

THANKS, YOU'RE DOING A GREAT JOB

On Friday morning, I was sitting in Starbucks on the corner of Dundas and Richmond – people watching. There's something very pastoral in observing the world from a corner coffee shop. I have noticed that people here do acknowledge, even strike up a brief conversation. The funniest moment was when a young woman stopped at the window to primp herself in the glass, being totally unaware that she was looking directly at me. I wanted to shout out "you look great", but didn't want to make myself conspicuous.

Imagine if that was you and suddenly a voice called out "you're looking fabulous." If you had been standing on the corner of 14th Street NW in Washington DC, several summers ago, that's exactly what you may have heard: the positive sound of a compliment. *Ding-dong*, a chime cuts through the noise, followed by a pleasant voice saying to a passerby, "You create a brighter future."

Where did *that* come from? Well, there on 14th Street was a bright red-and-white-striped box perched on a platform of bricks, with a speaker at eye level and a grid of ventilation holes in the side. A small sign read, "The Compliment Machine." Set up to work at random intervals, as someone passed by, they would hear one of a one hundred prerecorded compliments.

The Compliment Machine was the brainchild of Tom Greaves, a local visual artist, who constructed it as part of SitesProject D.C., an exhibit by the Washington Project for the Arts.

Greaves originally conceived the piece as a comment on our "saccharine" culture in which, like on a kids' soccer team, everyone is special and unique, nobody can be criticized and everyone gets an award. For Greaves the piece was less a judgment one way or the other and more about perception of our culture.

"On the one hand, I think there are a lot of gratuitous praise and awards and trophies heaped upon people for barely showing up," Greaves said. "On the other side of that coin is the real human need for assurance and reassurance and to be complimented." The nature of the compliment and its effect would be, like most art, dependent on the ear of the beholder.

Tom Minter, a playwright and resident of nearby Q Street who walked past The Compliment Machine regularly, said, "It really makes you feel good. If I'm having a really bad moment while I'm walking down this street, and it penetrates the fog, it's a good thing."

"Everyone deserves to have a compliment paid to them." If we're able to slow down, and if we take the time to listen to positive words, no matter where they come from, they can have an effect on us.

In a world where signs and commercial jingles remind us every day that we're too fat, too poor, too unattractive, too whatever and that true happiness and validation come from the acquisition of stuff. When we hear seemingly nothing but bad news about the world everywhere we turn; in

the midst of all that negativity, we refreshing, indeed it is necessary to hear a positive word about ourselves and our world.

It is all too easy to get caught up in the negative culture of a self centric society, whereas the real power to change begins with our attitude toward others. It could easily be said about the Church that they're good at loving God, they're just not very good at loving each other.

In our gospel reading, Jesus makes a very profound statement about evil. He says, "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within that evil intentions come." That's pretty stiff. Even though the subject begins with personal hygiene, Jesus pushes the envelope, as usual, and implicates our spiritual behaviour. He refuses to scapegoat evil on some legendary spiritual force or being, but lays the responsibility squarely at the feet of humans. In as much, he is saying that evil does not come from the outside to possess us like some alien being, but it is germinated from within.

In effect, when someone profanes or curses someone, or just speaks negatively about them, it comes from the bad that is within them. That includes all those judgmental statements with which we might seek to put someone in their place. Remember this is not a discourse about felons and criminals; here Jesus is referring to religious people.

Being religious doesn't make you good, it just makes you more accountable.

It is so hard to hold your tongue when you get all riled up. Yet, in the mind of Jesus, that's what makes the difference between his followers and the rest of the people. I know how hard it is, when you've invested in a project, and then someone comes along and does it differently, especially when we *know* that our way was the best way.

Over many years I have taken personal retreat in monastic houses and have observed with both respect and sympathy the disciplines of the sisters and brothers. There's a line in the *Sound of Music* where Maria says that every time the Novice Sister corrects her she makes her kiss the ground, so she had now taken to kissing the ground whenever she saw the Novice Sister coming toward her. That's how subservient behaviour was dealt with.

In Florida, I have a good relationship with the Benedictine Abbey at St. Leo University, and made many friends there. One such brother was the guest master at my first visit. Br. Malachi had been restaurant owner in Boston and a successful entrepreneur. He had two attempts at Abbey life and eventually left to head up a national charity. One of his great frustrations was seeing senior monks do things in such archaic and dysfunctional ways. But while he was adapt to far more efficient methods he had to graciously submit to their ways.

The Jesus way of thinking behind this is not to say that the old ways are best, but that our love and appreciation of people has to be greater than what we do and the way we do them.

I've been in London eight weeks now. Sometimes it feels like I've always been here. People ask me what my plans are for the future of MCC London, and had I have been younger or less experienced there may have been several changes already. But I have seen the effect of making

changes a priority over people's needs and feelings and I have seen it to be destructive. I probably did the same in my first church.

In some ways I'm a textbook on how to do church, and that may have been why you called me as pastor. Believe me, this experience may come in handy in the future, but right now I'm listening, watching and learning. I want to hear what you are passionate about, what you are sad or frustrated about. You see I'm not planning on going anywhere. This is not a stepping stone to another MCC job. I'm here because I care about people.

I'm not here to pretend that our 28 year history didn't exist. I'm certainly not here to pretend that the events of the past eighteen months didn't happen. But neither am I here to try to change the past or stir up old hurts. My mantra for ministry has always been the words of Isaiah 61:1 and repeated by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19. Jesus' version was *The Spirit of the Sovereign God is upon me because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of God's favour.*

A church functions best on acts of appreciation and generosity. The scripture consistently calls for us to do acts of justice. Unfortunately in the warring history of religion justice has been seen as punitive; we have misguidedly taken on the role of speaking for God. That is not what God asks of us; rather that we should see all people as equal with ourselves – that is the basis of the gospel. Those reminders – do to others as you would have done to you (Luke 6:31), forgive as you have been forgiven (Matt. 6:14), love others as you love yourself (Matt 19:19, 22:39).

Folks walking by Greaves' Compliment Machine had the option to either believe the complimentary messages about themselves or simply walk on by without acknowledging them at all. You have to wonder, though, about the long-lasting effect on people who did buy into their compliment at first. Ours is not to judge the outcome but to begin the process with a compliment, a praise, and a thank you.