

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 13, 2010

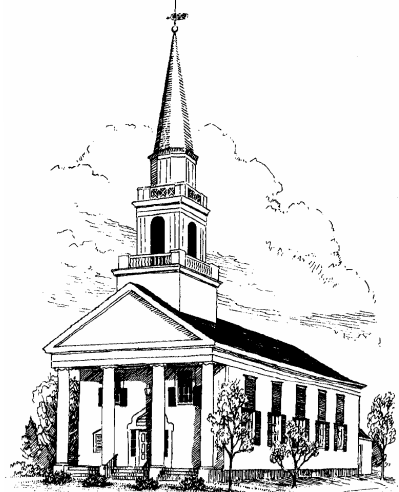
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“KALAMAZOO”

Scriptures:

3rd Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 7:36-8:3



Four and a half years ago the school children of Kalamazoo, MI, received an incredible promise. Literally called “The Kalamazoo Promise”, it was a gift from an anonymous group of donors to cover for all of its high school graduates 100% of tuition and fees for any instate university or community college in Michigan. And the timing could not have been better.

Since the 1980s this city of 77,000 people in southwest Michigan has watched its manufacturing jobs disappear. The state of Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the United States. Checker Cabs no longer run off the assembly line; Pfizer laid off thousands; over 60% of the city’s public school children qualify for federally subsidized lunches; the city’s poverty rate is 25%.

And we know, both as a society and as individuals, that when jobs disappear, morale plummets, hope decreases and the dominoes of struggling school systems begin to fall while juvenile crime increases. And pretty soon high school students, if they bother to attend school at all, see no reason to try when, even if they academically qualify for higher education, their families just cannot afford it.

Chronic shame can set in, which Professor Jan Holton at Yale Divinity School describes as a result of being pushed to the fringes of society, being left to look up at the world from a lowly place. She writes that chronic shame causes an overwhelming sense of self-condemnation and unworthiness and eventually leads folks to move through the world with a face perpetually cast downward; and over time, if severe enough, the shoulders will follow suit, slumping forward and causing the whole body to appear as though it is closing in on itself, shutting out the world in the process.

The high school students in Kalamazoo were at risk for chronic shame, suffering big gaps between freshman enrollment and graduation rates, and then the Kalamazoo Promise was delivered. The Kalamazoo Central High School seniors who graduated this past week were in eighth grade then, when crime-related stories seemed to grab as many headlines as those about learning achievements and sports victories. Then the Promise came and the response of teachers and administrators and parents and the students themselves was renewed dedication and very hard work and thoughtful decisions to prepare the way for college – college, a place where many of the graduates would be the first in their families to go.

There are similar state-sponsored scholarship programs in the United States; however, the difference with this one is that everyone, everyone is included. In other state programs merit-based scholarships end up going to more affluent students because they had the support and the resources both in and outside of school to begin with. This Kalamazoo Promise is for everyone.

So everyone involved in the education of the students of Kalamazoo Central High School responded to that Promise by working very hard, and they beat out over 1,000 applicants across the United States to win the Race to the Top High School Commencement Challenge; and the prize was having the President of the United States come to speak at commencement. And he did this past Monday night to fresh, shining, hopeful and grateful faces on their way to college.

It is important to revisit Jesus' words in this morning's gospel to understand that the behavior of the woman with the alabaster jar toward Jesus in the Pharisee's house was a *response* to the forgiveness offered by Jesus, not the other way around. He says, "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; *hence* she has shown great love." We don't know what the sins of the woman were. Some surmise prostitution, but we are not told that. We don't know if she encountered Jesus beforehand or not. But most biblical commentators are pretty clear and in agreement that God's generous forgiveness precedes and is evidenced by this woman's great love. This interpretation is not just based on the translations upon which they rely, but from the gist of the parable Jesus tells about the creditor and the two debtors.

Professor Gregory Anderson Love of San Francisco Theological Seminary writes that "the centerpiece of the entire text is Jesus' proclamation that the creditor forgives the debt gratis, not because of anything done by the debtors. God's love and free forgiveness are central and prior..."

And Jesus says, "...her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

It's important also to understand the Pharisee's view of sinners because it is a direct result of his view of God. For Simon the Pharisee, the righteousness of God means that God cannot endure sinners, and a follower of God gains salvation by upholding the purity code, with its separation of the elect from the sinners of the world. Simon the Pharisee sees this woman as a sinner and therefore distances himself from her. And in his mind Jesus must not be a prophet because, first of all, he doesn't know and he's allowing this unclean woman to touch him.

I can't help but wonder what the naysayers may have said to that group of anonymous donors in Kalamazoo. Don't waste your precious dollars, your alabaster jar of ointment, on this crowd of kids. Obviously, you must not realize the poverty, the lack of motivation, the lack of jobs around here anyway or you'd put your money to better use.

Yes, many of those students had the cards stacked up against them; they were on the fringes of our American dream with unemployed parents and a struggling school system. The Christian Science Monitor reports that more than half of the students in this graduating class were considered low-income.

They had a long way to go to come up with tuition even if they were accepted to college. The Kalamazoo Promise forgave their debt even before it was incurred. And unlike students from affluent families, these students would have had many times the debt to attend college. Their debts were forgiven through no action of their own. Their story starts there, just the way our gospel story starts this morning.

A woman relegated to the fringes of society, scorned, hidden forgotten, and then forgiven by Jesus, a woman who responds with loving extravagance. Who, yes, can't help but assume the posture of chronic shame in the Pharisee's house, but who, knowing that she is forgiven by God, can dare to come in and express her love and gratitude in the midst of those who would keep her down.

And we are reminded of the radical inclusivity of Jesus in these words of Cara Cunliffe, a graduating senior at Kalamazoo Central High: "We accept any student at K-Central, whether they're right out of jail, have a low income, it doesn't matter. The other schools in the competition accept minorities, but they don't accept everyone like K-Central does."

Friends, we have been given the most incredible promise of them all – the promise of God’s eternal love through our forgiveness by Jesus Christ. A promise that calls us to respond with love for each other and love for all. A promise that calls us to look around and bring in the marginalized to our ever-widening circle. A promise that calls us to share our resources, to strive towards excellence, to work to heal the brokenness of God’s creation, to lift up others and ourselves from the posture of chronic shame.

As Kalamazoo graduating senior Cailey Cunliffe said, “I want the world to know that we are an example that if you keep your goals in mind and work hard, you can make them happen.” And then she added, “Keep your head up.” Friends, may we realize the promise that we’ve been given and lift our heads up in love and gratitude to God. And may we evidence it by our extravagantly pouring out what we have on our sisters and brothers who need our help. We, too, can show the world what happens when we put our minds to something in response to a promise. *God’s* promise is for everyone, too. Amen.