

“ANGELS IN DISGUISE” SERMON

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First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

Good morning, and thank you for the privilege of speaking to you today. I’ve been a visitor to your congregation twice before and I feel very much at home here. I’m a member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Fe, so we are of the same tribe.

In January 2014, I began spending half a day a week volunteering as a chaplain at Pete’s Place, the interfaith homeless shelter in Santa Fe, where I live. Sometimes the guests, as we call them, ask me to pray for them, or to hear their confessions, or to talk about God. But most of the time, I just listen. I listen to their personal problems, their political opinions, their life stories, their hopes, their fears, their rage.

I have worked as a hospice and hospital chaplain in the past, but this listening is different. These people are not going home once they recover from their surgery, nor are they being released from their suffering through death. The homeless people I listen to will experience the same suffering tomorrow—and the day after that, and the day after that, *ad infinitum*—with no “healing” in sight.

This work has changed my life, and my understanding of what it means to be homeless. I hope to share some of that with you today.

Every faith tradition and every prophet has commanded his followers to care for the poor and the disadvantaged.

In the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, Moses commands the people, “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor. . . you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and give him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” The practice of giving to charity in Judaism is called *tzedakah*. But the root of *tzedakah* in Hebrew doesn’t actually mean charity; it means righteousness. To care for those less fortunate than us is to be righteous people.

Islam *defines* righteousness by acts of charity. The Koran says, “Righteousness is not that you turn your faces to the east and the west [in prayer]. But righteous is the one who . . . gives his wealth *in spite of love for it* to kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the wayfarer, to those who ask and to set slaves free.

Christians are familiar with Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s the story of a traveler who was stripped, robbed, beaten and left on the road. Many people passed him by, including a priest. But a man from Samaria stopped and bound up the injured man’s wounds and took him to an inn. He left the innkeeper money to cover

the man's lodging and said he would come back and pay whatever more was needed.

Many other faiths teach that doing good works is redemptive. And the entire 12-step philosophy common to Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and so on is based on the idea that service to others is essential to one's personal recovery and healing.

From our perspective as Unitarian Universalists, doing charitable works, helping the poor and homeless, falls under our First Principle, to recognize "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," and the Second Principle, to promote "justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

But exactly how *do* we help the homeless? For some of us, giving money to a charity that operates homeless shelters or provides meals and food boxes to the poor is the easiest and most efficient way to show our compassion and make sure our money is going to the "right" place—because most of us have some misgivings about handing money to beggars on the street. Are we supporting their alcohol and drug habits by doing so? Are they really even poor and homeless, or just running a scam? And some of them—well, if they can stand on a street corner all day begging, why can't they work a regular job like the rest of us?

I wish I could offer clear answers to those questions. But the truth is, we don't even know how many people in our midst are homeless. Agencies make regular "counts" of homeless people on the street, but admit they are really just guesses. And "how many?" is not really the question. The germane question is, "Who are these people we call 'the homeless?'"

Although I've spent most of my time with homeless people in Santa Fe, during the past month I've also visited shelters here in Albuquerque. Our populations are strikingly similar. The homeless people here and in Santa Fe are primarily Anglo and secondarily Hispanic, Native American, or of other ethnic minorities. Though homeless people once fit the stereotype of the hobo, an elderly man who was probably an alcoholic and riding the rails from place to place, these days the homeless tend to be more stable, to stay in one community. They also include many single women, young people, mothers with children, and increasingly, single fathers with children as well. The ratio of men to women is about three to one. The homeless come from all economic classes. Some of the homeless people I know have no work skills and no capacity to interact with others in a socially acceptable manner. Others are highly educated and have good social skills. Among the homeless people I know is a man with two master's degrees, a woman who was a high school teacher, a woman who was a hospital nurse and another man is a religious scholar.

So what happened to these people? Many become homeless when they lose a job and can't get another before the rent is due. Many low-income people are just one

car repair or one medical bill away from homelessness. Many women with children become homeless after their spouse or significant other leaves. Such people can sometimes get back on their feet. But the longer a person remains homeless, the harder that is. Imagine trying to get a job when you've had two hours' sleep on the ground outside the night before, don't have clean clothes, don't own a phone so you can receive a call-back, and don't have easy access to a computer to find job listings or fill out applications. Imagine that you have problems with drinking or using drugs, have a mental illness or are developmentally disabled. Or perhaps you suffer from PTSD as a result of combat or physical or sexual abuse. The majority of homeless women have been victims of physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood. Many of these people become chronically homeless. And the violence, the abuse, the PTSD, the mental problems get worse; people once able to function despite such problems lose that ability after a short time living on the street.

Not all "homeless" people are without shelter, *per se*. One man I know became homeless after losing two jobs in a row; he lives in an abandoned camper shell at a salvage yard. He comes to the shelter several times a week for a shower, food and clothing. Some shelter guests sleep in their cars—whether they are running or not—but come to the shelter to shower, eat, have social contact and perhaps see a nurse. Other homeless people camp in tents in arroyos, or find occasional shelter in abandoned buildings, and likewise use shelters to access food and health care services. One shelter guest I know, an unemployed software engineer, sleeps on the floor of a business that sometimes hires him, and comes to the shelter daily to get food.

Yet it can be difficult to find compassion for some of the homeless. If *we* became homeless, we wouldn't be like them, we think. They're often drunk or on drugs. Their eyes are bloodshot; they speak and act inappropriately, falling asleep or falling down, swearing and shouting, threatening others. They're unclean, they smell, and they won't take a shower, even if one is available. They start arguments, even with their friends. They're irritable or won't speak at all to shelter volunteers and workers. They refuse to take their antipsychotic medications, and then act out. They get into fights, one day being the aggressor, the next the victim.

These people are hard to like and hard to accept. But they all have one thing in common. They don't want to be homeless. It's a myth that people choose homelessness. Instead, many of them have lost the capacity to help themselves, to let others help them, to believe in themselves long enough to cross the threshold into a new life. They have given up trying to get what *we* consider our birthright: a job, a family, a safe place to live. They are just trying to get by *today*.

Those who are mentally ill face an even greater challenge. I've talked with many a person at the shelter whom I thought seemed perfectly fine and couldn't help wondering why the heck they didn't just get a job, any job, and get on with their lives? And then the next time I talk with them I realize they have some pretty strange ideas, by most of our standards. If they managed to get hired anywhere, they

wouldn't last long. I'm talking about people who suffer from schizophrenia, paranoia, personality or bipolar disorder and other serious mental illnesses. Some of these people are intellectually brilliant. But their mental problems prevent them from accessing the very systems that might help them. Their only hope of re-integration to society lies in the kind of long-term rehabilitation programs that ended with the Reagan era.

Some homeless people are physically ill or disabled. I know one woman who was crippled by polio as a child; for many years, she was the coffee lady at a local cafeteria, a job she loved and in which she took great pride. Now older, she can't do physical work like that, and she can't do much of anything many days because of her pain. And if a person doesn't have any physical problems before hitting the streets, it isn't long before they do. Sleeping on the ground, walking almost all day every day, inadequate nutrition, violence, and the added effects of alcohol or drug abuse damage their bodies irreparably.

And how *can* these people believe in themselves when the world out there tells them every day that they are worthless? Many homeless people walk the streets during the day because there is no place where they can just sit where someone won't be offended by their mere presence. They tell me that security guards and police make them leave just about anywhere they land; the people we rely on to protect us pose a threat to them. The "normal" people they pass on the street often won't look them in the eye, may even change sides of the street so as to avoid contact, or worse, may say cruel things—and, as we here in Albuquerque know, may even kill them. "They treat us worse than dogs," one woman told me. Every single day these people are told that they are useless and valueless. Can we reasonably expect such people to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" and get their lives together?

Many of the homeless people I know tell me they are going somewhere, soon. Meanwhile, they are waiting. Waiting for a check to come in. Waiting for a letter from a family member who might let them move in. Waiting for an inheritance, imagined or real. Waiting for the "right time" to make a change. Waiting for the Rapture, the Apocalypse, the End Days.

Where are they going? Denver. Maybe Phoenix. Back East. Hawaii or somewhere else exotic. Heaven. Or Hell. But they are not going home. No one ever tells me they can go home. Or they would, wouldn't they? Most of them probably feel like the woman who told me through her tears one day, "I'm leaving; I have to get out of this place." "Where are you going?" I asked her. "Anywhere," she said. "Anywhere that's not here."

For most of the people I know who share this common theme, this waiting is an expression of hope—despite the very hopelessness of their situations. Perhaps they believe, *If I wait long enough, something will change, and I won't have to be here any more; I won't be homeless anymore.*

That same waiting behavior is also an expression of hopelessness. One woman I know says she has an inheritance waiting for her back East, and she's going there to start her life over. Soon. But something holds her back, something she can't express; another week goes by, and another, and now a year and a half has passed since I first heard this story. She is still at the shelter, still homeless, still hopeless—immobilized by her reality.

This is not laziness. This is not insanity. This is not stupidity, though it may look like all of those things.

The Christian writer Marcus Borg says that the suffering of the poor is primarily that of shame and disgrace. It's a toxic shame, *a global sense of failure of the whole self*. This is the primary "disease" of homelessness: *A global sense of failure of the whole self*. Some people already have it when they hit the streets; it's one of the reasons they end up there. Others catch it soon after.

Father Gregory Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries, who has long worked with gang culture in Los Angeles, has a prescription for those of us who would help those less fortunate than we are. We must "stand with the least likely to succeed until [we achieve] something more valuable: kinship," Boyle says. "You stand with the belligerent, the surly, and the badly behaved until bad behavior is recognized for the language it is: the vocabulary of the deeply wounded and of those whose burdens are more than they can bear."

We cannot fix such people. We cannot erase a lifetime of suffering that has led them to this condition. Homeless shelters exist to keep them safe, nourished, and clothed, and to provide a social context. Shelter employees, volunteers and outside agencies work very hard to help these people when they are ready to change their lives. Often, a guest on a new path seems to be succeeding but then falls down again, like the man who was sober for months and then showed up drunk at the shelter. Our job is to pick them up after they fall—no matter how many times they fall.

Some homeless people can find a new life, but it takes a great deal of help along the way: to navigate the Byzantine systems of assistance, to find housing, to get a job. It does happen, but not on a made-for-TV scale. It's one person at a time, or rather, two people at a time. One volunteer, one social worker, one mental health counselor, who connects with one mentally ill, drug-addicted, alcoholic, belligerent loser, and says, "I am not giving up on you, even when you give up on yourself."

I have told you many sad tales today, and you would expect that volunteering at a homeless shelter would be depressing, upsetting, even heartbreaking. Sometimes it is all those things. But there are deep connections among the shelter guests, staff and volunteers, a real sense of community. And a surprising amount of laughter as well.

Many shelter guests use humor to distract themselves from their suffering; it's a buffer against the truth. One guest tells constant one-liners, often apparently created on the spur of the moment.

"Do you know how many homeless people it takes to change a light bulb?" he asked me one day.

"I don't know, how many?"

"I don't know, either," he said, "but as long as we're talking about change, can you spare some?"

Another day at lunchtime, a guest accidentally knocked a full pitcher of lemonade all over the table and the floor. Without missing a beat, a man standing nearby cupped his hands and yelled out, "Cleanup on Aisle One! Cleanup on Aisle One!"

We are not so different from our homeless neighbors. In fact, inside we are not different at all. And that's what's so scary; the idea that the only thing that separates us from the people we see on the street corners is the thin veneer of money.

And I have another theory. We need the homeless, the poor, the wretched people we see on the streets. We need them because they represent our shadow side. They represent who *we* might be if we hadn't gotten away with *our* "wrongdoings," with our bad behavior, with our secrets and our lies, if we hadn't escaped without getting caught.

In the 1991 movie, "The Fisher King," starring Robin Williams as a mentally disturbed homeless man and Jeff Bridges as a down-on-his-luck radio shock jock who caused the death of Williams' wife, it is *Bridges* who says, "If there was only some way I could pay the fine and go home." In some way, homeless or not, in each of our hearts, we'd like to "pay the fine and go home." We'd like to find our redemption from suffering, in other words.

Through my volunteer work at the shelter, I am connected to my humanity over and over again in a way that leaves me breathless. I depart the shelter—even after a "bad" day of fights and police calls and vomit and rage—in a state of gratitude and wonderment that is hard to explain. I am allowed a glimpse into the hearts of others in such a way that I no longer feel separated, singular or isolated.

I am no longer afraid of homeless people on the street. I am no longer torn by inner questions about whether or not they should be working, or whether or not any money I give them will go for booze or drugs. I don't care about any of that. I want to know, how can I connect with that person? What do we have in common? What can he or she teach me, and I them? I can't rescue anyone, but I can I look them in the eyes, smile, and say hello. The Israeli philosopher Martin Buber said that people become fully human only when their being is affirmed by another person. Buber

writes, "Secretly and bashfully every person watches for a YES which can allow that person to be, and which can come only from one human person to another. It is from one person to another that the heavenly bread of self-being is passed." I try to offer Buber's magical affirming YES to all those I encounter.

The title I gave this sermon is "Angels in Disguise," which was inspired by the song that will serve as the postlude today. It's a song about seeing beneath the surface, looking beyond the outsides of people to their inner beauty. One of the many roles the Angel plays in mythology and religion is that of the teacher. The shelter guests are "angels" to me because they are my teachers.

Father Gregory Boyle says that, "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals."

This I believe to be true. We are all teaching each other, all the time. We can all be "angels in disguise."

C. 2015 Hollis Walker