



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Advent Good News – Smoothing the Way

December 11, 2016

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

Officer Ray Robakowski of the Milwaukee Police Department was a tough, no nonsense cop. He knew Jacob Maclin well. He had arrested him several times and expected he would do so again. After all, Maclin was a drug dealing gang banger with a rap sheet like the phone book. Robakowski had watched him grow up, in his succession of mug shots. To him, Maclin was just a problem to be put where he wouldn't keep causing trouble. To Maclin, this cop was everything he hated. Life had been an unending cycle of frustration and bad choices, dead ends and bad breaks. Together, they were locked in an ugly struggle with no good end in sight. The District Attorney decided to try something different. He called Ray's boss at the Police Department and told him that he wanted Ray to try to help Jacob break the cycle. Ray was ordered to meet Jacob for coffee. He went begrudgingly, with an attitude. Jacob, on other hand, had to tricked into meeting with Ray. His parole officer told him that he had a job interview at the coffee shop. As you might imagine, their meeting didn't go well. They mostly sat and glared at each other.

To get his boss off of his back, Ray arranged a couple of job interviews for Jacob with people that he knew from his many years on the force. He didn't expect Jacob to follow through and assumed that they would begin their old pattern soon -kind of like Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner. Ray told Jacob, "I'm not a social worker, you mess up and I'll come get you." But Jacob surprised him. He went on every job interview, really wanting to have a chance at a different kind of life. One of the interviews, about number 15, was a place called Community Warehouse. It's a non-profit building materials company that hires people with less than spotless life histories. Jacob got a job there and now after eight years, he has become a member of the management team. He has made a good life for his children and for himself. And that's not the end of the story. Last year Ray retired from the police department but he wasn't ready to do nothing so he went looking for something to do. He called Jacob and asked him for a job. The two laugh about the role reversal. Ray now also works at Community Warehouse and they've become best friends.

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There are so many Advent themes in the story of Jacob and Ray. Their story was featured on CBS evening news and in a book called *Redemptive Leadership (as a Value Added Management Practice)*. The chapter that they are in is called "Smoothing out the road ahead," like it's straight out of John the Baptist's story. "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." The author, Joseph Bucci, even makes the connection between John the Baptist and the cop and the gangbanger in this book on leadership. John's role is talked about as making the path straight and smooth for the coming Messiah. It's not a surprise that the work of redemption needs someone or something to smooth the way. That is the work of Christ for us, removing obstacles between us and God. Someone like Jacob Maclin who finds himself in a really deep hole often can't get out by himself. Ray the cop may have started out helping him because he was told to but he became a believer. Eventually, he believed in Jacob. And Jacob, having had someone smooth the way for him, turned around and has done the same for at least a dozen others. Now, if Officer Ray Robakowski was clear that he didn't want to fill the role of social worker, he most certainly would have refused to think of himself as a prophet or redeemer, but that's exactly what he became here. So while Ray would not have thought of himself as a John the Baptist, he did make the way smoother for Jacob - just as the Baptist made straight the way for Jesus, and Jesus became the way smoother for all humanity. It's "paying it forward" with the full power and hope of Advent.

This is a great story but it is far removed from most of our experiences, as was that of the POWs who built the Italian Chapel. As much as these stories are evidence of seeing with new eyes, the Kingdom in our midst, and we hear them with gratitude and wonder, if we are to take on the Advent role perhaps we need something a little closer to home. We need our own stories of how to make the way smooth for others, in Branford, right now. And it just happens that I have a story for you.

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Just this past Thursday, the Board of Branford Cares voted to implement a new program that will smooth the way for many families in our town. There are some distressing statistics that shocked even me...close to 40% of households in Branford are barely making ends meet. The poorest in our community, indeed our nation, qualify for various kinds of assistance. But there is a whole swath of people, hardworking people, who make too much, sometimes a few dollars a week too much to receive help, but they don't make not enough to make ends meet. They fall into a category known as ALICE, Asset Limited Income Constrained and Employed. They have no one to smooth the way for them in a way that can make real change, like Officer Robakowski did for Jacob Maclin. But now, we get to be a part of smoothing the way, one family at a time. Branford Cares is going to provide monthly rental subsidies for up to a year and work with the families through budgeting and nutrition counseling to smooth their way into a better situation. You have all been a part of that. You have held a space for Branford Cares to be born and mature until it was ready for this. Many of you helped to raise the initial funds through block parties and other grass roots events, something you can do again any time you want to. And now, Branford Cares has the means to help a dozen families to start with. It will be a community effort. I don't want to overstate what we can do, but it's the kind of thing that Isaiah talked about;

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;

...the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Smooth highways are created for others by the choices that we make. As Christ's Kingdom is revealed here and now, we receive grace, strength, and ingenuity to live that kingdom, to be those who create a smoother path for those that God will give to us. What an incredible Advent gift to us, to make us heralds and proclaimers and builders of God's kingdom, right here and right now.