



“Moving from Charity to Changing Structures”

Nehemiah 8:1-10 and Luke 4:14-21

Julie R. Harley – January 24, 2010 – First United Church of Oak Park

Robert Strube grew up in the grocery business. His father owned Strube Celery and Vegetable on South Water Street in Chicago, and Bob took over in 1946 after he got out of the Army. Business was good, yet there was always leftover produce that the store couldn't sell. So Bob started contacting food pantries and church groups to share the excess food with people in need.

Then after many years, Bob had a vision. He decided he could do more for hungry people, and so he got together with five others in 1979 to found the Greater Chicago Food Depository. Many grocery stores banded together to donate their unsold food to this central location. When it got off the ground, the Depository provided 40 food pantries with a half-million pounds of food.

But Bob Strube still wasn't satisfied. He was more than a grocer; he had a heart as big as all outdoors. So Bob established a personal goal to end hunger in the U.S. by the year 2000. He worked tirelessly as a fundraiser for the Food Depository, and the organization continued to grow.

Today Strube Celery and Vegetable is still run by his family, and the Greater Chicago Food Depository now funnels donations into a 268,000 square foot warehouse on the southwest side. The Depository feeds 500,000 people in Cook County each year, and it is the primary supplier for our OPRF Food Pantry.

Every week, a big white truck filled with food arrives in our parking lot to unload supplies from the GCFD thanks to Bob Strube's vision. Bob died a week ago at age 91. We are grateful for his life, because he changed the way hungry people are fed. **All it took was a big vision and a long-term commitment.**

Norman Borlaug was born in Cresco, Iowa and earned graduate degrees in plant pathology at the University of Minnesota. During the 1940s, he became part of a Rockefeller Foundation project to help improve wheat production in Mexico. He spent 20 years researching ways to develop a high-yield, disease-resistant strain of wheat. Norman was more than a scientist; he was concerned about feeding the world's poor.

Norman Borlaug spent his career addressing hunger in Mexico, Pakistan, India, Asia and Africa. Through his efforts, wheat yields nearly doubled in some countries. Norman was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize because his efforts to provide greater food security in impoverished nations led to peace.

When he died last September at age 95, Norman was credited with saving a billion people from starvation. His message was: "The world is hungry for bread and for peace." We are grateful for his life. Norman Borlaug exponentially expanded the food supply for people in the developing world. **All it took was a big vision and a long-term commitment.**

Jesus was 30 years old and newly baptized when he stood up in his home synagogue in Nazareth to give his first sermon. His mission statement was clear: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. I have been sent to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus quoted those words from the prophet Isaiah, and then added, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your ears."

The Greek word for "oppressed" in Jesus' sermon literally means, "broken to bits." Jesus was sent to help people who have been broken to bits. The word "mission" literally means "to be sent." Jesus was sent to the same places that Bob Strube and

Norman Borlaug were sent: to the poor, to the hungry, to those whose lives are broken to bits.

How about us? Where are we sent? What does Jesus want us to do for the poor, the prisoner, the blind, and for those whose lives have been broken to bits: our sisters and brothers in Haiti; our sisters and brothers on the west side and the south side and in Cicero and Maywood and Austin?

Heaven knows, we're doing a lot already -- more than most churches! Last year we gave away more than \$150,000 to worthy charitable organizations around the community and around the world. We house the food pantry, the PADS homeless shelter, the Walk-In Ministry. All of these serve the poor. We take up special offerings for mission groups every month. We support the worldwide mission of two denominations.

Not bad for a group of people who only get together one hour a week, right?

I believe the answer is YES and NO.

Yes, we are doing an awesome job in responding to the needs of the poor and the hungry. But no, we are not doing enough to change the structures that cause hunger, that cause poverty, that cause homelessness. The fact that our food pantry is serving four times more people than we served three years ago is a sign of **failure, not success**.

It's not **our** failure – it's a failure of our **systems**: economic, educational, legal, housing, government, business, family and community. We're only one part of the solution, but we are the moral voice. We are the voice of God's justice.

Could it be that Jesus is calling us to a bigger vision and a long-term commitment to **creating justice** rather than simply **providing charity**? Could it be that our mission should focus on **preventing need rather than responding to need**?

What if we built more affordable housing so we would have less homeless people to shelter?

What if we created more jobs, so less people would have to come to the food pantry?

What if we were involved in hands-on mission ourselves, so we wouldn't simply give money to other people to do mission?

Several centuries ago, a Jewish scholar named Maimonides considered this same question. In the Jewish tradition, believers are expected to practice **tzedakah** – a Hebrew word that is untranslatable in English. **Tzedakah** means both charity and justice, and some translate it as righteous giving.

Every form of charity is good, but Maimonides developed an eight-level “Ladder of Tzedakah” in which each rung upward represents a higher degree of virtue.

1. The lowest rung is giving begrudgingly and making the recipient feel embarrassed.
2. Giving cheerfully, but giving too little.
3. Give cheerfully and adequately, but only after being asked.
4. Giving before being asked.
5. Giving when you do not know the person who is benefiting, but they know your name.
6. Giving when you know who is benefiting, but they do not know your name.
7. Giving when neither the donor nor the recipient is aware of the other’s identity.
8. The highest form of virtuous giving: Giving money, a loan, your time, or whatever else it takes to enable a person to become self-reliant.

There is nothing wrong with providing charity, but even more virtuous forms of mission are within our grasp.

For example, Kevin and Joan Salwen are a typical, upper middle class family. They live in Atlanta with two teenage children: Hannah, age 17, and Joseph, age 15. They had a spacious home, plenty of goodies, and lots of money – but they found their affluence was causing them to drift apart. They spent weekends driving their kids to activities in the family van, with the kids watching TV in the back seat. When they were home, they each retreated to their own part of the house and had little to say to each other at meals.

Until one day, when Hannah began getting upset about the inequalities between the world’s haves and have-nots: the difference between the First World, where the average per capita income is \$4,000 and the Fourth World (which includes Haiti), where the income is about \$150.

Hannah told her parents she wanted their family to make a difference, even if it was a small difference. “Okay,” said her mom, “What are you willing to sacrifice? Your house? Your room?” Hannah said yes to both.

That began a conversation that led the Salwens to make the decision to sell their dream house and move to one that was half the size – while donating the difference to people in need.

The Salwens did their research. They considered three causes: clean water, homelessness and poverty. They volunteered time for World Vision and Habitat for Humanity. They finally chose as their recipient the Hunger Project, which works with villagers in Africa, Asia and South America, helping them to move from poverty to self-reliance. The funds from their house sale built two centers in eastern Ghana to provide a community meeting place, a bank for microloans, a food storage facility and a health clinic.

To complete the circle, the family traveled to Ghana to meet the people and form relationships with them. The Salwens now live in a small house and are much closer as a family. Their own lives were transformed, while they enabled others to become self-reliant.

Why are we so often content to provide charity, rather than seeking to change the conditions that make charity necessary? Because charity is easy and justice is hard.

A major problem we face in the church is the problem of the too big and the too small. Our purposes as Christians are necessarily large: bringing good news to the poor and letting the oppressed go free are not goals we can accomplish in an afternoon.

It is the nature of great visions that they cannot be accomplished easily.

Learning to be Christian involves learning a whole way of life and coming to know and trust in God. Living into our baptismal vows takes a lifetime. When a man talked with the poet Maya Angelou and said that he was a Christian, she replied, “Already?! I’ve been working on it for years, and I’m not there yet.”

What we’re trying to do here at First United Church of Oak Park seems too big.

But we also have the problem of too small. In the life of the church, we do a little of this and a little of that and a little of something else. Too often the pieces of our life together do not seem to add up to much. We lose the connection between our committee work and our missional calling. We lose the overall significance of worship, or Bible study, or volunteering to serve. It seems like we do a lot of things together, but sometimes we wonder if it really makes a difference or creates change. (See *Growing in the Life of Faith* by Craig Dykstra)

Christ's call is so big, and our numbers seem so small.

What can you expect from a group of people who only get together one hour a week?

But this is exactly how God works in our lives and in the life of the world. God gives us a vision that seems unattainable, unreachable, and completely out of our league.

Something like:

Moving beyond religious rhetoric to carry out God-pleasing actions.

Moving beyond individualism to engage in intimate fellowship with others.

Moving beyond charity to changing structures of injustice.

Let's say that becomes our big vision for the next ten years.

And then we begin to engage in small, everyday practices of faith:

Worship; prayer; confession; forgiveness; encouragement; service; witness; mutual love; hospitality; listening; resisting evil; providing a spiritual framework for our ministries; working together to build institutions that will sustain life and reflect God's will.

It is those small practices that make us the church of Jesus Christ. And it is those practices of faith that add up to good news for the poor, that liberate those whose lives have been broken to bits.

I have spoken before about Greg Mortenson, who wrote the book Three Cups of Tea (which a group will be studying together beginning Feb. 1). He has written a second book called Stones Into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Our church was privileged to host Karin Ronnow a month

ago, as she spoke about her first-hand experience of Greg's mission in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

From a very humble beginning, Greg has helped found 131 schools in those two countries, providing education to nearly 58,000 students.

Greg is just an ordinary person – like Robert Strube or Norman Borlaug or the Salwen family – who had a great vision. He believes that the conflict in Afghanistan will ultimately not be won with guns and air strikes, but with books, notebooks, and pencils, the tools that allow poor people to achieve greater prosperity and well-being.

Despite fatwas issued against him, despite threats from the Taliban and other extremists, Greg has done everything he can to make sure that the children of Afghanistan get an education. He has a special passion for the education of girls, and he says: “If you educate a boy, you educate an individual, but if you educate a girl, you educate a community.”

If we want to move beyond charity, to changing structures of injustice, it will take a big vision and a long-term commitment. Jesus said, “Today, this has been fulfilled in your hearing.” God has already set our mission in motion; we simply join in the movement that Jesus started.

From Nazareth to Oak Park, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, for we are anointed in Jesus' name to bring good news to the poor. Amen.