

Thoughts from Chicago  
A Sermon by members of the 2009 High School Mission Trip  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
05 July 2009  
Text: Micah 6:6-8

Introduction by Kurt

Rebecca Hoogwerf Reflection– Read by Kurt

Catherine Carulas Reflection – Read by Caitlin

Amy Young Reflection – Read by Kurt

Caitlin Cheverine Reflection – Read by Caitlin

Kurt Zitzner Reflection – Ready by Kurt

### **Introduction**

If you're visiting us today you may find our "sermon" a bit untraditional. A group of us just returned on Friday night from a mission trip to Chicago and we are delighted to share our experiences with you this morning. There are 3 things we want to do during "Thoughts from Chicago"

1. Explain our trip...
2. Explain how it impacted our lives...
3. Discuss how we hope it might impact yours...

Caitlin, Rebecca and I... I'm Kurt Zitzner, the Youth Director at Fairmount.... will be discussing the trip starting with a reflection from one of our youth participants, Rebecca Hoogwerf.

### **Rebecca Hoogwerf**

Over 21,000 people live with HIV and AIDS in Chicago. The vast majority of these people live at or below the poverty line. Since 1981, 11,000 men, women and children in metropolitan Chicago have died from HIV/AIDS.

Twenty years ago, volunteers mobilized across metropolitan Chicago to help their friends, family members and colleagues who were battling from HIV/AIDS. Their efforts and dedication to provide food, shelter, care and education about HIV grew and expanded, becoming Vital Bridges.

Today, they serve nearly 2,000 people annually. Since their founding in 1988, Vital Bridges has provided more than 10 million meals, 600,000 nights of shelter and 250,000 hours of counseling to over 10,000 clients.

Vital Bridges has five different sites around Chicago. They not only provide the most basic needs – nutritious food and safe housing – but they also work to stabilize their clients’ lives and guide them on a path to improve their health. Their clients receive assistance toward greater independence through case management, counseling, prevention services and education.

My team and I went to Vital Bridges South on Thursday and we worked filling boxes for the clients. The boxes contain nutritious food, fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, frozen meats and seafood.

Each client is able to fill out a “shopping list form” based on their preferences and their meetings with the dietitians and then volunteers take their forms and pick out all the items they requested from the shelves, the freezers, and refrigerators of the food pantry. When we finished shopping for what the clients, we read off what they asked for and what they received and then help them pack it into bags or boxes.

Occasionally, the person would smile and say "thank you" and that gave me an incredible feeling of what I was doing was directly helping people. The trip leaders kept telling us not to expect a thank you or even a smile... they said that we’re not here for thank yous or smiles we’re here because we care... we’re here because we’re doing the work we feel called to do.

Of course, you can't always expect a smile or a kind word, but when I did get a couple, it is a great feeling and it made the whole trip worth while.

### **Catherine Carulas**

Catherine Carulas is away with her family this weekend so I will be reading her reflection. My name is Caitlin. Here was Catherine’s comments:

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This whole experience was so rewarding. I really feel that I have helped people in great need. On the third day of the trip I went to a soup kitchen called missionaries of charity which was run by a team of nuns.

When we arrived at the soup kitchen there were already people waiting outside anxious for food even before it had been prepared. I helped make soup and salad for the people and while we were all preparing the food, the nuns were praying and blessing the food.

I thought it was really fabulous that the women cared enough about the people they were serving to take the time 4 days a week to work at the soup kitchen. When I was serving the food I was really

touched by one man who came and said it was his first time coming. He asked what he was allowed to have and seemed so scared and embarrassed that he had to ask for help.

All of the people at the soup kitchen were so appreciative of my help and even though service is supposed to be a thankless job it was nice to hear that my work was needed and enjoyed. The whole trip was such a great experience and I only wish there was more I could do. I hope that I can now take what I learned in Chicago and use it to address the needs my own community has.

In addition the great thing about this mission trip was getting to spend time with other members of our youth group and meeting new people who all share a common goal. My faith in Jesus Christ was strengthened by this experience and my ability to serve others.

### **Amy Young**

Amy Young is now out of town celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with her family, so I offered to read her reflection this morning.

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For me, this trip has made Christianity more complex. Although the fundamentals of the religion remained the same, I heard many different beliefs and theories during our small groups and during our nightly presentations. All of these theories appealed to me and all of them I agreed, but then they always seem to be conflicting with each other.

For example, If God has predestined plans for us, then why are an increasing number of people led astray? Why would He let that happen? In any case, DOOR Chicago has really shaken the core of my perspective, of everything I used to hold as steadfast and undeniably true. However, there is one person who helped clarify the role I play as a growing adult in the Christian community. Brenda Mathews, a local citizen of East Garfield Park and speaker of the faith, visited on our last day and gave a very passionate speech.

She started off by reading us a passage from Jeremiah, chapter 1 versus 4-8:

*(insert passage here; the bible here is filled with thee and stuff like that, you might want to make it more modern).* As of that moment, I realized the extent to which I distrusted people, and I realized I should have more faith in the goodness of humanity.

A pretty powerful revelation for just the start of a long monologue. The next thing Brenda said was that more young people – those that aren't lost – feel like they can wait to do God's work until later in life, say 25 or 30 years old. She said that we have no time, and that our time is right now. As a matter of fact, God did his greatest works through the faith of young people. In many cases, youth set up expectations for community service. However, we shouldn't judge because we are called to

work and expectations don't play a part, or at least shouldn't. Thusly, I need to stop expecting, and start doing.

Next, Brenda said we had to go find God for ourselves, that if we yearn for his presence that he will come. But how daunting is that? How can someone as young and inexperienced as me possible hope to find an all knowing power? All I know is that I should.

Often times, the only "church" people will visit is you and the holy spirit you posses. To be that presence and to do the work that needs to be done to its full extent, I need to find God first. Wish me luck. In essence, I shouldn't be afraid of the tasks at hand. People are afraid of working in God's name because community work in the name of God is not commonly practiced in this day and age. But as another wise person on the trip said "why stand in when you were born to stand out? And if you're going to stand out, then be outstanding." From this experience, I have derived a greater purpose. Thank you.

### **Caitlin Cheverine**

The last day we were in Chicago, Brian, the director of DOOR, led an activity where everyone had to say one word that described the past week. The word I chose was "love." The day that best represents "love" was at St. Martin De Porris, House of Hope.

St. Martin is a private, non-profit, Christian shelter for homeless women recovering from substance abuse, their children, and pregnant teenage girls. After being there for a few hours, I realized that these sisters got it (literally, it was started by two nuns). Over the last 21 years, they have created and implemented a comprehensive plan for effectively addressing the needs of addicted homeless women.

Their primary aim is to enable each and every resident to leave the shelter with a renewed sense of dignity through personal responsibility, and re-enter her community as a positive force and remain stabilized. To date, 95% of the residents that have made it through their program are still clean today. And a good portion of those are now volunteering and/or working at the shelter to help others.

The services that St. Martin provides are extensive and include not only basic food and shelter but also things like individual and family counseling. They have educational and life skills training for adults and pre-school children. They also have health care and alcohol and drug abuse recovery program. And of course housing placement and outreach services after they leave. It is a pretty comprehensive program.

On Wednesday, I was assigned to "educational and life skills for pre-school children" at St. Martin. As I walked into the room I was bombarded by ten 4-year-olds running straight at me. Each one gave me a huge hug. I was in shock because I had never met any children who so much wanted attention and just to be loved. We started by playing with Lego's and a train. It was overwhelming because all ten of the children wanted me to play with them at the same time. This demonstrated to

me their lack of adult contact. We sang songs, including the “ABC Song.” I read books to them, but that also was difficult when I had three kids in my lap at the same time. Merely spending four hours with these children, showed me the importance of kids receiving love from adults.

### **Kurt Zitzner**

Since Caitlin just talked about the St. Martin again is the facility for women with drug and/or alcohol related addictions... I’ll share another quick story about my experience there. When we got there, I assigned to “educational and life skills for adults.”

The priest came in and said “okay, are you good at math?”

I said “I suppose so... what will I be doing?”

He said “I don’t know... possibly algebra, geometry, maybe some proofs, stuff like that... depends who is in the group.”

I looked around... and thought to myself “hmm... haven’t done that stuff in 10 years” and just then the priest said “you’ll be okay... meet me downstairs.”

I was partnered with a lovely woman... we’ll call her Sarah since I can’t share her real name. She was in her 50s, very nice, pleasant, happy to be there and so grateful that I was there working with her.

So, I sat down and looked at the booklet and... it was decimals. I just needed to teach Sarah how round decimals the nearest whole number, then tenth, then hundredth. That’s it!

I thought to myself... sweet! I lucked out. Believe it or not, I actually do remember how to do this ☺

So we started doing the decimal exercises on her sheet.

We were making good time.

And on to exercise two titled American Currency... round to the nearest cent.

Sarah was having trouble figuring out what the decimal meant when it was \$1.654 dollars. In each situation, she basically ignored the decimal point and read the number as if the last two digits were always cents... even if it was \$1.6592. \$164.92.

I spent about 7 minutes trying to explain why the decimal point was what she needed to focus on first... then she could read the number correctly... and I wasn’t getting very far so I decided to use some real money. Everyone knows money!

So, I took out a penny, a quarter, and a dollar bill and I said.

“Okay Sarah... would you rather have 100 of these pennies or 1 of these dollar bills.”

And she said “100 pennies”.

Thinking maybe it was because she just liked pennies more... “why?” I asked.

“because there is 100 of them and that’s more than 1.”

Then she gave me a proud and happy smile and said “right?”

I didn’t know if she was joking or if this was for real so I said “Sarah, wait... are you serious?”

She said “100 is more than 1... right?”

I said “yes, 100 is more than 1... but there are 100 of these pennies in this 1 dollar bill. They are the same thing. There is no actual difference between them.”

Then Sarah looked at me like I was speaking some other language.

Folks, listen to me... Sarah was dead serious.

I wanted to cry. How was this possible? What in the world is going on? I couldn’t say anything or do anything... Literally, hundreds of things started running through my head...

Sarah was smart... she could read the questions out load to me. She read the instructions at the top of the page. She could even read the news paper. So how could she possibly not understand this?

\*\*\*\* PAUSE \*\*\*\*\*

I’m serious... think about this. How could she possibly gotten through life without knowing this?

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I’m going to ask you to do something. Think about what God wants you to do about this and about all the other things that are happening out there in this world that just don’t make sense... that are simply un-just.

- As Rebecca said earlier, 11,000 people have died of AIDS in Chicago alone since 1981. How many world wide? What are we doing about it?
- As Catherine said, there were people lined up to eat before we even got there to start preparing the food. This is going on in Cleveland too! What are we doing about?

- As Caitlin said, merely spending 4 hours with these children, showed me the importance of kids receiving love from adults. What are we doing about it?
- As Amy said, often times the only “Church” that people will ever visit is you... and the Holy Spirit you possess. What are we doing about it?

Think about what God wants you to do... and ask yourself if you’re doing it. I’m not here to say do this or do that... I’m simply asking (begging you really) to do something!

What does God require of us? Not to give burnt offerings... not to give a calf. Not to give rams or rivers of oil. To do justice... to love kindness... and to walk humbly with him. One of the bibles I was looking at replaced humbly with wisely. Walk wisely with God.

Will you pray with me?

God, sometimes we miss the signs you send us. Sometimes we intentionally ignore them and sometimes we think we are just too busy to even notice. Help us realize that our possessions, our family, our friends, our jobs, our money, our education... all of these are just tools that you gave us to do your work here on earth.

We all want to be a part of your sanctuary, but many of us don’t know what that looks like. We all want the holy spirit for someone else, but we don’t always know what that means.

Help us get out of our comfort zone and make a difference in the lives of the people around us. Each of us is suffering, and questioning, and wondering, and living our lives... and I ask that you be with us and help us walk wisely with you each day. I ask that you show us how to serve justice and love kindness each day... through each of our interactions.

Amen.