

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Title: "Transformational Love"

Rev. Josh Fitterling

Gary, Indiana - for many years, I only knew of this town through the song from The Music Man - some of you may be familiar with it. A song that, when I hear it, makes Gary, Indiana sound like a sweet place to be with it's cute, upbeat tune and musings about it being "home, sweet, home". And so, as I was heading off to Gary, Indiana for a week long mission trip with my home church a number of years ago, I knew very little about our destination. All I knew was that the area was devastated after flooding, and we were going to live and share our God's love through the work of our hands and help to restore the lives of those who were effected.

But of course, my naiveté about the town which for the next week was going to be our home away from home eventually came to a halt as we settled in for our first work assignment. Now, we were going to help restore an inner city park. And, to do this we were going to begin cleaning it up, framing out a new pavilion, essentially giving the youth of the community a place to come and play. Sounds like a great thing to do right? But this assignment also came with warnings about this "bad" neighborhood we would be in.

"Lock you cars! It's a bad neighborhood." Even though we were going to be standing literally 50-100 feet away from our cars and they would always be within our field of vision, we were told to lock our cars giving us the sense that at any moment, they could be stolen.

"Travel in pairs! It's a bad neighborhood." There was a local sandwich shop that was allowing us who were working to use their bathrooms and even though it was a short walk away, we were told to only go to the bathroom in pairs. It's too dangerous otherwise!

“Don’t leave your tools unattended! It’s a bad neighborhood.” If you put a tool down, it won’t be long until it disappears, or so we were told.

And, in addition to these commands, there were police patrols that would roll by every 30 minutes or so to just make sure we were okay.

Now, these warnings came from a very real place grounded in statistics. After all, according to Forbes Magazine in 2013, Gary, Indiana was the #19 most miserable city in the nation – a rating that looks at violent crime rates, unemployment, foreclosures, as well as less severe factors such as weather and how the local sports teams are doing. Now, 19 may not sound so bad but with Gary, Indiana also being considered the “murder capital of the U.S.” throughout the 90’s, all of a sudden that little cheery song from the Music Man doesn’t seem to reflect the Gary, Indiana of today and the warnings of our project managers seem to paint a more accurate picture.

So having heard all of these warnings, I was a little fearful and our group was diligent to follow the rules, locking our cars, traveling in pairs, keeping an eye on our tools, because, the way that this place was described to us, it seemed like at any minutes something bad was going to happen and any person who was walking by on the street may be with one to initiate it.

Nevertheless, we began our work, because we were there to live out God’s love in very real ways – ways that transform. And as we began and as we were following all the rules, we noticed people walking by looking at us suspiciously. Some stopped and chatted with their friends looking over and pointing. Were they curious or plotting something, we didn’t know. But, by the picture painted for us of the town it could have been both. And then, finally, someone walking by stopped and asked what we were doing. And we told them that we are helping to clean up their park. And we even told them that we are from Pennsylvania and traveled with our church to help. And when they heard all of this, they were amazed – awestruck that we would come and do this for them and come from such a distance. And then, word must have started to spread

about what we were doing – someone came by and dropped off a case of water – a gesture of gratitude. A car pulled up and just shouted out the window, thank you! One gentleman even dropped off a case of chocolate milk – now, given that it was 90 degrees outside and we were working very hard, drinking warm chocolate milk would not have ended very well so no one touched it, but the gesture remained the same. And through it all, we began to see the town in a new light as they loved us back. We began to see the town as one that was not veiled only in the statistics of crimes and misery but one that also had much love within it.

In our scripture reading for today, we hear of the power of love. The love of God, revealed through Jesus Christ, that has the power to save, the power to redeem, the power to change, and the power to transform. We hear of God's love that, to Nicodemus, doesn't make sense! Be born from above? Be born anew? How can one who has already been born be born once more? It makes no sense to Nicodemus and of course makes no sense in the literal, but when the love of God touches us, it changes us, it redirects our steps, it has the power to transform our lives in small and great ways. It has the power to transform us each and every day.

You know, every time we do something for someone else as a response to our faith, we are sharing God's love out into the world - we are reflecting the love of God out into the world in real and tangible ways. And when we share God's love, transformation comes.

So where was the transformation out in Gary, Indiana? I saw it in 3 ways.

- 1) Our love impacted those in the community. Through it, their suspicion of us transformed into joy – transformed into hope – that there was love in the world – a love that was not limited by distance or withheld because of statistics!
- 2) Their love impacted our group. Through it, our suspicion of them transformed to joy and acceptance – sure there are problems in this community but there are good people there too! And this was also a good reminder that statistics should never limit the love of God!

- 3) The love of Christ that was being lived out by all transformed the community – physically!! A new park was beginning to be created and the community was rallying around it's creation.

“For God so loved the world” with a transformational love. We have been touched by that love and our transformation continues. When we are transformed by God’s love, we seek new things – those that Christ would have us find, we strive for new goals – those that Christ would have us achieve, we live with a new purpose – one that seeks to reflect God’s love out into the world so that the world can experience it and be transformed. And whether that transformation happens in large or small ways, it is always indeed great because this world and all that is in it is the world that God so loved. And we are sent out to share this love so that the world may be transformed. And this love that God has for the world comes with no limitations. It is off limit to no one. Whether in the happiest city or the most miserable, in a place with a high or low crime rate, in an inner city or a rural community, or any other distinctions, God’s love is meant for it all! “For God so loved the world”, all of it, and so should we! This old, old story of Jesus and his love remains forever true. Let us tell of it, in word and in deed, this day and every day, and see the transformation that will come. Amen.