

Giving is really our ultimate legacy

by Mark Pavilons

?If you judge people, you have no time to love them.? - Mother Teresa

Take it from her.

Known world-wide as one of the most compassionate, altruistic humanitarians of all time, she's synonymous with helping the poor and destitute.

It's fair to say there's never been anyone like her, nor will there ever be again.

Her compassion lives on in Christians and non-Christians alike, through hands-on volunteer work, mission work and humanitarian efforts.

My oldest daughter, Lexie, has been a beacon of helping since high school and her mission trips to the Dominican Republic to help migrant Haitian workers. She inspired me to go on one of these trips myself, with my son, while he was still in high school.

It was eye-opening and humbling.

Carrying on with her desire to help, Lexie coaxed me into volunteering at St. Francis Table on Queen Street in Toronto.

I had no idea what to expect, other than I?had a task, a purpose.

Unlike most ?soup kitchens,? St. Francis Table is a restaurant dedicated to providing meals and a welcoming environment for the needy of our community. Patrons receive full restaurant service at the tables. They are presented with a choice of two different meals, as well as soup, hot and cold beverage, followed by dessert.

Half of their patrons are post-psychiatric patients who are unable to work due to their illness.

Many spend most of their meager income on accommodation. About one-quarter of the patrons are senior citizens who come for nourishment and companionship. They provide meals to single parents, refugees, the unemployed, transients, ex-convicts and people living in Toronto's city streets, parks and alleys.

?Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received ? only what you have given: a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage,? said Francis of Assisi.

In keeping with their namesake and Franciscan heritage, they don't turn anyone away. They ask for a small donation (\$1) which helps them retain their sense of dignity.

?A meal at St. Francis Table is more than simply another handout, but an opportunity for the community, advocacy, and friendship.?

St. Francis Table currently serves nine nutritious and balanced meals per week.

We were on the Wednesday dinner shift and this was a first for me.

The service was non-stop for roughly 90 minutes, serving almost 80 individuals.I?was mainly on dish duty and with a focus and speed I didn't know I?had, I scraped, cleaned and put away hundreds of pieces of kitchenware.

The kitchen staff and our team of volunteers were like a well-oiled machine, never missing a beat. This was crazy and yet so cohesive ??udos to everyone.

Since opening its doors in 1987 as the first expression of Capuchin Outreach to the Poor, St. Francis Table is well established with the people of Parkdale, serving an average of 250 meals per day.

St. Francis is known for his ministry to the poor and underprivileged, his care for nature and animals, and founding the Franciscan order. Son of an affluent cloth merchant, St. Francis of Assisi lived in wealth and ease until God used a meeting with a leper to change his heart.

One of the most venerated figures in Christianity, Francis was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in 1228. He is commonly portrayed wearing a brown habit with a rope tied around his waist, featuring three knots symbolizing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

According to Christian tradition, Francis received the stigmata during the apparition of a Seraphic angel in a religious ecstasy in 1224.

?Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible,? he once said.

You don't have to be religious or well-read in scripture to appreciate the actions of men and women from our history. While religion played a big part in their lives, they were motivated by genuine love for their fellow men and women. They wanted to improve the plight of average person. They were pioneers in advocating for human rights.

Our society venerates the likes of the saints, and people like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Junior and Gandhi, for their work and ideology of brotherly love.

Gandhi put it plainly when he said: ?The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.?

Why is that list so short? Where are the Teresas and Martins today?

Our western system is so consumer-oriented and politically centred. We put on faces of tolerance and acceptance and our leaders do the dance in front of the TV cameras.

And yet, we haven't put a dent in homelessness, the housing crisis or food affordability.

Why aren't various levels of government doing more, by helping places like St. Francis Table?

If I?were in charge, I?would levy a nominal donation amount to all households and businesses within 10 kilometres of a homeless shelter, women's shelter, soup kitchen and any underfunded church or social services agency ??he street level ?knights.? A tax with a specific purpose.

I find it weird that just a short distance from Parkdale (near Little Tibet), sits Roncesvalles and Swansea-High Park and their high-end homes ?? huge dichotomy of circumstances.

Taking a break in the back alley of St. Francis, among the tiny lots and neglected fences, I?felt at ease. I was intrigued by this part of society. I?did not judge but just soaked it all in.

These are my fellow humans and I would love to sit and chat with each and every one of them, to learn of their lives, tales, trials and tribulations.

Martin Luther King Jr. said:??Life's most persistent and urgent question is, ?What are you doing for others??"

Well?