

Back Bay Mission Sermon by Carol Merriman - June 24,2018

Good morning! First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me to come talk to you about Back Bay Mission. A little background about me, I'm from River Falls and am a member of First Congregational UCC there. I have been going down to Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, MS since soon after Hurricane Katrina hit there. My church took some youth down and I saw how life changing it was for the kids as well as myself. I was very involved in Habitat for Humanity and this was very similar, so I continued to go down once a year. I was asked if I would be interested in doing some pulpit supply around Wisconsin when the Church Relations person or any other Back Bay staff couldn't make it. I agreed to do that and then that led me to being a member of their Board of Directors. A couple of the staff started bugging me to go down and be a long term volunteer. I just couldn't see myself being gone for extended periods of time, so I kept declining, until this past winter. I went down on January 1, and stayed for 10 weeks. While I was down there, the Church Relations position for the Midwest became available. I decided that would be like a dream job for me, so, I applied and on May 1st, started in that position. The experiences that I had while there is what I want to tell you about today. My position was a rover, because I was familiar with all aspects of what we do I could potentially help out wherever there was a need. My first day as a volunteer, I went over to the Micah Day Center, I knew there was always a need to help out with showers, laundry, making coffee, things like that. You also get an opportunity to meet and get to know the clients that use the center. I met Sarah, the Home at Last case manager. Home at last program is a program that allows Back Bay to house 17 single or family units. They have to have been homeless for a year and

someone in the household has to have a disability, addiction is considered a disability, so, many that have been chronically homeless get into this program with addiction as their disability. We set up the apartment with all the necessities, linens, bedding, towels, pots and pans, dishes, silverware, etc. Then they are basically on their own, we ask them to attend two meetings a month, one is to help with any concerns that are going on in their lives, and one is working on how to be a good, responsible renter, including how to fix things or what to do if something isn't working. Sarah and Back Bay are there to support them in any way they can. Sometimes she takes them to the Social Security office to help them get a disability income, sometimes to go to the grocery store, one gentleman was almost blind, had no income, so, Sarah took him once a month to the grocery store to help him buy his grocery needs. This had been going on the the six or so months that she had been with us and one day they got inside the door of the store, got the cart and he turned to her and said "I got this" she asked what he meant, and he said he wanted to do it on his own he would meet her at the checkout! That was a good day!!

Back Bay Mission has many programs that basically all try to help whoever needs it. There are so many problems people have and until you get to see and work in the trenches of some place like Back bay Mission, you really can't imagine. Back Bay has a woman that works with homeless and low income on health issues. She does workshops on heart problems, diabetes, diet, things that are concerns for them. We started a community garden at the request of our clients, Lowes, donated wood for raised beds, along with the soil. Master gardeners came to show them how to plant, take care of the plants while they grew, then also how to harvest. They had cooking classes on how to use what they grew, it was amazing to see and hear how much people appreciated learning about new foods they had never heard of.

We have a Utility assistance program where people that are behind on their utility bill can call in on Thursday morning and hopefully get an appointment to get money to pay or at least help pay for their bill. There are so many in need that they have a policy where they start taking call at 9 on Thursday morning and stop taking appointments when that weekly designated monies are gone, it usually is gone in less than 45 minutes, so, then they will have to keep trying every week.

We have a program that is called Bridges out of Poverty, this is a program that takes candidates and pairs them with a mentor, works with them for up to two years to get them out of poverty and able to live a sustainable life. We have had a couple of graduates from this program and we are very proud of those that graduated.

We have a veteran's program that works specially with vets. We have six apartments that are only for veterans, and as of now they have been the same ones since the beginning except for one that went to live closer to family.

Back to my experiences at the Micah Day Center and the other things that the case managers do on a day to day basis. I think I can honestly say that there is never a dull moment at the day center, especially, I found out in the winter. It was a unusually cold and wet winter for the gulf coast, so, the day center was usually hoping with people trying to stay warm, get some good food/snacks, get their wet, dirty clothes washed and a warm shower. We offer each client one outfit a month, so, they have to take good care of their clothes, sleeping bags, blankets, etc. We also only wash clothes not jackets or sleeping bags. It had been raining for a number of days and was very cold, at least it was for them, high thirties for days in a row was very difficult

for them. Biloxi, does not have an overnight shelter, so, there are many that are left out in the elements to find shelter of any kind that will keep them dry. I had one young woman that came in one day and said that a raccoon come into her camp in the night and stole her backpack with all her clothes! Pretty sure they were just wet and dirty, and her month wasn't up yet. One other woman who was a regular every day, had two sleeping bags but they were soaking wet, literally could wring them out, and they were full of mud. She wanted to hang them on the fence to hopefully dry out a bit before nightfall. It was heart wrenching to see these day after day. The cold damp environment also started to take a toll on their health. Many were coming down with cods, some with the flu. One gentleman that I had come to like, he was a character, an alcoholic, but, a gentleman and very kind. He had been in prison for 20 years, and just wanted to get by. He got sick, cold like symptoms, but kept getting worse. I thought he might have pneumonia, my mom had just gotten over it just before I came down and the symptoms were similar. We talked him into going to the clinic, Sarah gave him a ride, they saw him but no X-Ray or anything, just gave him some drugs and sent him on his way. A couple of days later he came in just sat in the back, didn't say anything to anyone, didn't want a shower, didn't even get a cup of coffee. I sat and tried to talk to him, he didn't say much and I could tell he was worse, so I tried to talk him into going back to the doctor. He had lost faith in the health care system, saying because he was homeless, they wouldn't do anything. I went back to get Sarah and she was with Kenny, the director of programming. Told them what was going on with Porter, so, Kenny went out and talked to him, he finally gave in. Sarah and I took him to the ER, Sarah gave them her work info so they could call with questions and to have them call her if he needed anything. We hadn't heard from him for a couple of days and started to get nervous

about what had happened to him. No one had seen him and they are all a tight group, everyone takes care of each other and one one had seen him. We called the hospital and found out that he had in fact been admitted, but he wouldn't answer his phone. We tried for two days without any results. We decided to go visit him. Sure enough he was still there, it had been five days!! He was glad to see us! He was in the process of getting discharged, so, Sarah went to talk with the hospital case worker to make sure his medicine would be paid for and I stayed to visit. He told me that the doctor had told him that if he had waited even four or five hours later to come in he probably wouldn't have made it! He was so grateful that I had persevered with him he had no words, just hugs! The doctor was evidently trying to make a point because he would stop in multiple times a day and tell him the same thing. When I went to say good bye to him on my last day there he started to cry when he gave me a hug, telling me again thanks for saving his life, the life of a felon, who most people won't give the time of day!

The title of my sermon was Why Should I Care? I think we all need to care for all the people around us, you never know who it is or what or how you could change their life forever. Homelessness isn't just in Biloxi, MS. It's everywhere and if they aren't homeless they might be on their last dollar or struggling to decide which is more important this week, groceries or medicine. What can you do, you ask? Smile to a stranger on the street, support your food shelf, volunteer wherever needs are. It won't just help the needy, but, it could change your life as well. If you would like to support Back Bay Mission, you can send a check, go down and help out. I know many from here have in the past and have scheduled visits already lined up for this year as well as next. Go to their website thebackbaymission.org and learn more about what we

do. Thanks again for having me! Oh, and I wouldn't feel right if I didn't give a shout out to Moon Beach camp, where I'm doing a long term volunteer gig all summer. If you would like to get in touch with me that is where you can find me!