

December 07, 2004

REQUIEM FOR THE HOMELESS

by Rev. Bob Hudak

The Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast recently held its first "Requiem for the Homeless."

I was invited to preach at this very moving service during which friends lit candles for the following persons who have died on the streets of Mobile in recent years, including: Dalton Acreman, Michael Antalan, David Brooks, Llewellyn Brooks, Steven Browning, John "Montana" Brunson, Lee Carter, Juan Chireno, Robert Clarhaut, Billy Corley, Jeremiah Davis, James Denson, Chad Edwards, Kenneth Gideons, Gary Harris, Terry Harris, Hollis King, Jackie Karr, Daniel Lessard, Jesse Magwood, Willie Marshall, Gary McBride, Willie Mae Patton, Madolyn Stanberry, Little Stokes, Jr., Brett Young and Janice Young.

I would like to acknowledge the Rev. John Hatcher, Pastor of Outreach International Center and Contributing Writer of The Fayette Citizen, for his insights in a recent column about the poor. And I want to acknowledge the memory of my high school classmate and Franciscan brother in Christ, George Minor, whose cremains rest here in Fayetteville in Nativity's Memorial Garden of the Resurrection.

Matthew 25: 31-46

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to the Rector of All Saints, Buck Belmore, for the invitation to participate in this evening's "Requiem for the Homeless." Thank you, Buck, for sending me the names of the persons we gather to remember this night. I have called upon them by name in prayer, that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart may inspire us tonight to renew our commitment to serve the Risen Christ present in our homeless sisters and brothers. For we gather here tonight, in this sacred space, to honor those who, in communion with the saints, have gone before us into the Kingdom of God. We commend these children of God into the hands of the One who has already welcomed them home. The homeless in our cities and throughout our country are increasingly left behind. Federal funding for homeless programs is insufficient to meet the rising need of increasing homelessness. And emergency shelters have been forced to turn away homeless families because of a lack of resources, as those of you involved with the Task Force for the Homeless know all too well. In the words of Maria Foscarinis, the Executive Director for the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty: "We applaud this country's efforts to protect human rights and human dignity around the world, but we cannot ignore the overwhelming human need and misery of millions of poor Americans."

No one talks much about the poor in our country anymore. The recent presidential campaign, the most expensive in the history of our country, put much of its emphasis on the middle class. The poor were invisible to both President Bush and Senator Kerry. An evangelical minister and columnist for the local paper where I come from in Fayetteville, Georgia, recently mused about whether or not someone might be in the wings to inspire and motivate millions of Americans to a

higher sense of responsibility and calling. The Rev. John Hatcher writes: "No one campaigns any longer, in the slums of Chicago or New York or the hillside shacks of Appalachia. We no longer want a leader who will care for the forgotten and downtrodden." The words of Emma Lazarus engraved on a plaque in the Statue of Liberty "cries with silent lips."

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

The Rev. Hatcher raises the question for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear: "Is there only compassion for the middle class who, in the words of a very perceptive prophet, 'buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like'." Our Requiem for the Homeless tonight comes at the end of another church year - the last Sunday after Pentecost also known as Christ the King Sunday. Our reading from Matthew 25 describes God's standard of judgment as told to us by Jesus. And the criteria Jesus will use to determine whether or not we are worthy to enter the kingdom of God doesn't depend upon whether or not we feel we are saved because we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior. What matters, Jesus tells us, is how we have treated other human persons, especially the stranger in need we meet in our lives. It doesn't matter whether they are Christians like ourselves, or Jews, or Muslims, or Buddhists, or Hindus, or any other religious tradition. It doesn't even matter whether these strangers in need practice any religion at all. The criteria for entrance into the heavenly kingdom, Jesus tells us, is whether or not we treated the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and those in prison as if they were Christ himself. Hospitality is what this passage in Matthew is all about: Feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, providing shelter to the homeless, visiting those who are sick and in prison.

As we are graciously welcomed to the feast at the table of God's grace, so too, are we called to share this gift generously and freely, as we do this night.

Several years ago, a hungry, homeless man spent his last bit of money to take a cab for a 22 mile trip from Atlanta to Fayetteville. It was a last ditch effort to see if I perhaps could help him. I'm glad I was there when he arrived, though I feel the timing was in God's plan, not mine. For some reason, I seemed to be his only earthly contact. While I was prepared to help the old man with sunken cheeks and thin gray hair, who suddenly stood before me, what I wasn't prepared for, however, was the sound of my name: "Bob." In the flash of an instant, I recognized the voice and suddenly didn't see the hungry, homeless, diabetic man before me! Instead, I saw the face of a fourteen year old classmate at St. Joseph's, the Franciscan high school we both attended some thirty-seven years before. "George," I exclaimed! I knew immediately who it was who had come to see me. I welcomed George into the parish kitchen, put on some coffee and provided him with some food. In trying to see how I could be of help to him, George quietly told me that his debilitating form of diabetes contributed to his loss of job, money and apartment. He had been sleeping in his car until it broke down. He felt that he ran out of all his options. He was cold and hungry. He broke down crying and told me he had decided to kill himself. He told me that he recognized me in a newspaper article he read about former Roman Catholic priests who had married and remembered where I was.

Thanks to a contact from a parishioner who works with social services, I drove George to a treatment facility for rehabilitation. And then came the hard part. George needed to go into assisted living for the three months before Medicaid and disability benefits would kick in. And I didn't have that kind of money. I prayed for guidance and direction until I realized that I needed to open a door I had carefully closed some years before - the same door George himself had closed when he, like me, left the Franciscan

Order of which we had both been members. I mustered enough courage to write a letter on behalf of George to the head of the Franciscan community I chose to leave some years ago, rupturing some rather significant relationships in the process. I asked for quite a bit of money. The plea went out to the far

reaches of the community and very soon I had enough money to help George live in an assisted living home and get the medications he needed until his Medicaid and disability benefits would begin.

If it weren't for our past - and the fact that both George and I, though never close friends, were brothers in Christ through the spiritual bond we shared as Franciscans, I would not have opened a door to my past which I thought I had carefully closed. But I did. And to my surprise, God was at work and miracles happened. About five months later, George's aunt from Wisconsin called me to say that George was in a hospital in Atlanta with a ruptured colon, and the prognosis was bad. I drove to Atlanta that afternoon and found George's brother sitting by his bedside. While George was not able to respond, he knew we were there. And within a short time, the machines went flat. And we knew that George had gone home to God.

A rabbi put this question to his students: "How can we determine the hour of dawn, the moment when the night ends and the day begins?" "When from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep," suggested one. "When you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine," offered another.

"No," the rabbi said. "When you look into the face of a human being and have enough light to recognize that person as your sister or brother. Up until then it is night, and darkness is still with us." There's a picture I remember seeing as a child which made a deep impression on me. Perhaps you've seen it. It's an image of Jesus disguised as a stranger knocking on a door which has no handle on the outside. It can only be opened from the inside. He knocks with hope that the person inside will hear him calling and open the door.

None of us would ever want to not open our door to Jesus if we really knew it was him, would we? And yet, what Matthew 25 so poignantly tells us is that the Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas and the Christ we worship as our King is the same one disguised as a stranger who oftentimes comes to our door in unexpected and surprise-filled ways. The darkness is still with us.

But the homeless have increasingly been able to look into our faces with the recognition that we are their sisters and brothers. The question it seems for us as disciples of Jesus who live in a country where homelessness is growing is: Can we look into the faces of the homeless and recognize them as our sisters and our brothers?

Our response tonight is a sign of hope and promise that the hour of dawn has indeed arrived, not just for those we remember who are with us no longer, but also for those of us here present who honor their memory by serving Christ, our King. The one who tells us solemnly that "insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."

Amen.

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