

Blind Man Receives Sight

In Luke 18 we read the story of a blind man begging on the side of the road outside the city. He's at the bottom end of the social ladder, outcast and overlooked. He's a panhandler, and furthermore he's blind. He's unworthy. He's unclean. Because of this he is excluded from everyday life, and so day by day he survives by begging.

Society tells us, and many of us come to believe, that some people are just worth more than others. This message is constantly being reinforced. We see that often once people are unable to "contribute" (and by that we mean financially) or at least be people who are self-sufficient, they are viewed or treated with less dignity and as less worthy. It is in the language we use to describe the poor - "needy", "drain on society", "waste of resources".

In Luke 18 we see that attitudes weren't very different in Jesus' day:

35 As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.

36 When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening.

37 They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

38 He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

39 Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

40 Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him,

41 "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Lord, I want to see," he replied.

42 Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you."

43 Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

Think for just a minute about the scene. There's an excited crowd. It's this Jesus that they are interested in. They've all heard rumours of what he can do, and what is said about who he is. Then there is Bartimaeus. Surely he isn't expecting much from this new celebrity figure. Bartimaeus must feel insignificant by comparison. Bartimaeus has limitations - one glaring one that impedes his abilities in society. No one would want to give a poor blind man their time, or expect anything of him. He is left to be forgotten on the side of the road. No one seems to see his intrinsic value. This blind man is told repeatedly to keep quiet. "Shut up!" they must be shouting. "Don't be a nuisance!" But Jesus did hear the cries from Bartimaeus. He heard them and cared deeply for him. He dignified a man who people thought had no dignity. Jesus even gave Bartimaeus back his sight.

I like this story for a number of reasons.

It certainly speaks of God's compassion towards those who are poor, told to be quiet, and excluded from community. But it also teaches us that those who we write off as needy and burdensome actually may have a lot to offer us and to teach us. Even about our own faith. The church by in large recognizes that we ought to be reaching out to the poor among us, that we have been called to share with, encourage, and help the needy. But do we often cultivate space, opportunities, and attitudes that recognize that they too have gifts to share with us also? My friend Sandra is a prime example of this:

Sandra's Story (removed)

When we pass her on the sidewalk, do we disregard her as someone who has something to offer us? Do we join in the crowds that pass her by and tell her to be quiet? Could we even begin to imagine having her resilience and faith?

This past winter I went through a time of deep grief when the tragic life and death of a close friend from the streets was weighing heavily on my heart and making me question whether God was far away. I sat with Sandra as she was processing her own loss. She

told me “whenever I start to question why I’m still here, and why I’m going through all of this, God just slaps me across the face again! Wake up Sandra! I’m right here and I love you. I’m with you in the trenches”. Sandra knows that real faith looks like, and it’s a privilege to be her friend and to learn from her. To remember that God is with me too, in the trenches of my own life.

Sometimes it takes real encounters with friends who are poor and whose lives are visibly messed up... people who cannot afford to pretend that everything’s okay, to remind us, all of us, of the ways we desperately need God and each other.

Day to Day Philosophy

My day to day work with Lazarus Rising happens as part of the core pastoral team at a church near Yonge and Charles called Sanctuary. There our mission is to be a place of welcome and inclusion for everyone, where those who are pushed to the margins of society are particularly valued. In other words, Sanctuary is a bit of an odd duck in terms of agencies that work with the poor and homeless of our city. Our focus is less on providing services, though we do that in the ways we can, but in being community together, in having friendships, in providing a small though inadequate taste of home for those who are homeless.

Many people who live on the streets have expressed that Sanctuary is their home, and for many the first place they have considered home. It is THEIR place, which is why its important that its folks from the street community that do all of the “volunteer” jobs around the building. From sorting donations, to cleaning and repairing the building, to cooking and serving meals. Middle class “volunteers” who come to help find that instead of being given a job and a name tag, they are given a meal and treated as visitors. Sanctuary is a place where folks without a home get to practice hospitality, instead of having to stand behind a counter being served

We are all given gifts, talents, and skills. Some people in society are encouraged to share, but others aren't. Others are expected to just be recipients. Day to day survival on the street often requires many activities that reinforce in people the idea that they are fundamentally someone who needs, who receives, who takes. Things like panhandling for change, or standing in line at a soup kitchen, or checking in to a shelter. People come to believe that they don't have anything to contribute - and that their relationships to others and society as a whole will always be characterized by their need and someone else plenty.

When I first walked through the doors at Sanctuary, I had a cover letter and resume in tow, ready to use my time and gifts to help the poor. It is startling for many, myself included, to be told there isn't a place for me in the kitchen, or the clothing room, but rather that I should sit down and share a meal with people from the street. I came to help! And won't I be taking a meal from someone who needs it much more than I do? It was uncomfortable and difficult to be served by the kinds of people I imagined myself serving.

I expected to be given a position of power. For it to be recognized that I was someone with something to offer. Being welcomed instead as a guest, and breaking bread with people I had previously been so eager to help made me realize we're not so different. And that I'm not the only one with gifts to share. Moving to the other side of the counter, or plexiglass, or table is a challenge. We have to become vulnerable when we choose to encounter people on their own turf. But it's worth it.

Learning from Street Walks

For the past two years I have had the opportunity to lead street walks with BIC leaders from around the world. The first year I did it was with leaders from various churches and communities in southern Africa.. They were here getting to know what ministry partners with MCC were doing in Ontario.

I had the privilege of taking them around the city, and spoke about what extreme poverty looks like in Toronto, including trying to give them a picture of what life is like for people living on the streets. They could not believe that people could even sleep outside in snow and freezing temperatures. For toew of them, it was their first day seeing snow! They also had a difficult time grasping that a country that has such wealth – with its skyscrapers and granite sidewalks - could not, or really, would not, provide for its people.

The most jarring thing they found was the idea that there are people who live on the streets who might have a family member who visits them or whom they themselves visit from time to time.

Further, sometimes when a person who lives on the streets passes away, the deceased's family might then step in and claim the body. "In our country," one man said, "it doesn't matter if it's your aunt's sister in law's cousin... or whomever, if family is in need you bring them into your house to care for them." This man was astonished with how we can do something like this in our culture. We spoke about the high value our society places on individual independence and self sufficiency - and how people often fall through the cracks in a society driven by these values.

Any holistic response to poverty in Toronto must recognize that homelessness in this city is not only material poverty but also fundamentally a poverty characterized by social isolation, of exclusion, and of displacement.

Defining Homelessness

I think it is interesting to notice how when addressing the problem of homelessness people usually speak of housing. The solution to homelessness apparently is houses. Admittedly, housing is vastly important and necessary. The difference that housing makes for someone trying to get back on their feet can't be overstated. However, isn't it possible that people can be housed and still not have homes?

Perhaps even some of us here now what this is like.

It is often said that “a home is more than four walls and a roof.” A home is not only a house but a place where you belong. It is a place of safety. It is a place of memories. A home is a place where one can be themselves. A home is a place to rest and a place to play. It is a place of hospitality. Home is a place to offer and share our gifts with another.

The roots of homelessness in this city go much deeper than only socio-economic issues, although those issues are many and must be addressed. To be homeless means to go without many deep and profound human needs. Many in the core of the Sanctuary community experience both literal homelessness and this other sort of homelessness which I am describing.

Are the people who live on the street in Toronto really all that poor when they have access to free meals and clothing? It is obvious that the poverty that exists in the home communities of the African leaders is much more severe. But many of those I spoke with were shocked by the dehumanization and displacement the poor in this city experience.

Benjamin's Story (Removed)

Being and Seeing

In Matthew 25 Jesus says “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” It is interesting to me that in this parable, Jesus identifies himself not as the caregiver, but with the needy. We are used to Jesus as Physician. Shepherd. King.

Jesus has told us that somehow, mysteriously, when we care for the 'least of these', we are caring for him. When we care for the poor and powerless we not only are the hands of Christ, bringing healing and comfort on his behalf, but we are also in a mysterious way encountering him when we tenderly love and care for the least among us. What a joy it is to have this opportunity to tangibly show our love.

I have come to believe that the biblical mandate to care for the poor is not just God's way of ensuring that the poor be cared for. Our faith requires us to care for the orphan and widow, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger. But it's critical to remember that the call to love our neighbour is not only for their benefit of our neighbour. God is also calling us to a way of life that He wants for us - a rich and fulfilling life of servitude, which is a gift from him. A life of community with one another and with God, where each person's gifts are shared and encouraged.

I want to end by reading some lyrics from a song we sing at Sanctuary.... written by a member of the community there.

"Bringing adoration to the King
Sitting at his feet just listening
Break the Alabaster offering
In heartfelt joy, my love I gladly bring.

Through unsung serving all of those I meet
A way to pour the costly at your feet
"What you do unto the least of mine...
It's unto me that you are being kind".

Bringing adoration to the King
Sitting at his feet just listening
Break the alabaster offering
In heartfelt joy, my love, I gladly bring."