



Proper 21, Year A – August 21, 2011

Exodus 1.8 – 2.10

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

He was reflective on this warm summer evening. He sat on the deck watching the leaves dance in the dying sun thinking about he got to be here, in this place, in this blessed life. He had so much to be thankful for, so much to feel blessed about and on this particular evening during this particular sunset he traced it all back to one event many years ago. He allowed himself to be swept away in the nostalgia and impulsively, uncharacteristically, fetched a pen and paper and began to write a letter.

"Dear Miss Ames" the letter began. "You may not remember me as it has been so many years since we last met but allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Michael Hendricks and you changed my life sometime during the dreary month of February 1978, the second term of my grade ten year. You, Miss Ames, supported me in my weakness and in doing so helped me find my strength."

As the letter went on Michael was barely aware that his handwriting had taken on the tight pointed cursive of his youth. So intent was he on getting the message out, passing along his deep gratitude, that his many years of language studies left him as he slid into the euphemisms of his teenage years. He retold the details of his entering the Social Studies class a whole year ahead of schedule. Surrounded by the jocks of the football team and the beauty of the cheerleaders his long lanky frame and pimple pocked face seemed sorely out of place. He had taken the course because he loved to talk about what made the world tick; how things came to be and where the world might move to in the future. His enthusiasm outweighed his nervousness and he looked forward every day to that particular class.

Until, that is, until THE ASSIGNMENT. Even in his memory the word assignment is in capitol letters. You see Michael was very good at putting together an essay, a string of words that were well considered and thought out that helped the reader get the point. But on that day so long ago Miss Ames told the class that they would have to research, write about, and present to the class about one thing that they were involved with in their community that was going to change the world. Michael actually deflated as he heard her words convinced that his solid B was going to quickly move towards a failing D. Not only could he NEVER in a million years get up in front of people and speak but Michael knew that he wasn't participating in anything important or life changing. He was just... well, just Michael. He certainly wasn't changing the world.

For a week he racked his brain, trying desperately to think of something worthwhile he could join - even at this last minute - just so he had something to research and write about. May be he'd be a candy striper at the hospital. May be he'd volunteer at the seniors home around the corner. May be he'd just help people put their buggies away at the grocery store and call it community service. He was desperate.

On the day he was to present he faked his mom out for the second time in his life, feigning a fever and a cough. By the time the clock struck the hour when he was supposed to be in class presenting he really WAS sick - sweating and nauseous at the thought. The next day he sheepishly entered Miss Ames' office between periods admitting to his cop out and in tears at his failed youth. With kindness in her eyes and compassion in her speech she gently calmed him down and asked him questions about his life. Through this winding tale of his 16 meagre years he found that he WAS changing the world and that he WAS giving selflessly of his time.

Michael, every day, walked home with a younger boy ensuring that no one pushed him in the bushes... again. Every day he met him at the corner, his eyes darting around to see if any of the enemy were approaching. For three years Michael had been escorting Johnny home, asking about his day and his plans for the future. While Michael was dwarfed by the football players in his social studies class he certainly outweighed the grade eight kids who sought to spoil Johnny's day with a dunk in drinking fountain near the park.

"And that, Miss Ames, was how you changed not only my life but the lives of all of those that I have come to serve. I still never stand up in front of a room full of people and talk but I do sit on several non-profit boards and continue to mentor youth. Miss Ames, when you asked how we had worked to change the world I thought that only by curing cancer could I succeed. But you showed me...and the whole class... that changing the world can happen one kind act at a time. Little Johnny grew up to be a composer of music and a classical pianist. By encouraging me to take what I thought to be a silly pass time more seriously you lead me to have more time with him, helping him work through some pretty rough times. Without you, he might not have made it out of that town alive, and without you I wouldn't believe that through the little things we indeed can change the world."

So I ask you, how will you change the world this week? I've asked this before and been accused of hyperbole but I disagree. In Michael's story we heard of how not only his life but the lives of countless others were influenced by a teachers insistence and encouragement over thirty years ago. In today's reading from Exodus we hear about how the whole story of the Israelites were changed by the decision of two midwives to reinforce the Pharaoh's worst prejudice and insist that those awful Jewish women just pushed babies out too fast to be caught and killed. Shiphrah and Puah, two women too horrified to carry out his command to kill all of the male babies changed the future of an entire nation of people because through their decision Moses came to be saved, fostered and reared by royalty. Perhaps their decision to rebel came from their own mothers who insisted that all life was sacred; we'll never know exactly who to thank for their way of thinking. But they did indeed change the world.

Paul in his letter to the Romans tells them to use their spiritual gifts; to minister, to teach, to give, to lead, to prophesy and to reach out in compassion. We are all called to reach out to one another as we are all one body in Christ.

So maybe you won't cure cancer, but you can comfort someone who is ill. May be you won't save all of the people starving in Africa but you can feed someone who is hungry. Perhaps you can't house all of the homeless in the city but you can donate to the people who strive to help them. Perhaps you can't make a whole grade twelve class graduate from high school but you can certainly mentor someone who might be struggling. You might not be able to wipe out illiteracy but you can certainly help one person learn to read.

Shiphrah and Puah didn't think they were changing the world, they just knew that they were saving a baby's life - but for Moses it was his whole world. For the person you feed, you change their life. For the people you mentor, it is their whole future. For the person who now reads who before walked through life trying to fake it, you've opened up paths beyond what you can know. For them, for those individuals, you have changed the world.

So, go and change the world.