

# Hard Questions Concerning Homelessness

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the present time we are facing a crisis of socioeconomic homelessness unparalleled since the great depression of the 1930's. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "We've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's market place. But one day we must come to see that an edifice, which produces beggars, needs restructuring." Even the Good Samaritan would have sooner or later had to ask, after he had helped hundreds of victims on the road to Jericho, "what am I going to do about the robbers who keep beating up all these people?"

It was questions like that which I began to ask as I saw more and more people ending up homeless. How is it that the city of St. Louis and St Louis county could say they had no money for affordable housing and yet both the city and county could come up with \$6000,000 a year for a football stadium, while the state could give \$12,000,000 a year for the stadium? When the city wanted to destroy the homes on 39<sup>th</sup> Street for the elderly like Mama Lester and Mrs. Bone I had to ask, "how can I remain silent?"

Why are developers awarded tax abatements and the right of eminent domain resulting in the poor and elderly being put on the street without assistance? I have to ask what is wrong with a free market that doesn't create adequate affordable housing but yet promotes the conversion of apartments into condominiums and gentrifies neighborhoods by displacing low-income people? How can we as believers not take a stand for justice as neighborhoods are redlined by financial institutions so poor people and landlords providing low income housing can't get loans to fix their buildings? How can local governments say they want to eliminate chronic homelessness as they allow poor neighborhoods to deteriorate, so these communities can become candidates for urban renewal resulting in rents being raised above the ability of the poor and elderly to pay?

Philip Alston, former chair of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights pointed out that "Homelessness is the predictable result of private and public – sector policies that exclude the poor from participating in

the economic revolution, while safety nets are slashed in the name of ‘globe competitiveness.’”

We are told in Amos 5:24, “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never – failing stream.” When you study Amos 5:21-24 you will see that the prophet Amos cries out that if our faith does not bring justice flowing like a river, then we should stop the noise we are making at our religious gatherings. The reason for this is because God gets tired of hearing it, unless what we call praise, is followed by acts of justice.

There is no book, which more precisely addresses both the cause and solutions for homelessness than the Bible. In the Bible we find over 2000 verses which relate to the poor. Yes it points out how people can end up homeless as a result of wrong choices (see the story of the prodigal son) but it also challenges those who claim to be the people of God to reach out to those in need. Individuals that say that they are followers of Jesus Christ need to reexamine His mission statement. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

In order to preach the good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed, we must confront the greed, self-centeredness, and fear in our own lives. This is possible as we accept the year of the Lord’s favor and grace that has come through the forgiveness of sins that Jesus Christ provided through His death and resurrection. Liberated from this tyranny of sin that controls our personal lives, we are now free to seek God for viable solutions to pursue Jesus mission of proclaiming in word and deed good news to the poor and oppressed.

Gerald Daly in his book Homeless: Policies, Strategies and Lives on the Street states that “recent increases in homelessness are attributable to global economic changes, a severe shortage of affordable shelter for low-income households, and cutbacks in social programs.” The examination of each of those areas in detail may help us to become better sociologists but how will they help us to become better followers of Jesus Christ, if we do not take decisive action to deal with them. Education concerning any problem will either depress us or empower us. If it is going to empower us, we have to ask, how will we handle this knowledge of the problems in order that it will result in viable solutions?

The question is what can we as individuals do about global economic changes, a severe shortage of affordable housing, or cutbacks in social programs? Many choosing to do nothing revere to a form of religion that denies the real power that can bring about viable solutions. Others believing they can do “all things through Christ who strengthens them” choose to pray and take decisive steps of faith in order to fulfill the mission Christ lays out as cited earlier in Luke 4:18-19.

Ps 82:3 says, “Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. As I read Scriptures like that in the Bible I have to ask myself how can I say I am desiring to do the will of God and then do nothing as justice is denied those in need? Whether it is the needy who are locked up daily without adequate legal defense or the poor and elderly whom having their homes taken from them through laws that benefit the greedy developers, I must seek God through prayer as to what decisive action I am to take. In each and every case I must in word and deed declare that there is hope because Christ is risen.

It’s a fact; despair is an integral part of poverty and injustice but the only lasting antidote to this despair is the hope the living Christ can bring. This hope is reflected in the lives of those who answer the call to follow Jesus as He stands in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Answering this call may mean going to Washington D.C like I did with Mrs. Bone and Mrs. Lester and giving squash seeds to our US Senators and Representatives. As these seeds were passed out the message went forth that we didn’t want HUD funds that were filtered through local officials to be used to drive the elderly from their homes. To stop this injustice we also visited one of the top aids of the President. The end result was that these two women were allowed to live in their home for the rest of their lives.

“Who so ever stopeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard”(Prov.21:13). The Stewart B. Mc Kinney Homeless Assistance Act clearly states that priority should be given to the homeless when it comes to the use of federal surplus property. Even though the law clearly states this, less than 1% of this property is actually used in this way. For that reason when such property became available in St. Louis, Springfield and Cape Girardeau, MO. New Life Evangelistic Center activity pursued such for the use of the homeless. As a result the former social security building in Springfield is now used daily to help the homeless veterans and other homeless people as the former federal courthouse in Cape Girardeau is being pursued. On each occasion the local governments involved have actively resisted such efforts. Such resistance though has served to enlighten the communities involved to the tremendous need for services for the homeless.

“He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth His Maker; but He that honoureth Him hath mercy on the poor”(Prov.14:31). When one is homeless nearly everything they do to rest after 10 PM is illegal. All night city police and park rangers are patrolling the area to be sure no one sleeps in city parks. The non-existence of public restrooms subjects the homeless to fines of \$100 if they relieve themselves in public. In obedience to Deut. 23:12, 13 New Life Evangelistic Center placed a public toilet on St Charles Street in St. Louis. To the relief of many in neighboring condominiums this toilet was burned to the ground within a week. The police and fire department responded by saying there was nothing they could do about it. With rest areas existing up and down the highways for travelers the question is, shouldn't our homeless travelers in the downtown areas have the same rights to rest and use the toilets?

Some religious folks will say it's not the job of the government to take care of the homeless it is the job of the church. Well then show me the churches that will let the homeless use their bathrooms and sleep on their pews. After all didn't Jesus say as often as you have done it to the least of these even so you have done it unto me”(Matt.25). When are we going to let Jesus come back into our churches? This will happen as we hear Him tell us to rise up and walk and be healed of the paralysis of fear. Then not only will we start asking the hard questions about justice for the homeless but we will begin demonstrating the courage necessary to let God use us to be the answer to these questions.

Steven Bouma - Prediger and Brian J. Walsh summarize the need in their book Beyond Homelessness when they write, “we need to emancipate both our minds and our spaces for the millions of people in North America and throughout the world who are treated as little more than social trash. If the economic dynamics of globalization and neoconservatism are forces for homelessness, we need an economics for homemaking to see us through this crisis. If our personal and cultural imaginations have been captivated by a fearful, self-protective and myopic ideology of economic growth and “invisible hands” we need to be set free by a radical narrative of hospitality and homecoming.”

Jesus provides us with such a narrative. He was forever associating with those in need (Luke 5:1-11), eating with them (Luke 5:27-32), comforting them (Luke 12:22—34), feeding them (Luke 9:10-17), restoring them to health (Luke 5:12-16) and ministering to them (Luke 7:18-23). Paul was deeply committed to “remembering the poor” (Gal. 2:7-10). As Christians, we must live in the light of the saving grace of Christ to the extent we will let justice forth as a mighty river,

as Amos declared, and not be afraid to ask the hard questions concerning the homeless.

Mother Theresa once said, in the faces of the poor and hungry, we will see the face of Christ. For as He said, “I assure you that whatever you did for the least of these my brothers (and sisters) you did for me. “Isn’t it time we responded by saying yes Lord here I am. Now use me for your glory to help those in need. Help me Lord to ask the hard questions of myself, my church, and my community that will bring about the changes that are so desperately needed in the middle of this epidemic of homelessness.

Yours in Christ Service,

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