

“Affordable Housing”

Isaiah 58:1-8; Matthew 7:21-28

Homeless and Affordable Housing Sunday

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I am grateful for the opportunity to preach again, and I am especially grateful to be assigned Homelessness and Affordable Housing Sunday. This church has occasionally taken my breath away with its generous responses in outreach to the poor, needy, friendless and sick within the church, in the community and in the world, and especially in Haiti. That is important to what I do as Outreach chair, and it feeds my spirit as a child of God. My job today is not to berate you with a message to get busy and get the job done, because we are – in our time – in God’s time. I thank God for that. It is not something to be taken for granted. I know it is a spiritual gift. Not every church has it. Today I want to explore some more detailed aspects of poverty, homelessness and our reaction to those. I hope it will help you understand – to some extent your own feelings – but more generally the feelings and actions of others.

Let’s take a look at the beginnings of poverty. There are about 2,000 verses in the Bible about the poor. If I jump around from book to book with my citations here, I am following parts of that 2,000 verse theme.

In Deuteronomy 15, God says ‘there will be no poor among you’ because of the land he is providing to the people of Israel, but after a few more verses, God is speaking of how to treat the poor. Even as God was providing, he knew some would take advantage, some would not follow the law, and because of innate greed and cruelty, the rich would make the poor. While there are many protections and benefits demanded by God for the poor, there was nothing especially blessed about being poor. It was a sorry state to be in, but a person might be able to escape it through hard work, and then there was the year of jubilee, which would make everything come out right...but I am not sure how well that was actually observed. Even then, exorbitant taxes took land; those without land could not eat. Without regulation, the poor were exploited further. Isaiah (5:8) was among the prophets to condemn the accumulation of lands. These large estates were used to grow export crops; wine and olive oil rather than foodstuffs. We see that Jesus carried on this message. Jesus was

poor, and he preached his first sermon about the poor relying on Isaiah. “Blessed are you who are poor,” he said, “For yours is the kingdom of God.”

Here in our provisional kingdom of God, we still have poverty and homelessness. On any given night in America, between 700,000 and two million people are homeless, (estimates of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty). We know here among us, there about 3,000 homeless on the Peninsula; another 900 in Portsmouth; and a bunch more on Southside and in Richmond.

What causes homelessness today? More particularly what has caused the rise in homelessness over the last 20-25 years? A growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty, reports the National Coalition for the Homeless in June of 2008.

Who are these people? Externally, they are men, women, children; black, brown, yellow, red, and white and yes – some blue with the cold or with advanced pulmonary diseases.

A higher percentage of homeless are veterans in proportion to the general population. We thought that when the asylums and institutions dumped their inhabitants decades ago, those people would swell the ranks of the homeless. Looking at today’s makeup, some studies show a lower percentage of mentally disturbed people in the ranks of the homeless. However, being on the streets tends to make people mentally disturbed. So the numbers don’t always line up the same in this area. What we see depends on a study’s focus.

Nationally, approximately half of all homeless women and children are fleeing from domestic violence (Zorza, 1991; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2001).

Who are these people? They are the children of God, just like you and me.

You and me - we are Americans. We take care of the down-trodden, the disadvantaged, the weak... We are the home of the brave and the land of the free.

How are we dealing with homeless people? In some places they pass laws against their activities and they enforce other laws selectively against the homeless. City ordinances frequently serve as a prominent tool to criminalize homelessness. Of the 224 cities surveyed for the National Coalition for the Homeless biennial 2008 report:

- 28% prohibit “camping” in particular public places in the city and 16% had city-wide prohibitions on “camping.”
- 27% prohibit sitting/lying in certain public places.
- 39% prohibit loitering in particular public areas and 16% prohibit loitering city-wide.
- 43% prohibit begging in particular public places; 45% prohibit aggressive panhandling and 21% have city-wide prohibitions on begging.

The trend of criminalizing homelessness appears to be growing. Of the 67 cities surveyed in a 2002 joint agency report and again in this report:

- There is a 12% increase in laws prohibiting begging in certain public places and an 18% increase in laws that prohibit aggressive panhandling.
- There is a 14% increase in laws prohibiting sitting or lying in certain public spaces.
- There is a 3% increase in laws prohibiting loitering, loafing or vagrancy.

Another trend documented is increased city efforts to target homeless persons indirectly by placing restrictions on providers serving food to poor and homeless persons in public spaces. Bear in mind it takes additional money to administer and enforce these laws or codes. These people often upset us – they are threatening, they are dirty, there are many reasons given. It gave me a little comfort to note that in the twenty meanest cities listed in that report, there are none from Virginia.

Mike Yankoski and his friend Sam spent five months living homeless in six cities. You can read about this in *Under the Overpass* (Yankoski, 2005).

Yankoski played his guitar for donations, but often it did not provide for food. After four hours of playing guitar one day, they ended up with \$1.18. Some youth asked them for a donation to buy Girls and Boys Club uniforms. Yankoski offered them the \$1.18. One boy said, “Hey, you guys don’t have any money at all, do you?” He pulled \$1.25 out of his pocket and said, “Don’t worry, man, I got you covered.”

“It makes a difference,” Yankoski said, “when someone actually notices you.”

Acts of compassion can fill the heart of the giver; they definitely fill the heart of the recipient, and sometimes of people watching.

The New Testament does not witness to any special access to God given to the poor, or any extra spirituality. Neither should poverty be ignored nor its existence accepted. We see the disciples selling their possessions to provide for the poor. A tangible sign

by which the wealthy can show their repentance is through their distribution of goods to people who are needy. But the world suffers under the oppression of evil, and evil will not meet final defeat – inevitable, complete and final defeat until the end of the age. Even so, nothing we do, no sacrifice to end injustice and oppression, will be in vain.

In this church, we deal with the homeless directly through PORT, our winter homeless shelter, through Habitat for Humanity, through our outreaches to Paul's Mobile Home Estates, and less directly through DUCO, LINK, and other charitable organizations.

Housing for the homeless becomes visible for a short time, through PORT, or in very limited quantities, through Habitat Houses. What about the others? What about the others who are running from neighborhood watch teams? The ones who leave their waste in public areas because we could not skip a light pole on a baseball field to build and maintain half a dozen public restrooms. While individual acts of compassion are important, maybe there is a better way to reduce the problem.

Malcolm Gladwell is an engaging writer who authored the best sellers, *Tipping Point*, and *Blink*. *Tipping Point* describes how a small change in the environment can have a radical change in the spread of a disease, for example. *Blink* addresses our tendency to make instantaneous decisions about people. Mr. Gladwell also writes articles for the *New Yorker*. One of those articles is about a homeless man, called Million Dollar Murray (New Yorker, 2006). I do not have the time to focus on all of the turns this story takes, but I would highly recommend you read it. Murray was a big ex-Marine in Reno. He was a drunk. But he was also a good man who attracted friends. He had a jovial manner, which surfaced even in the middle of a raging, drunken tirade against the police. He saved one of his regular hospital nurses from attack by another indigent. In fact, each time Murray went into a program, he stayed sober, he worked hard, he was frugal. Once he saved \$6,000. But the programs always ended. On the streets, that \$6,000 evaporated in a week. A policeman caught a glimpse of one of Murray's hospital bills. Astounded, he and other cops and some of the nurses started figuring up his total tab from the city of Reno.

You see when homeless people seek treatment for early-stage diseases, they are often ignored or released without treatment until finally they are discovered in a snow bank, in dire straights. Then they are admitted, at higher costs, with more expensive

medicines and treatments requiring expensive hospital bed time. After looking at Murray's record, these people looked at other chronic homeless persons and found the same pattern. To make a long story short, when Murray died, his friends figured he had cost the city a million dollars in services. They also figured that it would have cost about \$45,000 a year to house Murray and keep him in a program, and provide him needed services.

Studies of homeless in Philadelphia and other cities showed most people spent one night homeless, the next most two nights. When you are out on the streets, your main thought is getting off the streets, and making sure you will never be there again. There is a smattering of people who are on the streets through various periods until we get up to three months. Then we find about 10% of the homeless in that group. The final 10% are the chronically homeless. That final block is the group that consumes most of the costs of care for the homeless.

Analysis after analysis shows it is cheaper to provide the group of consistently homeless with apartments or houses. Then the question comes up, "Are they responsible enough?" One fellow in St Louis had a dozen of his friends over for a drunken blow-out, trashed his apartment, knocked out all of the windows, that sort of thing. Kick him out? No, they put him in another apartment, because that is cheaper in the long run. Wait a minute, if we have a single mother whose housing time runs out, we don't give her another apartment. No, it is not just, it is not earned, it is merely a cold, economic solution to reducing the financial costs of homelessness. Once you have removed the most persistently homeless from the shelter programs, more beds and services are freed to serve the shorter term homeless. It seems to be a reasonable solution, because communities are turning from continuum of care models to housing first models. Locally, we have been using a continuum of care model, by the way. Although some populations are directed toward housing first, there is just not enough money or housing to make housing first broadly feasible on the peninsula.

We already were troubled by putting out port-a-potties for people who did not earn them, and now I want to give them free housing! What kind of solution is this? It just isn't fair. One thing to consider is that a cot in a shelter is not a home. You don't get mail there, counselors will not visit there, you can't even leave your medicine there. Eighteen inches of separation is not exactly privacy. When you sleep in an apartment rather than on the street, your body can more easily fight off colds and minor

sickness, rather than having them degenerate into pneumonia and a \$3,000 trip to the emergency room.

I am glad there seems to be a more effective solution gaining momentum in some places, but I am more concerned about what causes us to feel that we are wronged somehow by both the existence of homeless people and an apparently sound program of making the homeless problem more affordable. What is it that is just not right?

Barbara Brown Taylor draws a relevant lesson for us from the story of Jonah. After his fish “issue,” Jonah goes to Ninevah, provides his message from God and everyone from the King on down tears their clothes and repents. And how does Jonah feel? Wronged!

“We are such bookkeepers,” Taylor says, “and God is not....when the people we judge most harshly receive the mercy of God, then it becomes painfully clear that there is something inherently unfair in the notion of grace. God does not keep track of things the way we do. God does not give any of us what we deserve, but what we need,” and it is very hard to trust God’s judgment. Those of us who get offended by the divine distribution of grace have forgotten who we are. We think we are the more diligent, sober workers who showed up at dawn, who deserve more pay than those who came to work at 4 PM. That is the way we see it, and we make the mistake of thinking that is the way God sees it, too. Well maybe God’s view is that we are all a mess. Taylor says, “Some of us clean up better than others and some of us have learned to manage our fears by doing good works, but when you come right down to it, we are all Ninevites and” last minute workers. That is probably not the way God puts it. “From where God sits, I expect we look more like hurt, sick, lost children, all of us in deep need of mercy.”

Maybe it is even worse that the poor remind us that Christ wants us to keep people out of those conditions. Maybe that is why some people concentrate on the legalistic aspects of religion, sort of like the Pharisees did in Jesus’ time. Listen to Matthew quote Jesus one more time, will you? “Love your God with all of your heart, and mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. On these depend all of the laws and all of the prophets.”

So I hope we will continue to love our neighbors through programs like PORT and Habitat for Humanity, despite our frustrations, and I pray God grants us better solutions to ease the pains of more of our brothers and sisters. This is our spiritual

worship. This is how we build our houses on the rock. Jesus made this housing affordable to us.

Would you join with me in prayer?

Lord, In Micah 6:8 you tell us what you require of us. “Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.” May we follow in God's righteous path that all might be blessed with prosperity and peace, now and in the hereafter. Amen.