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Hospitality as Companionship and Justice

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Concrete Pillow

December 22, 2011

It is hard, cold and unforgiving
All morning, day and night
Many think I chose this life for me
They say it's not their fight.

Sometimes the hunger really sucks
But I do have my pride
I won't beg, so if I must
In the garbage I will dive.

My one pair of stockings
are so filthy and so stiff
I try to wash them in the public fountain
Since I won't likely get new ones as a gift.

I while away the hours
I just try to get through each day
I wish there was a job for me
To earn some honest pay.

I watch the traffic going by
Busy people to and fro
It is though I am not even here
No one will say hello.

It is now time to lay down to sleep
I pray the Lord, my soul will keep
And whether or not I die before I wake
All homelessness in this world, please eradicate.

(from <http://www.friendtothehomeless.org/homeless-poetry> - poets name not given)

My work has not been in direct ministry to people who are homeless but instead I have been involved in writing, teaching, and organizing to do the work of justice. . .to end homelessness as this homeless poet asks us to do. Organizing for justice through structural change (e.g. affordable housing, good work for all, universal healthcare, no

wars, etc.) is of paramount importance. It is our fight. The problem of homelessness is less about the individuals who find themselves without a place to sleep and more about our collective identity as a people and a society. Organizing for justice, however, is an on-going process with no end in sight. In the meantime we must give attention to the individuals who are without a home. The poet writes, “It is though I am not even here No one will say hello.”

In Leviticus 25: 35 it says “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens.” Should we interpret “kin” as only referring to family members? When the Bible refers to the “kingdom of God,” it is not referring to a palace up in heaven, but rather to the unity of kin on this earth – the “kin-dom” of God – that we should all be in caring, loving and just relationships with one another and God. What if we actually got to know people who are homeless, who are on the streets, or in transitional housing, or even precariously housed? What if we said hello rather than walking by trying not to notice? What if we actually listened to their stories?

The stories we hear will show us is that each case of homelessness is a complex story embedded in the life of a particular human being. We are likely to find that someone we had labeled as lazy, dirty, or mentally unstable, is so much more than outward appearances suggest. . .but we won’t know this until we say hello and listen to the stories of different individuals. Understanding someone’s story will illuminate the essential things we have in common despite our differences. We are all a mix of numerous identities with multiple patterns and dimensions that make up who we are, yet we are also all humans yearning for love and connectedness. Part of our humanness is

that we all have vulnerabilities that can sometimes submerge our core loving and generous selves that seek to be in right relationship with others (Rennebohm, 52). Despite our failings the Holy Spirit resides in each of us. Recognizing this in each person is the beginning circle of care, laying the foundation for a just and compassionate world where all are included and cherished.

Listening attentively to stories will also illustrate that homelessness is not caused simply by an individual's actions – good or bad – but is the result of the ways we structure our society. In my conversations with people who have been chronically homeless, I have found that the majority of them grew up in poverty and many had suffered some sort of trauma, whether verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse, violence in war, or other loss.

Many people assume that our reality of people living on the street and in poverty is just the way things are in our society and not something that can really change. As Americans we have been socialized to accept a dominant cultural worldview that promotes individual initiative, enterprise, and achieving the American Dream, but a society founded on such a competitive worldview where each person is responsible for him or herself privileges the winners and marginalizes the losers.

We all need a place to call home – some sense of rootedness seems to be a need of the human soul. Humans need a sense of home if their identities are not to be dispersed and fragmented – we need a place we can pass through the stages of life, where we can belong to a community, where we can have a relationship with the natural elements, and where we have access to the sacred, however understood. The word “home” evokes warmth, safety, rest, nourishment, and direction. “Home is where the heart is” “There’s

no place like home” “Home is a person’s castle”; “Mi casa es su casa.” Even computer boards have a “home” key. Frequent homelessness makes it difficult for people to make sustainable connections with others, let alone become connected to a particular geographical space.

Yet, even without a home, people will seek both space and community, whether the space is a guarded sleeping spot under a bridge, or whether the community is homeless youth hanging out together. When I was in seminary in Berkeley there was a man, Tom, who hung out on a street corner a couple blocks from my house. After seminary I lived abroad for two years, then came back for graduate school to where I lived previously. Tom was still on the street corner, and although there were times when he had been drinking (he was a mellow drunk), most times he was personable. I remember one the day in October when he said to me “Meet my friend Jack” and pointed to a carved pumpkin on the sidewalk – “Jack O’Lantern is his name!” Tom might have been homeless, but he still had a geographical space. His space, however, did not protect him from the elements (rain, cold weather, and such), it did not afford him any privacy, and it also did not keep him safe from harassment (from the police for panhandling/loitering or from people who might hurt homeless people, often young men). In other words, his space was not a “home.” I know the men and women who we are remembering today also had stories and yearned to feel at home, to be connected in some way to others, to community.

One of our country’s most famous servant leaders, Martin Luther King, argued for a “beloved community,” a not yet, but future ideal based on solidarity of the human family. In several of his speeches, he said: “We are tied together in the single garment of

destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”¹ His vision of the beloved community is about the interrelatedness of all people, and for King, this vision entails that an “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” In other words, we cannot claim to be just when we allow one percent of our population to be without a home – the threads of our garment are unraveling and soon the garment will completely disintegrate. King’s vision of a beloved community is grounded in Jesus’ attitudes and behaviors that always pointed toward the building of new relationships and our responsibilities to one another, especially those on the underside. Jesus always sought to empower people, so although giving money to people on the street and offering a temporary place to sleep is often needed and the compassionate action in the face of suffering, in the long run it will not empower people. Instead, justice is called for, but how are we to understand justice?

In the scriptures of the Old Testament, God promised the people of Israel rootedness, literally to a specific place, and symbolically to the joy and well-being of being rooted and embodied people connected to God. In biblical times, land could be equated to a home as people could not live without land to cultivate. When the people of Israel were homeless, they learned that God provides unexpected sustaining resources to the landless. God fed the people of Israel with bread raining down from heaven, and God quenched their thirst by instructing Moses to strike the rock at Horeb so that water might come out for all to drink. They lived by God’s grace. And God did keep God’s covenant and gave the people land.

Once the people had “land,” however, they were tempted to forget the history of barrenness and slavery and turn gifted land into managed land, living apart from covenant with God. Also in Leviticus it says “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land

is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” But the people forgot that their possession of land was a gift and they were but tenants on the land. Instead, they believed that they earned it on their own. They then did all they could to protect “their” land (e.g. property) against those who had none (e.g. NIMBY), and even found ways to extract property from others, through debt schemes, low wages, and more. Those of us who are called, through our religious traditions or through other motivations, to be servants in some shape or form, cannot ignore this responsibility of justice and forget that the land, both literally as a home, and symbolically as connection to God and others, is a gift from God. Yet, how should we take that gift of rootedness and connection, and make it a reality for all?

The easiest way is the simplest: treating each person we meet – no matter how disheveled or dirty – as someone who has a spark of divinity within. This means not turning away and ignoring the person, but saying hello and seeing the real person. . .not defining the person by his or her homelessness. Craig Rennebohm, who ministers to the homeless in Seattle, talks about a time when he was suffering from deep depression and someone accompanied him – the person cared for Craig’s soul, his deepest identity, his wholeness as a person, the source, roots, and ultimate horizon of who he was as a human being.

The harder way to share our gift of rootedness and connection is to work with others to address the root causes of homelessness and become a society that does not assume homelessness is inevitable. It means promoting better pay and organizing for affordable housing – no one should be working full-time and unable to afford housing. It means advocating for peaceful conflict resolution between countries, not war – no one

should be homeless because they are suffering from war-induced post-traumatic stress disorder. It means fighting the societal epidemic of spousal and child abuse – no one should be homeless because they are running away from an abusive spouse or parent. It means resisting all forms of oppression that lower people’s self-esteem and exclude people from full participation in society – no one should lack a home, either physically or symbolically, because they have been repeatedly devalued in some shape or form.

These paths to making rootedness a reality call us to transform structures, not simply be good Samaritans to those who cross our paths. As Martin Luther King once said, we must see that the “whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway.” In other words, true compassion goes beyond simple charity. In Martin Luther King’s words again: “the edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring.” The real question is whether we will we take the call to be servants seriously, by accepting God’s gift of rootedness and connection, and seeking to make sure that all people have a home in the beloved community, a home with a soft pillow, not one of concrete. We will remember those who have passed away this year, who did die before they woke, by committing to make the problem of homelessness our fight.

ⁱ The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., ed. James M. Washington, “A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 254.