

Sermon at Trondhjem Lutheran
January 26, 2014

Good morning! My name is Dayna Norvold and I'm the Executive Director with Rice County Habitat for Humanity. It's a pleasure to be with you today. It's especially exciting because we have recently selected one of your members as a partner family with Rice County Habitat – Annastina Swenson and her two kids. We're looking forward to building with her – and YOU. Trondhjem has been a long supporter of the ministry of Habitat. And it's great working with your church because you have people who actually know how to do stuff.

We pride ourselves in being able to put even the most unskilled volunteer to work – but, Mike, our Construction Coordinator, appreciates those with just a little skill. You helped us on the houses in Nerstrand, Northfield, Faribault, Dundas, Morrystown and here in Lonsdale. The build with Annastina in 2014 will be our third build here in Lonsdale.

We really put Annastina through the ringer in our process – she can tell you that applying with Habitat is a long process. Lots of paperwork, lots of interviews. I always say, applying for Habitat is like applying for a mortgage and a program at the same time – and the process is driven by volunteers who have full lives and jobs. A lot of our

process is about income and employment verification but some if the arduous process helps us to see which applicants are really willing to put in the hard work it takes to own a home. Annastina put in that hard work and we're looking forward to partnering with her in 2014.

When we select families we try to tell them in person that they've been selected. That doesn't always work – because it's hard to find out where a person is going to be without telling them why you want to know. I thought I would be sneaky and try to figure out from her dad, Per, where she'd be last weekend, but first I asked Randy Stangler if he thought Per could keep a secret. He said, “no”. Ok, so scheming with Per was out.

Then I called Pastor Howard to see if he knew her schedule, because I KNOW he can keep a secret, but he wasn't quite sure of her schedule. So, I was still scheming when I got an e-mail from Annastina on Friday because she was dying to know if our Board had decided and I figured I'd better put her out of her misery of not knowing so I told her she'd been selected. At first she said, “no way” – but, then it sunk in. She was able to tell her kids that night and there's a great video of that on our website – habitatricecounty.org. Annastina sat the boys down to tell them and she told me they first thought they were in trouble but they were soon jumping for joy at the news.

It really is a blessing to do this work with Habitat. I can truly say that we make dreams come true for families. The work is not without its challenges, to be sure, but when we keep our eyes on the prize we can glimpse God's Kingdom here on earth. We see God's Kingdom through the excitement of a kid who is going to get their own room and not have to share with mom anymore; we see God's Kingdom in the look of relief from a parent who doesn't have to worry about the \$460 monthly gas bill to heat their mobile home anymore; we see God's Kingdom in the hands of our volunteers who put their sweat and effort into building these houses; we see God's Kingdom through the generous support given by individuals, businesses, churches that give financially and through in kind donations.

Through this work with Habitat we are able to see, here on earth, what it's like to live how God wants us to live. To be in Christian community, to serve, to help, to love, and to support one another in this deeply meaningful way.

I've been with Rice County Habitat as the Executive Director since November of 2007. In the first couple of years I was energized by all there was to do – set up an office, build some infrastructure in our organization, work with volunteers, apply for grants, work with families. In years four and five, for me, I got into the groove of grow, grow, grow,

expand, expand, expand. There is always a pressure, no matter what your job, to do more, provide more, serve more. We get caught up in the TOTALS – we get caught up in the numbers. We always want to do more than last year. In the Habitat world, affiliates are measured by the number of families partnered with so of course you always want your number of families to grow – but that means more hands are needed to volunteer, more funds are needed, more land is needed – it leads us into the pattern of more, more, more. I believe in that spirit of growth – we always want to be improving what we do and ultimately have more families in need in homes of their own. But, in that relentless pursuit of growth we can take our eyes off of what Jesus modeled for us and we can stray from how Jesus really wants us to live.

Jesus was relational. Jesus spoke to the masses, for sure, but more Bible stories talk about how Jesus came into the life of an INDIVIDUAL and transformed it. You know those stories: the leper, the paralyzed man, the bleeding woman, the demon possessed man. Those are just a few of the healing stories. Then there's the parables where Jesus teaches us the importance of "the one" – the parables of the lost coin, the lost son, the lost sheep – all show us that even if you have a hundred sheep, the one who is lost is just as valuable.

I go to meetings all the time where we talk about the needs in our community. Thirty percent of households in Rice County make less than \$35,000 annually. In Faribault, over 60% of kids qualify for free or reduced lunch. The unemployment rate in some of our communities still hovers around 10%. In Minnesota, 11.4% of people live in poverty. That's nearly 600,000 PEOPLE – and over 183,000 of them are children. And do you know what the poverty wage is? If you're a family of 4 and make \$23,800 or less, you're in poverty. If you make 24,000, you're not "technically" in poverty.

We can get lost and outraged in these numbers. We can get lost in the statistics. We can get overwhelmed by the needs we see around us. And, to make it more complicated, we have judgment about these numbers, too, don't we? We make judgments about people who make different choices than we do. We place our values into their lives. It is this judgment that often keeps us distant and separated.

As Christians we must look to Jesus to teach us how to respond to the world's needs. And indeed, what Jesus did IS relevant to us today.

When Jesus walked on earth it wasn't as if humankind had different problems. There were class divisions; there was rich and poor; there were the outcasts and the pious; there was sickness, there were questionable women who were absent of morals and men who

couldn't be trusted – these are all problems we encounter today, people were judged on the choices they made. In all of Jesus' teachings – he tells us, and models to us – go to the other. Enter into their lives – enter into their space. Not only did Jesus GO to the other – he TOUCHED them. He touched the untouchables. Think about the leper – the one no one wanted to touch – Jesus reached out and touched him. The blind man where Jesus touched his eyes – where the blind man needed healing is where Jesus laid his hands.

Have you ever participated in a foot washing? Maybe you have during a Maundy Thursday service? The first time I did I was 22 doing a year of service with Lutheran Volunteer Corps in Washington DC at a shelter for women who were homeless. There was a worship service where congregation members and homeless women attended together and on this day you could choose to participate in a foot washing. I remember thinking – what? We're taking our shoes AND socks off in church? This is weird. OK – I'm certainly not going to be the first to get up. I sat there – watching, waiting to see who was going to participate and to my surprise many did. And I thought – OK, I'm going to do it – I'm going to force myself to do it. I don't want to be the only one NOT doing it. I was engaged in my nervous thoughts instead of being engaged in thinking about the meaning and symbolism of the act. What if my feet smell? I should have cut my toe nails. Where do I put

my shoes? Do I put my socks IN my shoes? Wait, what if THEIR feet smell? Good grief – these thoughts. And then all of a sudden there I was, sitting with my feet in warm water with someone gently rubbing them with a cloth. This felt good. In this completely vulnerable space, with a stranger at my feet, I got why it was important to accept and receive this gift from another. We connect with one another on a very human yet transcendent level when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

And then it was time for me to wash another's feet. My anxious thoughts had disappeared and I can't even tell you now if the person's feet were dirty, calloused or smelly – all I could think was the gift I was providing and receiving.

Step out of your comfort zone and step into the life of another. It is in that stepping TOWARDS another person that you create a Christ filled relationship – it is that relationship centered in Jesus – that can transform.

I'm Norwegian and I'm Lutheran – that makes me a pretty private person. It's not always comfortable for me to walk TOWARDS another person. We all have our boundaries – we all have our comfort zones. What are the boundaries of your comfort zone? We can all remember a time where we were in a situation when we were confronted by the

needs of another person and we held back because we didn't want to interfere or intrude or appear like we're being nose-y. We've all had that distant acquaintance who was diagnosed with an illness and we meant to send that card or make that phone call but we didn't gather up the courage to do it. We've all meant to sign up for that service project or help with that non profit but we just didn't make the time. Or to bring it home a little more, we've all gotten busy in our lives and not said to our kids we're proud of them, or to our spouses that we love them, because we're caught up in the day to day.

When you step TOWARDS another you put yourself in a vulnerable position. It can be unpredictable – we might have to share a piece of ourselves. We're stoic here in Minnesota and we don't often like to do that. What's the Ole and Lena joke? Ole loved Lena so much that he almost told her.

Let me tell you about our Family Services Committee members who continually step TOWARDS another - and I will tell you it's their faith that compels them to do it. There are a couple of ladies that have been on our committee for several years and I've done many interviews with them in the homes of applicants. When you walk into the home of anyone you don't know well you never know what situations you might encounter. Sometimes it's a neighborhood we're unfamiliar with; or an

apartment complex that's unsettling. Sometimes there are little children who are shy and hide behind mom or dad and sometimes they're bounding into your lap. Sometimes there are pets who also bound into your lap. When you're in someone else's home you see a part of their lives that not everyone else sees. Sometimes you align with it, recognize it, feel comfortable with it – sometimes it's different, uncomfortable, messy, smelly.

But it's this work, compelled by the faith of our committee members that makes Habitat possible. We need to enter the homes of our applicants to get a sense of their need for housing. Some homes are decent and others you hate to leave them there for one more night.

Our volunteers put their whole selves into the situation of another. James 2 says, *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*

What good is it to “care about the poor” if we don't do anything about it? What good is it to “care about those in need” if we don't do anything about it. Jesus says that indeed, it is US, it is YOU and ME that

need to respond to the needs that we see. We must ENTER IN so that we can touch it, feel it, be surrounded by the need so that we are compelled to act – we have no choice but to lend a hand.

In the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand – you all know this story. Jesus had a long day of healing a large crowd and the crowd wasn't leaving. The disciples got nervous and couldn't possibly imagine how they were going to get fed and they encouraged Jesus to send them away so they could go into the village and get their own food. And Jesus replied, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat."

I love the directness of that scripture. It's Matthew 14:16 to be exact. "You give them something to eat." I wanted to make sure it wasn't just the NIV translation that made it this direct but each translation that I looked up had the same direct quality to it. YOU DO IT. One said, "you, yourselves, must give them something to eat". Even the King James version is direct, "They need not depart; give ye them to eat".

I can't help but think that Jesus was once again exasperated at his disciples and their inability to "get it". Jesus must have been thinking – I've been showing you for MONTHS how to spread God's love to one another and you want to send them away to fend for themselves?

It's helpful to know here that the disciples are plain, ordinary people. Not unlike us here today. The disciples are not theological professionals, they are not an elevated class in society. They are fishermen, tax collectors and plain old sinners. The fact that Jesus chose them to spread the gospel MUST translate that he chooses us, too, to continue to spread the gospel.

And the Feeding of the 5,000 is the perfect illustration for us. There's a need. An overwhelming need – people are hungry and they're hungry now. We learn from this story that when you bring all you've got to Jesus – five loaves of bread and two fish – it is God's love and power that transforms it into something beyond what we could have done ourselves.

What do YOU have that you can bring to Jesus? What can YOU bring forward so that he can transform your life and the lives of those around you? No way did the disciples believe that five loaves of bread and two fish would feed five thousand but it did. No way gathering volunteers to build a house can transform a family and a community – but it does. It's radical, really. Bring what you have to Jesus – come to God in your vulnerability - and BELIEVE that he can transform.

We don't need much. We don't need to be perfect. We don't need to be free from anxious and nervous thoughts. What do you have that you can bring to Jesus?

Come. The world's needs are great.

Come. Bring all that you have to the cross.

Come. See what God can do.

Amen.

James 2:14-17

Faith and Deeds

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

¹⁶ Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

¹⁷ “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

¹⁸ “Bring them here to me,” he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.