

The Many Faces of Homelessness

Numbers 12: 1-9

John 9: 1-12

October 20, 2013: Homelessness Ministry Sunday

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I. Introduction

One of the high points of Annual Conference this year, and that's not a phrase you'll hear me use a lot, was that at one of the dinners, I had an opportunity to hear a United Methodist pastor from Texas speak. Her name was Lorenza Smith, and she had started to feel a call from God to engage in ministry with the homeless. She chose to do that in a fairly unusual way which is that she asked the Bishop of the Texas Conference to appoint her to a ministry on the street, and she waived any right to a salary, gave up her medical benefits, sold everything that she had except what she could carry in a backpack and started living on the street as a homeless person, and she's been doing that now for the last couple of years. The one concession that she made to her Bishop was that she agreed to let the Annual Conference buy her an iPhone so that she could document some of her journey on the streets, and also so that the Conference could contact her if they felt like they needed to.

It was a very powerful testimony as she shared some of the pictures that she had taken with her iPhone of the folks that she had lived with for the last several years and this wonderful collage of faces, of homeless veterans and women living with their children and teenagers fleeing abusive households, and just this amazing mix of people. And just listening to her tell those stories and as she spoke of each one by

name and some friends, some that never became friends, but people that she got to know.

And after her sharing was over, there was a time for questions and answers, and what was interesting was there were all sort of the obligatory questions about what led her to make this career choice, but then people started asking her questions about homelessness and now that she had been on the street for all this amount of time, what were her insights in terms of policies and programs that would be helpful, and the conversation moved almost immediately to a kind of theoretical level. And she was very clear the first time that someone asked a question about policy that she didn't have any answers to homelessness. She was not on the street to collect data. She felt a call to a ministry of presence, to be with folks who were suffering homelessness. She said, "There may come a point in my journey where I've developed some ideas that we can then talk about, but," she said, "right now, I'm just being present."

And what was interesting then was having said that pretty clearly, I thought, people kept coming back to policy questions, "Talk to us about programs that could be helpful. Talk to us about the church's response," and over and over again, Lorenza took the conversation back to how we engage people.

II. Jesus and the Blind Beggar

Well, that got me thinking about this wonderful gospel lesson from John, because the disciples do exactly the same thing. And you've got to love the fact -- because the disciples, they're us, right? I mean, this is how we respond to problems. So, the disciples and Jesus are walking down the street and they see a homeless

beggar who has been blind from birth. They don't engage the beggar at all. They turn it into a theological conversation and say to Jesus, "Now, who sinned? Was it this man or was it his parents? Help us to understand the theology of suffering." And we all do that, right? I mean, it's always easier to deal with the kind of theoretical, with the theological, with the policy statement than to engage the person.

We do this all the time. How often have you heard someone talking about someone who has been diagnosed with lung cancer and then they'll say, "Oh, but they smoked their whole life," or someone got into an accident, "But they had been driving too fast," or "I saw this homeless guy the other day and he clearly had been drinking."

We love to find a reason for why people end up in tragic situations. In part, I think because that makes it safe for us. If we can figure out why a problem happened, then we can figure out why it won't happen to me, right? And the disciples are exactly this way. The disciples see a blind beggar and their immediate response is, "Let's figure out who is to blame for this man's blindness," because that keeps the whole situation at arm's length, it makes a safer space for us.

And Jesus, of course, does exactly the opposite. He doesn't let them make it into a theological issue. He makes it an opportunity for engagement. And instead of talking about the blind man sitting at their feet, Jesus turns and talks to the blind man and makes a mud paste and puts it on his eyes and sends him to a pool to wash and to be healed. And what is interesting as the story progresses, of course, is that as soon as the blind man ceases to be blind and ceases to be a beggar, all of a sudden, the people in the community start to notice and engage him. So, instead of being that

blind guy begging at the gate, they start talking to him, “Hey, how did you get healed? How did this occur?”

Jesus’ willingness to see him, to engage him, all of a sudden invites everybody else to start treating him not as an object but as a subject, not as someone at a distance but as someone who can be engaged. And Jesus says very pointedly to the disciples that our work is to share the light while it is still daytime. In other words, it’s not just Jesus’ call to engage the blind beggar, to heal the sickness in front of him. It’s all of our call. We are called to be servants and witnesses to the light.

And it sort of tickles me that all of the early manuscripts of the New Testament have this as a first-person plural, “We are called to do this.” Some of the later manuscripts have it as a first-person singular, “It is my role to do this.” And that’s a lot more comfortable, isn’t it, if it is Jesus’ call. I have in my mind a picture of a medieval manuscript copyist who’s copying the story and comes across this phrase where Jesus said, “It’s our call to witness to the light,” and thinking, “Oh, that must be a mistake. This is what Jesus is doing so let me correct that and make it I.” But the earliest manuscripts are all crystal clear that this is a “we,” that we are called to engage the people who are suffering around us in the exact same way that Jesus has done.

Jesus, through his engagement, through his willingness to see this person and engage them face to face, has brought them into the community. Someone who was an outcast, someone who was ostracized, someone who was outside of the acceptable people, and Jesus has brought them in.

III. The Challenge to Moses

We see a very similar dynamic in the story from Numbers about Moses. The Israelites, of course, are always grumbling in this journey through the desert, but the cause for this grumbling in today's lesson right from the beginning is Moses had married a Cushite woman. Now, the Cushites are people who lived slightly to the south of Egypt in what is now modern-day Ethiopia. So, Moses has married someone who is a woman of color, she is outside of the Israelite community and that has bent some noses out of shape. And so, they start to challenge Moses' leadership because Moses clearly "violated the law of our cultural integrity.": And I love this phrase too, that God invites Moses and Aaron and Miriam to the tent of meeting. Well, you know, if you're Aaron and Miriam, you've got to be nervous. You've been badmouthing Moses and God says, "Come out and let's have a conversation." And God says, "Moses sees me face to face. Everybody else who knows something about me knows it through a dream, through a prophecy, through the words of Scripture. Moses knows me because he looks me in the eye." The phrase here is, "Moses speaks to me mouth to mouth," in Hebrew, that there's this direct connection. And the implicit message there is because Moses sees me face to face, Moses sees everybody face to face, that this Cushite woman is not just somebody who we don't want as part of our community, that now she is a sacred child of God because Moses has seen her. And I wonder a little bit if maybe part of the message there is that because Moses sees the outcast face to face, that's what gives Moses the ability to see God face to face.

IV. From Disciple to Blind Man

So, we have here in these wonderful passages an invitation to move beyond the place that is our comfort zone, which is to talk about policies, to talk about programs, and an invitation to engage a neighbor who we might not know. We have this incredible blessing in our church of having two shelters and a wealth of outreach and hunger ministries that allow us to engage our homeless neighbors face to face, to not talk about what caused homelessness, to not figure out what the right program to solve homelessness is, but an invitation to relationship, to engage the people around us.

I am so grateful that over the 20-plus years that Metropolitan has been engaged in this ministry, we have not outsourced our shelters. We have not sent them someplace else for us to run and to support. We have placed our shelters right inside the buildings of our churches so that homelessness is never something out there. It's part of who we are, and we have in that process committed ourselves to making sure that we always have the opportunity to engage the people that we are serving face to face so that they're not just numbers and they're not just statistics and they're not just problems to be solved. They're sacred children of God. And I'm so grateful that we have made that a commitment of our church, and I think that that has shaped us in profoundly powerful ways over the course of the life of our community. So, I want to thank you for that and thank all of you who have been engaged in that piece of our ministry over the years.

I want to invite those of you who haven't to take advantage of the incredible gift that we have in this community of faith, to broaden who we are as a community, to engage people who might not look like us or have the same background as us and to acknowledge that we are all brothers and sisters together. And whether you do that by

spending the night in the shelter as one of the overnight volunteers, bringing a meal and having a meal with the guys that are now there -- we just opened up so we've got three wonderful new residents of Metro House -- that I would love to have us engage and invite into our community, whether it's taking the food out on the vans with the Grate Patrol and meeting the guys and women and children who are receiving the food that we prepare or whether it's just inviting the guy outside the Metro to come and have breakfast with you. You have an opportunity to engage a child of God face to face, and that will change how we engage homelessness more profoundly than any of the policy decisions that we will make.

V. Conclusion

After hearing Lorenza Smith give her testimony at the Annual Conference, I somewhat awkwardly went back to my very plush room in the Marriott Hotel where we were all staying and the coordinators of that night's dinner took Reverend Smith to a nearby park where she was going to continue her ministry, sleeping on a park bench. Most of us will never have the kind of call that Lorenza has, but we are all blessed here with the opportunity to engage those who are most vulnerable and most in need of face to face relationship, in relationships that will be transformative for us and for them as we model what it looks like to be the body of Christ. And we do that knowing that as our eyes become clear, we are enabled then to see the face of God in those around us. Our role in the gospel story moves, as John tells it, from being a disciple to being the blind man, that once we wipe the mud off of our eyes, we get the opportunity to see Jesus in the face of those whom we serve. Amen.

I have a couple of, they're not announcements, but a couple of follow-ups to this that we're going to have a witness from one of our Metro House residents who is now living a wonderful and stable life with a job and an apartment. We also, in our ministry over the last couple of years, had been very blessed by getting a chance to work with the Sasha Bruce Youth Network. And every year, the serving team identifies a partner of ours who is given, is awarded, our Tyler Rusch Award to end homelessness, and the Sasha Bruce Youth Network is a recipient of that award this morning. We want to celebrate the very powerful work that Sasha Bruce has done with homeless youth around our city.

I also want to say just in a moment of celebration that because of the work of Sasha Bruce and our partners at Community Council for the Homeless at Friendship Place and the Washington Interfaith Network and many of our serving team here, we were able to persuade the city to step back just this week from its decision to not make shelter space available to homeless youth who are below the age of 18. The city was trying to essentially limit shelter access to those who are above 18, and we have encouraged them and they have responded to step back from that decision, to make shelter space available to homeless youth which is a tremendous achievement on the part of our WIN team and our partners.

I also want to celebrate the fact that many of you have been involved in our work with Brighter Day in encouraging the city to rehabilitate Parkway Overlook as a residential, affordable housing community, 266 units, and the mayor has publicly committed himself within the last month to doing that as well. So, we've had some

really exciting developments in our work around making sure homeless folks have a place to stay.