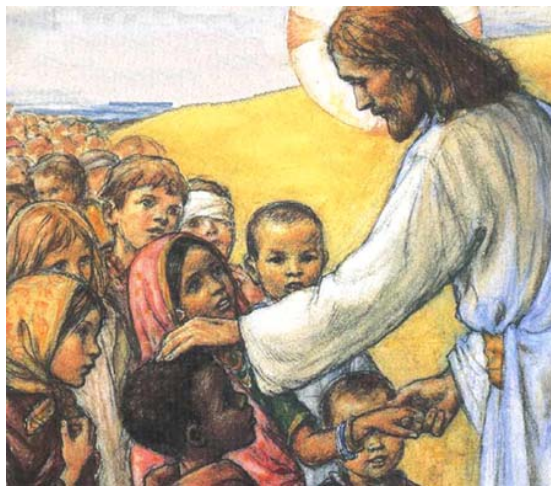


THE LEAST OF THESE



Sunday, May 24, 2009

Allen Harmon

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ

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Battle Creek, MI 49017
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James 1:27

“The Least of These”

I want to thank Leah for giving me the opportunity to stand before you this morning. Though if the truth be told, I'm not sure if she is going to remember asking me. She sounded like she was on a lot of pain medication this past Wednesday morning when she called me. Leah started the conversation something like this. "Allen, can I ask you for a favor?" "Sure," I replied. I figured she was calling to ask for advice or to have me share some wonderful insight with her. I never expected to hear what came next. "I am not recovering from my surgery as fast as the Doctors thought I would and Tom is going to be out of town starting on Saturday." I should have heard alarms going off right then. Leah continued, "I've called Cheryl, and everyone I can think of to deliver the message for me on Sunday. No one is available. Would you consider doing the message for me?" Not that you were last on my list," she hurriedly added. "Sure, I would be delighted" I replied. I was just excited to be on anybody's list. I didn't care where I was on the list. Later it would occur to me that Tom was kind enough to give me 3 months to prepare a message. Leah must have more confidence in me because she only gave me 3 days.

We read in the bible that Jesus commands us to love one another. We read that "as you do to the least of these, so you do unto me. I have a sister. Her name is Lynn. As her big brother it is my job to protect her.

This has not been easy. Lynn is self sufficient. She could even be described as hard headed or stubborn as a mule. She rarely admits to being wrong and will work twice even three times as hard to make something work just so she won't be proven wrong. Mom says she is a lot like me.

What is family? As I was growing up, my family consisted of my father and mother, myself, my brother Craig, and my sister. This picture was taken right after Lynn was baptized in the Miller Chapel by Dr. Miller. Family also included my Grandmother Allen, who lived with us more years than not. My Grandfather Allen died six weeks before I was born. Grandma was a part of our household as I grew up and it always seemed strange when she would live away from the farm for short periods of time. She referred to these times as her adventures.

Today, my family consists of myself, my wife Wanda, our children, Katelyn, Jared, and Callie, and Katelyn's fiancée, Deyan Kozhuharov. Deyan is from Bulgaria and graduated from Olivet College last spring and moved into our basement. Deyan's parents still live in Bulgaria and other than with a webcam, Deyan has not seen his parents in nearly three years. My parents live across the driveway and we see them everyday. Even Wanda's parents moved within a half mile of the farm after we were married. I have heard some joke of the farm as the Harmon compound. I am glad that I was raised to think of family as being more than just one's parents and siblings. Mom tells stories of people my Grandfather Allen invited to live on the farm when life dealt them a blow. Clark and Marcille Barnes lived with my grandparents after Clark lost his leg in WWII while serving in Germany. A two week visit turned into a two year stay. Dick and Betty Johnson stayed

for two months. The magnolia bush he planted in 1945 still blooms in my side yard.

Family has also taken on new meaning thanks to my sister, Lynn. Lynn and her partner, Missy, adopted twin boys a couple of years ago from Kazakhstan. Denis and Dima had been turned over to an orphanage when they were two months old. Lynn and Missy met them when they were 3 ½ years old. Pushed aside and unwanted by society, the boys knew no family other than themselves. Dima had reacted to the orphanage environment by withdrawing into himself. Quietly rocking in a corner, he avoided contact with all others except his brother Denis. Having drawn inward, Dima was thought by the workers at the orphanage to have limited mental capacity and they considered him undesirable for adoptive parents. Denis dealt with the orphanage environment by acting out, often times with aggression. Lynn and Missy were encouraged by the orphanage staff to adopt Denis but to leave Dima. Lynn and Missy prayed over the decision to adopt the twin boys. Lynn and Missy felt strongly about maintaining family connections. The decision was made that brothers, who had relied upon each other to survive in the orphanage, should not be separated because some social worker chose to see one as less than perfect. Lynn and Missy believe that all are perfect in God's eyes and that we are all perfect in the eyes of our family. Thanks to the family values with which Lynn and Missy were raised, Denis and Dima Harmon arrived at their new home in Memphis, TN in June, 2006. Through the loving and patient care provided to the boys by their Mama and Mimi, Denis has learned to control his aggression and Dima has found interest in the world around him. Neither boy shows any sign of being anything other than a normal

child with a thirst to learn.

Here at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in Battle Creek, Michigan, we are a family. Like any family we find strength in our similarities and in our differences. We are united in our love for God and Christ. Our relationships strengthen as we express God's love through our interaction with each other, our outreach programs in our neighborhood and community, and our mission trips throughout the United States and beyond. We grow in our faith as we meet and discuss our faith journeys, finding strength in the individual stories we tell of God's presence in lives and how we are called to share God's love not only through talk or sharing of financial gifts, but through hands on work. Counting the number of people sitting in the pews on Sunday morning may be the measuring stick of success for some, especially if the number is high, but here it is in counting the lives that we touch as we allow ourselves to be God's hands in the world, bringing God's love and joy to those whose lives we touch and improve, recognizing that the gifts we share are also the greatest gifts we will ever receive. God challenges us to go out into the world, to be his hands that bring good works to others; to be his eyes that see injustice and to have courage to speak out for those who have no voice; and to be ears that hear the cry of his people and respond with care and compassion. Together we walk God's path of justice, grace, and salvation. We are here as a community of faith to support each other when we tire following the path set before us. We can see that we have come a long way when we glance back and see the history of this church and together we will go forward as we hold to this guiding principle: "as you have done it to the least of these my children, you have done it unto me. We are called to love one another as

ourselves and to see the face of Jesus in the least of society's members, remembering that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ and we are family.

Let us listen now to hear God's call to each of us in this short video. As the video ends, for those who are able, let's stand and sing the words that will be on the screens.

Here I am Lord. Amen.



DAH Baby Boys!!!



Burlakov Siblings—1 Nov 2005

