
Don't Call Us Homeless

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 8 - Year A**

Friends, this is how it happens. This is how it happens that an African American priest such as myself, in a time like this, gets a chance to share with you someone else's issue besides an issue of race or ethnicity. This is how it happens, my friends. It happens when enough white people among also care enough about race matters, to speak out about Black Lives Matter, so that your priest here today can speak out about some other that also matters: in this case another group that I hear Jesus calling us to talk about today.

In today's gospel Jesus says:

"Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." Matthew 10:41-42

Well, it's that kind of reward that I've been coveting for our church for several years now. And I think I got closer to achieving it for our church a few years ago when I heard this prophetic challenge from one of our Cathedral street friends; let's call him Trevor.

'Don't call us homeless,' Trevor said to me a few years ago.

'Why do you say that?' I responded.

'Because it's a way of saying we're second-class citizens,' he answered. 'It's like you're saying we don't belong here when you use the word, 'homeless.' But we do belong here, just like anybody else. Just because we don't own a house, or have an apartment to live in, doesn't mean we shouldn't be treated like everyone else. We belong here too. It's just that we happen to be living on the streets. Our home is the streets,' he concluded.

'Then, what do you want to be called?' I shot back at him, a little defensively.

'Street people,' he declared. 'Just call us street people.'

Now you notice I asked him what he wanted to be called somewhat defensively, right? That's right. Right there I was at risk for failing to heed Jesus' teaching about prophetic messengers in today's gospel:

welcome a prophet in the name of a prophet in order to receive a prophet's reward; and welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person in order to receive the reward of the righteous; and give even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple in order not to lose a reward.

It's some kind of reward that I was on the verge of losing by my resistance to Trevor's prophetic challenge to me that day. And it's that kind of reward that I covet and yearn for all who hear me today in this beloved community of our gathered-together church.

Now I need to make it clear what kind of reward we're at risk for forfeiting. Here's the larger context in which Jesus makes this teaching most urgent for us. Today's gospel reading comes at the end of a series of instructions that Jesus delivers to his disciples. Just a few verses before today's reading, he tells those disciples that he's sending them out into the world, as he says, 'like sheep into the midst of wolves.'

And then he uses a metaphor to describe the risk, the liability that they are under. He uses the metaphor of family members and loved ones to describe their attachments; their attachment to their personal biases and affinities. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me," is the way Jesus puts it, "is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." And then he concludes by declaring the hallmark, the signature statement, or the key metaphor of our Christian discipleship:

'and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.' Matt. 10:37-38

Now this way of the Cross is the kind of gospel good news we need to be hearing in this season of Pentecost that we are embarked upon this summer. The good news is that we are working that metaphor of crucifying our affinities that pit us against one another in this time of street protests and presidential politics. And as we work that metaphor of crucifying our affinities—our personal biases and prejudices—there is a reward that awaits us: we will be able to join together to build beloved communities in our commonwealth of these United States.

To get to that kind of reward we need to attending to some of the other lives that matter on our streets and in our neighborhoods. And our Cathedral friend, Trevor, who lives on the streets of Buckhead, is precisely one of the prophetic messengers being sent to us with a suggestion about how we can do that here in our own neighborhood. Our challenge as a church community, however, is a formidable one. And my personal challenge is by no means less formidable.

Let me state the challenge in my personal terms first. How can I crucify my personal affinities that would put me at risk for failing to heed this prophetic call?

Some of you have gotten to know me somewhat in these twenty years that I've been one of your priests here at the Cathedral. You know that I grew up in fairly privileged surroundings as a middle class African American. My parents were college graduates of Morehouse and Spelman respectively. After college they both earned masters' degrees; in addition my father a law degree and my mother a doctorate in ministry. We are certainly part of so-called black professional uplift.

For my part I managed to avoid the blight on young black men in our society; to avoid either getting killed or imprisoned. Instead stayed in school, mostly! ☐ And eventually I became faculty at Emory University here in Atlanta, and for these past years have served as one of your priests. So far so good, right?

But along the way I also incurred some middle-class affinities that today I'm ashamed to confess. Again here's that word, affinities. I mean our compulsive, default preferences and biases. For me today, I see how my personal prejudices and go-to preferences too often serve as a type of bondage or slavery—the kind of thing that the apostle Paul calls shameful in today's reading from Romans. There he says:

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

. . .

[And] what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. Romans 6:16, 19, 21

Right here Paul insists that whatever advantages have come to us by our means of our preferred inclinations, there's a kind of soul death that occurs if we become captive to them. By contrast, he proclaims, there is a promise of abundant life if we manage to 'put to death' instead our affinities—again, our compulsive, default preferences and biases.

Choose instead, the apostle urges, what he calls 'slavery to God,' or becoming 'slaves to righteousness, or becoming 'obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted' (Rom. 6:17).

Now here's how I got to travel a little further on that path of 'obedience-of-the-heart' when I was a Boy Scout growing up in Atlanta. Here's a milestone story of my own passage from affinities to shame, followed by breakthrough to trying to live a more abundant life.

As a high school aged Boy Scout it was my turn one year to organize our monthly "Troop" meeting in one of the member's homes. To this day I remember my deliberate decision, as I scheduled our meetings month after month, to avoid having us meet at the home of one of the boys who lived in "the projects." As you likely know, back then "the projects" was the name given to low-income housing communities. And those housing units contrasted sharply in my mind with the suburban homes lived in by me and the other troop members.

But then something happened that astonished me. One of our other members, when his turn came to schedule our meetings, assumed as a matter of course that we would meet in another member's apartment in the projects. He took it for granted that meeting in the projects was okay. He assumed the equality of our other member's status. It blew my mind.

At first amazed, eventually I became mortified to realize that I had acted-out class prejudice on one of my own schoolmates. To this day I regret the kind of black middle-class assumptions that allowed me to take it for granted that our friend's home was not the kind of place that we should meet in. Moreover I have struggled to carry out my repentance by being on the look-out for opportunities to reverse that kind of prejudice in my own life and in the communities to which I provide counsel and leadership.

Church family, and Christian friends, listen to how one of our sister parishes describes their outreach to people who occupy their streets and alleyways, and who assist people who live under the bridges and in the cracks and crannies of their neighborhood. The following offers a window into the individualized focus of their program. I transcribed it verbatim from a video that you can also find on their website. The priest says:

There are many, many, many barriers, as you can imagine . . . if you are living on the street, to get and keep a job and a home . . . So the answers are not simple. But the answers are always—and here's my key word, relational. It always comes back to relationship.

And that's why you need the local, grassroots provider; the one who . . . [as] people walk in off the street [they get to] know the name of the person that they're coming to see [. . .] because that's how they gain trust in order to listen . . . [and say] 'Hey, you can trust to walk down this path and do this; you can trust me, I'll walk with you on this path' . . .

That means [we need] a lot of people walking side by side with each of those [persons] . . . for weeks, and months, and even years to see them come out of that homelessness.

And then he concludes:

But, let me ask you this: What else have we got to do in this life? What does the Lord require of you—'Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.' If you walk with your neighbor in need, you're walking with your God, according to Jesus. (Transcribed from this video at the 12:27-13.47 minute marker: <https://stlvideo.s3.amazonaws.com/Sermons2019/2019-07-07-Forum-Homelessness.mp4.>)[1]

Now I've just shared with you the efforts of a sister parish in our town; a parish that engages with the issue of homelessness in their neighborhood. And I want to assure you how careful they are to make it clear that there are many other ways to support mission and outreach in that community besides that particular program.

But alongside appreciating that kind of care, I'm also mindful of the concern that I highlighted at the beginning of my reflections on today's gospel: there's a reward waiting for us that we're likely to miss if we forfeit this kind of opportunity.

Right here and now in Pentecost season, another prophetic challenge is being offered to us to do something in relation to the street protests and presidential politics that are upon us as we begin a long, hot summer.

Of course there are many ways to answer the gospel call to more abundant life for ourselves and others. Not everyone is needed to volunteer for an outreach program addressing homelessness. But all of us are called to be somewhere that challenges our affinities, and where we carry our cross to victory in Christ.

Join those of us today who are seeking some kind of way to heed the voice that says, 'Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward' (Matt. 10:42). Amen.

[1] [This particular program] . . . is a ministry of presence of parishioners who support individuals who are homeless in their goal toward self-sufficiency.

[These parishioners] are engaged with individuals in need, and all come [seeking] transformation for the parishioner as well as the individual served. Likewise . . . several [other] ministries reflect parishioners' desire to be a "voice" and advocate for the poor, to strive for social justice, and to seek peace in the life of the Atlanta community and the world.

[To repeat:] many parishioners are involved in a variety of [other] community ministries . . . that reflect . . . [our] Baptismal Covenant: "to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being."

[That said, last summer in 2019 this particular program involved] two groups of about five parishioners [who] support individuals participating . . . with a goal of self-sufficiency. Since its inception in 2004, nearly 100 parishioners, engaged in 17 groups, have been involved in this ministry.

<https://www.stlukesrectorsearch.org/community-ministries>; cf. [Forum: Update on Homeless in Atlanta 7/7/2019](#) Crossroads Executive Director Tony Johns and Gateway Center Executive Director Raphael Holloway speak about homelessness in Atlanta.

<https://stlvideo.s3.amazonaws.com/Sermons2019/2019-07-07-Forum-Homelessness.mp4>