



Highlights of diocesan news in printable format — February 21, 2024

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From the Bishop

Look for the folks who need to know that they belong

This is a transcript of a video message.

This is Bishop Hughes in the Diocese of Newark, and our Lenten journey has begun. I made some suggestions right before Ash Wednesday of things that you could practice for Lent, and my hope is that you have taken on a spiritual practice. I'm okay with the fact that some of you are going to do a self help practice, that's perfectly fine. But I'm really hoping for the spiritual practice that anchors your faith and gives it an opportunity to grow and to develop more. And that during these 40 days of Lent, that that would be a practice drawing you deeper and deeper into God's presence, and the transformation that comes from that.

I have one other thought about how we practice Lent. I wonder, who are the people around us that we could help to feel like they belong – whether it's belonging in our family, or belonging in our church, or belonging at work, or belonging in our friends group – but since they belong. I am deeply aware of the vast number of people I encounter on a regular basis, who feel quite lost and lonely. Who feel that they don't belong anywhere. Who wished that they have a place where they knew they fit in, and who have this deep longing for connection and don't quite know how to get there.

Now, I'm not suggesting that for Lent you create new programs and new groups and take on a whole practice of starting up something. But I am wondering, as we go about our lives during these 40 days of Lent, if we could be a little more aware and sensitive to those who are

feeling left out. Sometimes they give that away, sometimes not. Sometimes it's obvious that someone is not sitting with the group. And maybe they don't want to, but maybe they do. And so I want to encourage us to number one, be aware. And then number two, make the offer. To offer a word of encouragement or friendliness or welcome, to let people know that they have a place and that they matter. And that they matter, actually, even to you, that you'd like them to be part of a conversation. "Hey, there's room at the table for you. There's room in this conversation for you."

I say all these things, because in the past year, the United States has experienced the largest number of deaths by suicide than it has in its history. In its entire history. We've never had so many people go because of loneliness. I keep thinking of the Tracy Chapman song, "You have a fast car." It's been on everybody's minds lately because of the performance at the Grammy Awards. But there's a little phrase in there towards the end of the refrain, where she says, "I had a feeling that I could belong. I had a feeling that I could be someone." And don't all of us at some point in our lives experience that. And I can look back on a time when I experienced that, and remember the people who reached out to me to remind me that I had a place, that I did belong.

So I offer that to you this Lent. Across these 40 days, as you engage in your spiritual practices, or your self help program, but during these 40 days, look for the folks who need to know that they belong. Look for the folks who need to know that they are someone, to the people around them, to their church community, to their neighborhood, to their family, to their friends.

Happening at Our Congregations

The Sky's the Limit Thrift Store: A ministry of unexpected blessings

By the Rev. Deacon Jill Singleton

A teacher came to the Rev. Melissa Hall, Rector of St. James, Upper Montclair, for help, and the Holy Spirit answered.

Recently hired to launch a new program designed to give young adults with special needs a chance to be employed and learn life-changing career skills that have the potential to transform their lives, Gabe Bauer didn't know where to start. "I was looking for a way to provide young adults with special needs a purpose in life," said Bauer, a St. James parishioner and certified special education teacher in Essex Fells, "just like every other human being should have."

"Gabe told me she couldn't get jobs for her kids," explained Hall. "And that's when it happened. I closed my eyes and it was a real Holy Spirit moment. I said, 'We're going to open a thrift store called The Sky's the Limit. And your students are going to run it.'"

With the help of several eager parishioners, space was reorganized and transformed into what's become known around St. James as "The Shop." "It looked like a garbage dump at first," said 24-year-old Nicolette D'Albo, one of Bauer's students and among the first group of young adults hired by St. James to work in The Shop, "and we built it up."

But in many ways, sorting and cleaning and setting up the space turned out to be the easy part. What proved to be a little harder was getting very willing volunteers comfortable with the idea of working with young adults with special needs. "I didn't think I could do this, I thought at first," said Joanne Torrisi, a retired teacher who now serves as one of two main coordinators for The Shop, and whose responsibilities include training the young adults from Montclair High School who are employed at the Thrift Store. "But I just fell into it and I love doing it. It's the most gratifying thing I have ever done."

"Seeing people's misunderstanding and fears of children who are autistic or have challenges, and then seeing the relationships that started to build was an unexpected blessing," said Hall. "The Shop reminds us that we are all God's creation and are the same on the inside, that we all have our own things that we're afraid of. The students taught us to be mindful that kindness is the only way to go if you are a Christian person," she said. "It was humbling for all of us."

"This was a steppingstone," said Antonella D'Albo, Nicolette's mother. "She could take the skills and confidence she learned here and take it to another place." D'Albo said she saw many changes in her daughter over the years, including "her ability to communicate with customers, and the confidence that she gained in a safe environment where [young adults with special needs] are respected, and treated with dignity." In fact, she credits the experience her daughter had at St. James with her success in being hired at Shoprite, where she currently works four days per week.

But the blessings don't stop here. They've traveled all the way across the world to the Holy Land.

Proceeds from The Shop benefit several ministries, including the Princess Basma Center in Jerusalem, The Lighthouse for Asylum-Seekers in Union City, the Montclair Hispanic Ministry, and scholarships for families attending the St. James Preschool.

"We've been able to expand the ministry that we can support from The Shop," said Barbara Boehm, who together with Joanne Torrisi is charged with coordinating the Thrift Store. "Princess Basma specializes in special needs children in the Palestinian territories," said Boehm, who fell in love with the Center while in Jerusalem teaching a class on Holy Lands and the Arts at St. George's College. "In addition to their medical needs, the children are living under circumstances that are challenging," she said, "so it ends up resonating with the work we are doing with the Montclair Hispanic Ministry and The Lighthouse – people who have been displaced and who face challenges in having the home that they deserve."

Boehm said she views The Shop as "the public face" of St. James. "People who would never think of coming

through our doors on Sunday morning come in through the Thrift Store and they find us here,” she said.

Catherine Gilmore, a retired teacher who has been volunteering at The Shop for the past few years, agreed with Boehm and added that there are “magical moments” that happen every day at The Shop. One such moment was this past year while helping the students set up Christmas decorations. “It was one of those days where everything was happening at once,” she said, “someone asking how much something costs, someone coming in with a donation, someone asking about a set of encyclopedias, and one of these students, a high schooler who had never seen a creche before asked me who Mary is and whether she was a teen mom.” Gilmore said she stopped what she was doing to talk to the teenager about Mary. “That’s why I love the Thrift Store,” she said. “Out of the hecticness of a normal day you teach someone who Mary was.”

Boehm shared similar stories she experienced at The Shop. One was about a couple who came into The Shop and asked if the priest was present. They had recently been married and were looking to have their rings blessed. “I got Rev. Melissa out of a meeting and she took them down to the sanctuary,” said Boehm. Another was about a man who came in with donations from his aunt who recently died. The man explained that for the last year of his life his sister, who had been involved with a Roman Catholic church all of her life, had come into St. James and sat in the back pew. “My aunt wanted to give St. James some money,” he said, “How do I do that?”

In addition to these opportunities for pastoral care and holy presence, volunteers at The Shop express reverence and respect for the items that are donated, many of which are hidden among clothes and other household items in ordinary plastic garbage bags. “We have antique linens, fine china and silver that come in,” said Boehm, who said that she feels “as if these objects have been parts of chapters of people’s lives and they are just waiting to be in a new chapter of someone’s story.”

Many items that make their way to The Shop come in the wake of someone’s death. A grieving spouse or child brings in the remains of their loved one’s life. “These things were given out of a broken heart and they deserve respect,” said Gilmore. And on the other hand,

the Thrift Store is there for people after a tragedy, such as losing a job or falling victim to a house fire. “People know that if they come here they will be taken care of,” said Hall. “No one who ever comes here walks away with nothing - whether it’s clothing, food, money, or a prayer - they know we’re here and that we care.”

The passion each volunteer expresses for their ministry is impressive, as is the special fellowship they share with one another. Volunteer Carol Mosezar agrees. “It’s giving back – to the community, places that need help – but whatever I’m doing I’m having fun.” Mosezar, who said she comes to this work naturally as a result of her mother’s stories about growing up in the Great Depression, said she especially enjoys “watching how the students grow and develop into more capable adults.”

These days it takes about a dozen dedicated volunteers – including adults and youth from Rite 13 and confirmation classes – working alongside the four to six young adults with special needs from Montclair High School, to make The Shop run. It’s clear that their work in The Shop is a central part of their faith journey, and each, in their way, talks about how they are better people for it.

“I’m very proud of The Shop because of how good it makes us be,” said Hall. “We are the very best people we can be when we are up there.”

Recycling clothing and reducing the amount of waste being sent to our landfills, providing affordable clothing for those facing economic challenges, helping children with special needs both here and in Jerusalem, supporting asylum seekers, being a Holy presence mid-week for all who walk through the doors, transforming the hearts of volunteers who enter into relationships with young adults they might never otherwise know, receiving financial donations from those who had quietly called St. James their home, and dignifying lives lost in the respectful treatment of the treasures they leave behind... it’s clear that the Holy Spirit was at work when She gave Hall the vision for the Thrift Store, and it’s clearer still that the name She provided was absolutely spot on – The Sky’s the Limit.

The Rev. Deacon Jill Singleton serves as part-time Parish Administrator at St. James, Upper Montclair.

Diocesan Announcements

Clergy ministry transitions

Departures

JAN 28 - The Rev. Canon Robert Griner

Assisting Clergy at Christ Church, Short Hills

Arrivals

FEB 11 - The Rev. Canon Robert Griner

Priest Associate at Grace, Madison