabeth, but the school has long since closed. There was, however, one occasion when I found myself having to visit the church's convent, where the nuns lived. I never got further than the foyer, but this, to me, felt special. There was a small wooden table and a chair, and a hallway led back to what looked like a kitchen. A single crucifix hung on a wall. There was no other ornament or furnishing. And everything was spotless. I can't even recall why I had to visit the convent, but to this day I can recall a distinct sense of ... something. Holiness? God-ness?

That same sensation would be recalled to me the first time I found myself in here at church, alone, on a Saturday before dawn, contractor bag in tow. The hallways where you usually have to take care not to stumble over frolicking children were dark and empty. Parish Hall echoed with the shuffling of my shoes. Everything was clean and in place for the worship activities to follow the next day.

The impetus behind why the churches' recycling is handled by volunteers and not disposed of with the rest of the waste stream remains somewhat of a mystery to me. Something about saving WEPCO approximately \$50 a month. I volunteered for the task back when I served on the WEPCO board, and have kept up with it since. It seemed a fairly straightforward way to assist, and I used this task as an excuse to duck out of the biennial Clean Up Days that Chip Fuller is so keen on scheduling. I'd rather break down cardboard boxes than rake or weed any day.

And in a way, the recycling tells a bit of the story of the life of the church. In the mixed paper bins in the workroom are the usual bulletins from the weeks worship services. Occasionally there'd be memorial flyers from funerals. Sometimes there would be long thin strips of paper from the large paper cutter, which I could never figure out the reason for. On one occasion, there was an entire rolling book rack filled with bibles with a note on it saying, "for recycling". I think that was the strangest thing I'd encountered, and I had to avoid suspicious stares from the folks at the transfer station as I dumped dozens of otherwise seemingly intact and useful holy books into the enormous dumpster. And as for the cardboard, well lots of empty pizza boxes likely meant that one or another youth group had held a meeting. The cases that all of your toilet paper came in. Paper towels cases. Boxes for coffee, creamer, disposable utensils. Office supplies. At Easter time, enormous, and innumerable, boxes that contained lilies. After a wedding, long boxes from roses and other flowers. The largest box I'd encountered had contained a huge flat-screen television.

The transfer station staff greatly prefers that recyclable cardboard be flattened. So, part of my Saturday routine in Parish Hall was breaking down these containers into a manageable pile. Or two. Or five. It is fascinating to note the various ways that manufacturers assemble these things for their purposes. The most typical is your standard box with plastic strapping tape holding it together. This makes for a relatively easy breakdown since a simple slice with a blade gets the job done. Other times, the strapping tape is of the reinforced paper kind. This is also a straightforward breakdown since a stiff punch will usually allow it to yield. Then there are boxes and involve no adhesive but are simply, and often quite cleverly, cut into particular shapes and folded ingeniously into themselves to create the needed strength to hold its contents. These were the most fascinating for me, little useful marvels of engineering and design. Some loads require that their shipping boxes be glued. Sometimes this glue was relatively weak and would give way with a sharp tear. Other times it was a super industrial glue that needed to be sliced apart. And then there were the staples. These were usually for the heaviest type of loads. Think of that flat-screen TV. These would need to be individually pried loose and separated, so as not to contaminate the cardboard stream with metal.

There was something deeply meditative to me in this process of breaking apart the boxes. And in the empty sacred space of our church complex on a Saturday morning it would lead me to think of how God wants us to break apart the things in our lives that need breaking apart. Our fears. Our unhealthy desires. Our weaknesses. Our hopelessness. Our isolations. How are those things held together in you? Perhaps they once served a purpose, like the boxes did. But are they now simply remnants that need to be discarded? Do you use a blade? Like a surgeon treating an illness? Do you give a swift punch, akin to dislodging food from a choking person? Do you tease and pry open each individual sturdy little staple, like working through issues with a counsellor or friend? As you do, do you reflect on what purpose these things served in your life.

Was it a long ago hurt like a memorial flyer from a funeral? Was it something supremely practical like the paper towels or toilet paper. Did you use up your fear like so many packets of coffee?

Faith in God through Christ is a very helpful tool in these undertakings. Find a sacred space of your own to meet him in, in the quiet of an early Saturday morning. Trust that he can take three barley loaves and two fishes and feed five thousand. Recycle the bread bag and bury the fish guts in the tomato garden. Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted. God will recycle you.

Amen.