

Sermon Notes

You can make a difference without taking responsibility for solving every problem.

Good morning. My name is Joe Lawver. My wife, Teri, and I have been members of St. Matthew's since 2002 and we raised two children, Delia, 21 and Rowland, 17 in the parish. Among other things that keep me busy, I am the mayor of Pennington.

To paraphrase the Oracle of Omaha, I won birthplace bingo. Warren Buffet posits that so much of who we are and what we become is determined by where we are born. Imagine through some magical Genie, two identical twins are plucked from the womb and one is born in the US and the other is born in Bangladesh. Given that these twins have equal intelligence, drive, creativity, etc., do we expect them to have equal opportunities and outcomes? Of course not. As crazy as the US is right now, its political, economic, educational, and environmental climate is much stronger than Bangladesh, or Yemen or many, many other countries. I did nothing to earn the advantage of being born in the US.

Here are a few of the other advantages from my childhood that I did nothing to earn.

1. I am white.
2. I am male.
3. I am heterosexual.
4. I was born into a large, loving, and, most importantly, intact family.
5. My parents stressed education, reading to me from my earliest days and encouraging academic achievement.
6. I was born healthy, did not develop a chronic disease, and had access to decent health care.
7. I was never beaten, neglected or sexually abused as a child.
8. No one in my household was addicted to drugs or alcohol.
9. While there were lean times in our family, we were never food insecure.
10. I grew up in stable, middle class neighborhoods with low crime and decent schools.

Now if I believed in prosperity theology, I would credit my good fortune to my parents' superior faith. I could pray a little harder and throw a few more bucks in

the collection plate and expect the good fortune to continue for my children and, eventually, grandchildren.

But I don't believe that for a second. I don't believe that my faith or my parents faith is superior to that of the family of 12 year old Tamir Rice who was killed by police while playing with a toy gun in a Cleveland park, or the family of Gustavo and Johnny Perez, ages 16 and 8, who were shot dead in a drive by shooting in Trenton two weeks ago, or the families of the young girls in Sri Lanka who are forced to quit school at 14 so they can work in the tea plantations, or the families of the children at El Hogar that many of you have met on St. Matthew's mission trips. I can't believe that a loving God would use the suffering of children as a way to punish parents for insufficient faith.

I don't know why some people win birthplace bingo and others don't. But I do know that today's gospel calls on us to try to even the score, to seek justice. I know that sounds overwhelming, but I am here to tell you that one person doing one good deed can make a difference. We don't have to solve all of the world's problems today, but if we each try to do a little bit more every day, we will move our families, community, nation and world closer to the promised land.

For example, Andrea Melton at Arm in Arm wanted to get more books into the hands of children at their food pantries, knowing that early reading is the key to building a solid academic foundation. She found a source for good used books but needed a place to display them. I volunteered to build some bookcases for her. With just four hours and little bit of scrap lumber, I built custom bookcases for both pantries in Trenton. Now when children come into the pantry with their parents, they can choose books to read there and take home with them instead of staring at their parents' phones. Did Andrea and I solve the education crisis in Trenton? No, but we helped a few kids get a leg up on learning.

In August, the Hopewell Valley Mobile Food Pantry received an email from a mother whose children wanted to run a food drive in their neighborhood.

Alexandra and Charlotte, ages 10 and 7 respectively, wrote letters and distributed them to all of their neighbors. They later went back to their neighbors and collected the food donations. Through their work, they collected 20 boxes and bags of groceries. Did Alexandra and Charlotte solve food insecurity in NJ? No but they made it possible for 10 families to make it through another week without having to worry about having enough to eat.

When George Floyd died at the hands of the Minneapolis police, the nation rose up and said enough. Two young men in Pennington decided that they needed to speak out. Jacob Boyer and Ryan Smith organized a rally and march. When I first heard about it, they told me they expected just their friends and a few family members. Ten days later, because of their efforts and the nation's anguish, they rallied 1,000 people to march for justice. Maya Hill gave an eloquent and moving speech. It was a truly remarkable experience for all who attended, not least of all because it took place in, let's be candid, lily-white Pennington. Did Jacob and Ryan eliminate racial bias in policing? No, but they created a space where people like me could hear directly from people of color about how systemic bias hurts them, and they challenged us all to advocate for reform.

One last example, when this parish ran its stewardship campaign last year, Ophelia, the wardens and the vestry chose to do something different. They decided to ask the parish to fund one college scholarship through Urban Promise. The parish enthusiastically got on board. Mar-Keith is now a sophomore at Rider. I can tell you that his freshman year was not easy. He struggled with issues I never faced in school. Mar-Keith commutes to Rider by NJ Transit buses. Early last fall, Michael Lovaglio, the incredibly dedicated program director at Urban Promise, saw that Mar-Keith was missing a lot of classes. When he talked with Mar-Keith,

he found out that he was missing classes because the bus consistently ran late or did not show at all. After scrounging under the proverbial couch cushions, Michael found a way to pay for Uber for Mar-Keith when the buses did not show. Mar-Keith's grades steadily improved after that and, while he still has struggles, he continues to make good academic progress. Did St. Matthew's solve the national college affordability crisis? No, but you have made higher education possible for Mar-Keith and you have set an example that Urban Promise is asking other parishes to follow.

The First Epistle of John says "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." I believe that it is through acts like these that we abide in God's love and that we get to experience the joy of God among us. It is this belief that gives me great hope when I look upon a world of great inequity.

Barry Switzer, the Head Football Coach at University of Oklahoma and then the Dallas Cowboys said, "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple." I ask you to think about where along the base path you were born. And I challenge you to find the little and big things that you can do

every day to help those that don't have the same advantages as you to move ahead on the bases.

Thank you.