

Proper 21, Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Bishop Geralynn Wolf,
the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island,
chose to spend her sabbatical a few years back
in a most unusual way.

Most clergy, on their sabbaticals,
will use the time to study or travel.
Bishop Wolf chose to spend a month living on the streets,
among the homeless.

She didn't take many comforts with her.
Not her car. Not her cell phone.
Certainly not her purple bishop's shirt.
She had three pairs of socks,
One change of long underwear,
Two changes of regular underwear,
Some toiletries,
And that's it.
In her pocket, she had a journal that she kept,
And a small Bible, in very tiny print.

Bishop Wolf thought it was important to see for herself, first-hand,
What the realities of life are
For people who must live on the streets.

She later said,
"I think my deep sadness came
when I realized how fine some of these people are,
many of them are.
If you can get beyond some of the cursing and acting out,
you see people who really do have dreams and hopes,
values, who are trying to make it,
who have been put down many times,
whose formal education maybe is limited."

“In the US, we like to think that you can always pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” she said.

“But not everybody gets those bootstraps. Some don’t even have the boots.”

Bishop Wolf wrote about her experiences in her book, “Down and Out in Providence: Memoir of a Homeless Bishop.” I commend the book to you all. It makes for devastating reading. Especially difficult to read are her accounts Of her visits to churches.

She visited a number of churches during her month on the streets, Including some Episcopal churches. No one recognized her. How could they, When so often, people wouldn’t even look at her. In her homelessness, she became virtually invisible, The sort of person it’s easy to pass by And never give a second thought to.

But Bishop Wolf did not harshly judge those who, Had they known who she was, Would have been extremely aware of her And attentive to her needs. “I join those who have not looked,” she says. “Who also are unaware of my neighbor, Who close my wallet when I should open it. It’s not that I’m immune from this.” She said that her time on the street helped to open her eyes. But, she added, “It’s a lifetime journey living into those passages of scripture that hold the poor and those who mourn in such honor and esteem.”

Each of our Scripture passages today reminds us that those in need are our responsibility. God expects us to care for the poor. It’s all through the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Every prophet, from the Old Testament

Right on up to our 21st century prophets such as William Barber,
 They all remind the people
 that the poor are our neighbors
 and that none of them should ever have to beg for the crumbs
 that fall from our tables.

Isn't that image from the gospel heart breaking?
 We can't imagine that a rich man would be so callous
 as to ignore poor Lazarus
 who lay by the gate of his house.
 He was so poor and so sick
 that we're told dogs would come and lick his sores.

Lazarus had a horrid and probably frightening existence,
 and still, the rich man ignored him.
 Jesus tells this story to point out that some of the Pharisees
 were ignoring the needs of their own people
 just like the rich man.

In Jesus' day, the assumption was that a man like Lazarus
 Turned out that way because of his or his parents' sin.
 In our day, don't we also usually assume
 That the homeless, the poor, the down and out,
 Got that way because of their "sin" of laziness
 or poor judgment
 or that they're scamming us?

We often hear people say
 that they don't give a street person any money
 because he or she will spend it on alcohol or drugs.
 And yes, sometimes they do.
 But many times they don't.

When we make assumptions –
 Usually negative assumptions –
 About WHY another person is in need,
 How are we any better
 Than those 1st century Pharisees
 Or the rich man in our gospel story today?

Really, what is most helpful
Is not to ignore, but to see.
And to listen.
To engage others in conversation,
To find out what their needs are,
And what might have led them into their current circumstances.
Often, we will find that their *greatest* need
Is, in fact, to be listened to,
To have another human being
Offer them a few minutes of their time and attention.
If you've ever worked in a shelter or gone to St. Clare's,
you know that's the truth.

Those of you who read Gleanings this week
Know of my concern
About how best to serve
The increasing numbers of people in need
Who show up here at St. James nearly every day.

Some come seeking food.
Some come seeking money.
Some just need somewhere to rest for awhile,
Someone to sit with them and pray with them.
And some come here to sleep,
Whether it's on our sidewalk
Or behind our bushes,
Or in their car parked in our parking lot.

I believe we need to have a conversation, as a parish,
About how best to serve
These Lazaruses at our gate.
How can we be thoughtful and intentional in our response,
Opening our hearts to those in need,
Even while we acknowledge certain boundaries.
Not chasms between us and them.
But guidelines that make our interactions
Safe and meaningful and proper.

I would like to see us set up a task force
To explore our options.

To see what other churches are doing.
To see what resources already exist nearby.
To see how we can collaborate with other organizations.
I want to listen to all concerns,
And think outside the box as well as in.

Carol Cozart has agreed to chair this task force.
But this is not a job for one person,
Or even for three or four people.
This will take the effort of a lot of people.
I want to put this challenge before each of you.
Will you help us as a church
to come up with a reasoned, thoughtful, faithful response
to this challenge that has been set before us.

And let me just say here
That I understand that not everyone
has extra money to be giving away.
I don't believe God expects us
to put ourselves or our families in danger
Because we give others our last bit of money.

But there are many ways to share.
Acknowledging the humanity of another is one way;
listening, volunteering –
these are all ways of sharing with those in need.

First Timothy gives us another.
The author reminds us about the danger of excesses.
Our culture unfortunately encourages us
to amass much more than we need, doesn't it?
If we're honest, we might have more to share
if we were more content with having enough.

Instead, let us be rich in good works,
So that we may take hold of the life
That really is life.
To quote from that great Anglican priest John Wesley:
"Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,

In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

Amen.