

The Inexhaustible Ordinary Rev. Scott Planting

Bar Harbor Congregational Church
Bar Harbor, Maine
July 24, 2016

Scripture Luke 11. 1-13

Prayer

1.

Pleasure to be here for Seacoast Mission Sunday.

Mission Founded here in 1905 by your pastor Angus MacDonald and his brother Alexander, pastor of Seal Harbor church.

They had a big vision.

The first annual report, issued in the summer of 1906, began--

“To sail a sloop in a parish extending from Kittery Point to Quoddy Head, along the broken coast of Maine, in all kinds of weather, is not a small undertaking.”

“To enter the coves and harbors, to call on the families on isolated islands, to visit the lightkeepers and the life saving stations, is a task of greater magnitude.”

What I’m very proud of—is this “task of greater magnitude”—to call on families—in these remote places.

2.

Let me begin with a brief overview of the Seacoast Mission

WHAT WE DO

We build healthier communities, stronger families, and brighter futures—by land and by sea. In all we do, the Mission is committed to working with people’s strengths and to honoring the capacity of individuals to choose their own course in life.

WHO WE ARE

We have always have been committed to our work for the long haul, and island and coastal residents know they can rely on us. While our presence is steady, we are responsive to the needs of individuals and communities, and our programs adapt to meet changing conditions.

WHERE WE WORK--ISLANDS

Of Maine's thousands of coastal islands, fifteen still have year-round populations—fifteen “unbridged” islands, that is, which rely on ferries, private vessels, or airplanes for transportation to the mainland.

The islands were originally settled because of their proximity to fishing grounds. Motorized boats have lessened that advantage, and island populations have declined over the past century. Fishing—primarily lobster fishing—is still the primary occupation for island residents.

The Maine Seacoast Mission serves the ten unbridged, inhabited islands east of Boothbay Harbor: Frenchboro, Swan's Island, Isle au Haut, Great Cranberry, Islesford, Monhegan, Matinicus, Islesboro, Vinal Haven, and North Haven.

We operate land-based telemedicine facilities on Swan's Island and Islesford. We support outreach programs operated through churches on Vinalhaven, North Haven, Swan's Island, and Islesboro. In addition The Sunbeam makes regular biweekly telemedicine visits to Frenchboro, Isle au Haut, and Matinicus, and periodically to Monhegan.

Where we work: Washington County

Known for its wild blueberry barrens and, on the coast, its rocky harbors and powerful tides, Washington County is often beautiful but harsh.

The easternmost county in the United States, it is also one of the most economically impoverished regions of Maine and the nation. Washington county covers an area twice the size of Rhode Island and has just over 32,000 residents,

or about 13 people per square mile. The Maine Seacoast Mission has served its isolated coastal towns for over 100 years.

Washington County residents often struggle to make modest livings from land and sea, frequently working seasonal jobs that do not pay enough to consistently afford basic necessities. Unemployment is higher than in most of Maine. Children in Washington County are particularly at risk; 27 percent live in poverty and experience food insecurity.

What we do—WASHINGTON COUNTY

EdGE

Founded in 2002, EdGE, or Ed Greaves Education, brings innovative after-school, summer, and in-school programs to children along the Downeast coast from Gouldsboro to Machias. The after-school program also offers academic support, and in-school programs include peer mentoring for students beginning high school.

More than 700 students take part in EdGE activities each year. To remove barriers to participation, transportation is provided at no cost to the student. Summer camps have a nominal fee, but all other programs are free, and no one is excluded for lack of funds. EdGE is headquartered on the Mission's Downeast campus in Cherryfield, where there are also hiking trails and a rigorous ropes course.

What we do: ISLAND SERVICES

The 74-foot, steel-hulled Sunbeam V brings the Maine Seacoast Mission's services winter and summer to residents of Maine's most remote coastal and outer-island communities. Island living presents unique challenges. Isolation can take a toll— island populations are small, work is frequently independent, and public meeting places such as stores or churches are few—and going “off island” for a medical appointment can be a difficult and lengthy process.

The Sunbeam and its crew bring a welcome respite from that isolation, offering a warm meeting place, the opportunity to visit with crew members familiar with island living, and medical care via the ship's nurse and telemedicine facilities. Ninety percent of all island residents use them.

3.

That's an overview of the Seacoast Mission. Let me tell you about our heart.

Mission superintendent Neal Bousfield (1938-1972) wrote about "the heart" of the Mission. He said, "it is not something one can see, such as the Sunbeam or a set of buildings, or a group of men and women at work, that tells the story, but rather it is something to which the heart responds which is the real Mission.

For 12 years, your pastor Rob Benson served as pastor to the outer islands. RThe heart of the Mission is Rob and Sharon (nurse) sitting on the porch of Ellen Bunker's home on Matinicus. Leaning in towards one another they are thinking about —Maud, an irascible, island elder—had fallen in her home—and needed to get off the island—which was not an easy task. Only because of Rob and Sharon's love for her—in good and bad times—Rob's care meant helping to balance her checkbook; Sharon caring for her feet. They made possible what no one else could have done—and made Maud's final days—full of dignity.

Rob and Sharon's care for Maud—is the story of the Seacoast Mission. It is the grace present—in balancing an old woman's checkbook and washing her feet. It is witnessing to the sacred worth of every human person whose dignity shines through humble circumstance—loneliness softened, goods shared, companionship experienced as rest.

4.

Let me give you a couple of stories to illustrate—grace present in the ordinary.

A few weeks ago, the Mission boat—the Sunbeam, travelled from Rockland to Matinicus—for the purpose of bring family and friend together for a funeral for Rick, a fisherman out on Matinicus. Rick died a year ago. Reason for the delay good illustration of the way we work.

First, there is the tide. The Sunbeam grounds out during low tide on Matinicus. She is quite literally “on the island” for close to eight hours when this happens. Few people want to spend that long at a funeral. In order to make all that needs to happen fit into midday, the captain has to choose a date when the Sunbeam can get in and out of the harbor on the same tide.

Second, The wind is another consideration. Because of how she sits in the water, the Sunbeam cannot safely cruise into the Matinicus harbor to tie-up when the wind is blowing in certain directions. Windy days and other unpleasant stormy weather are the primary reasons that this funeral took an entire year.

Third, Time is the final variable in planning a Matinicus funeral. Douglas, the boat’s chaplain, has precisely three hours to get family and guests off the Sunbeam and to the island church, then to the cemetery (which, happens to be located on the opposite end of the two mile island), back to the church for the Ladies Aid reception (which includes lunch, beverages, dessert and catching up between on and off island friends) and, finally, back to the boat.

Tide, wind, time all came together. The entire island population gathered at the cemetery.

Rick was a quiet man who kept to himself. The nurse would have coffee with him every morning; to check in. Rob, sat with him on wharf as he painted lobster buoys.

At the graveside service, people listened closely to what the Sunbeam’s chaplain, Douglas Cornman, would say about their neighbor. He spoke about the good he knew in Rick; the excellent lobster chowder he’d bring aboard for supper. After the service, everyone gathered in the basement of the church for lunch. Islanders who had kept their distance from the Douglas shook his hand and thanked him for his words. A distance had been covered.

In the words of wonderful writer Marilynne Robinson—in Rick we discovered “the inexhaustible ordinary.” We see the sacred in people, a deep and abiding reverence, for the ordinary, even in all our brokenness, to meet each other as

God meets us—prickly and imprecise and difficult though we may be sometimes, the assertion that a human being is an image of God.

5.

Another story from Matinicus—about the something approaching due reverence—the Sunbeam crew goes about their work:

At first light nurse Sunbeam Sharon Daley and pastor to the outer islands Douglas Cornman, greet steward Jillian—who hands them LL Bean bags of breakfast sandwiches and 2 large thermos of coffee—in the near light and fog they walk through old fish sheds—to Harbor Point, aka, Probation Point to the 3 story dormitory captains built for their sternmen.

Sternmen are the ‘migrant laborers’ of the ocean. The work is hard, the pay is good, and no one asks much about where you came from—hence the name “probation point.”

As sternmen make their way down to docks, Sharon and Douglas, offer breakfast sandwiches and coffee. The point is to build up trust. It takes time.

The Sunbeam is safe place, where people can get away from small island intrigues for a few minutes. A woman who is a domestic abuse survivor , “Everytime I come on the SB I get little piece of my life back.

It was late and the crew was sitting at table talking about the events of the day, when a sternman,—wandered down the dock talking on his cell phone—he stopped right beside the boat, leaned against the hull and we could hear his tense, loud, angry conversation.

A crew member got up and locked the door. “I don’t like this; he scares me.” The rest of the crew huddled together, except for Jillian, the boat’s steward—our cook—a winsome and delightful woman--and in a flash she was out of the boat on the dock talking quietly with the young man—their heads leaning in towards one another. A few minutes, later she brought him on the boat, sat him down amongst us—gave him a cup of coffee, whispered to us—“he’s okay, a sweet boy, girl friend troubles.” An hour later, he looks up and he says, “I heard there’s a

minister on this boat. Can I talk with him?” That would be me. And in the quiet of the boat’s pilot house, I heard his story addiction and loss and we said a prayer.

He came back the next morning—for coffee and met with nurse—before heading out for the day’s fishing.

The Sunbeam steward, Jillian, has a generous, open spirit, to see that young man in the hoodie was an image of God. There are two ways we could see this young man. Again, in the words of Marilynne Robinson, contempt imposes; grace discovers. Contempt generalizes; grace is charmed by haunting particularities. Contempt entraps; grace frees.”

6.

I see this same compassionate identification –that makes us larger, freer and more loving in the Mission’s work in Washington County.

A week ago, on the lawn at the Colket Center, the Mission’s home on West Street, at the Mission’s annual Scholarship BBQ I handed a Mission scholarship to a young woman from Columbia Falls.

I’d seen here a few days earlier at summer camp at the EdGE Center in Cherryfield. The place is alive with a hundred children. There were kids everywhere working on art projects, playing sports, coming back from the ropes course--the EdGE building inside and out was a beehive of activity.

Desiree is sitting at a table working with 10 little children on an art project—kind of Matisse paper cutouts – meets rural Maine. She is laughing complementing a little boy on his cutout—pine trees, lake and canoe.

Let me introduce you to this young woman in her own words,

“My name is Desiree Grant. I’m from Columbia Falls, Maine, and I’m going to be a sophomore at the University of Maine. People set good examples for me and I learn from that.

Many people would say people who live in Washington County especially growing up in a trailer don’t have opportunity.

I'm a big dreamer. So, all I thought was I want to get up and be something big!"

What that "something big" is--is to be a studio artist and art teacher in Cherryfield. Desiree began as an EdGE student when she was in the 3rd grade. She stayed with the program all through elementary school and worked as a counselor through high school and now, in college, part of the paid staff.

She's attending university because of a Mission Scholarship. Life hasn't been easy for her, but because she had good teachers at EdGE, and a supportive mentor in EdGE program director, Charlie Harrington, people who saw Desiree's abilities, she's well on her way to making her "big dream" a reality.

The Maine Seacoast Mission programs—EdGE and Scholarship—have given Desiree two important things. First, knowledge based skill in reading, writing and math, and along with these problem solving skills, important character traits such as motivation, persistence and grit.

Second, the Mission gave her social networks, the support of people who valued her dreams and told her every step along the way, "you are great and we'll do everything to support your aspirations."

There's a widening opportunity gap in this country between children who have the knowledge and the social skills to succeed in their lives and those who do not. That introduction "My name is Desiree Grant..." comes at the end of a new film called Choosing our Future—the Land of Opportunity produced by the Educational Testing Service that describes this widening opportunity gap.

The film highlights school programs in urban Detroit, a latino community community in Southern California, and rural Maine—EdGE—which are all part of pioneering programs closing the prosperity gap. The power of the film and report is that it places our work in Downeast Maine in a national context. Rural Maine children, urban and minority children all face the same hurdles. The message of the film is that EdGE is giving children both the knowledge and social skills needed to succeed in life. At the end of the film Desiree looks straight into the camera lens and says, "I want to be something big!" I have no doubt about it.

It takes imagination and love, devotion and resource to see in the young woman from a rough upbringing that artist doing the Matisse papercuts with children.

All this good work, out on Matinicus—Cherryfield—takes place—because the Seacoast believes—again in the words of Marilynne Robinson—“that reservoir of goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary cause of things.”

That’s what we believe and hold to—that reservoir of goodness—beyond—and of another kind—we are able to receive and to give to others. In the ordinary cause of things—not just the momentous things—but Rob balancing check book of Maud, or the Sunbeam crew—taking a full year—to bury their friend Rick, or Jillian to see the good—in the guy with the hoodie—“he’s a good boy.” Or, all those EDGE people who never let Desiree’s dream collapse.

It’s what we believe and what we try to do every day.

In Marilynne Robinson’s book *Gilead*, the old pastor John Ames expresses his faith in the sacredness of the world:

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life...Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?

Amen.