

Doughnuts, coffee and communion

*from Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context,
by Stanley Saunders and Chuck Campbell*

Scripture reading

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

—*Luke 14:12-14*



Photo by Susan Nisly

Florian Herrmann tests electronic items at the Common Good Thrift Store (part of East Central Ministries) in Albuquerque.

Reflection

In November 1995, some friends and I spent the night with the community of homeless people who stay in the backyard of the Open Door. As our group arrived, the backyard community welcomed us warmly and enthusiastically. Glenda, a homeless woman who served as our host for the night, showed us where to park and gave us each a hug. Already, roles were being reversed; those of us who liked to think of ourselves as providers of hospitality became instead the recipients.

Following dinner with members of the Open Door Community, we ventured out into the cold, each of us carrying three blankets and a piece of cardboard. Glenda and her friends, however, immediately informed us that our supply of cardboard was inadequate; a single piece of cardboard would not provide adequate insulation for a night during which the temperatures would dip well down into the 30s. “We’ll take you on a cardboard hunt,” they announced, and we set out toward the dumpsters on Ponce de Leon.

During the cardboard hunt, the role reversal continued. We middle-class visitors, who were accustomed to being in control, had to give up our privileged positions and take the role of apprentices learning from the masters. We were now on the turf of homeless people; they alone knew the essential directions and the unspoken rules. We had no choice but to trust our well-being to this group of strangers. Our trust was not misplaced. Soon we all had enough cardboard to get us through the night.

Together, we sat down on the ground in a circle and began to share stories. Those who live economically privileged lives were taught about the fragility of life, as the homeless hosts openly told us about their journeys to homelessness. An unfortunate incident, an encounter with the police, an addiction, a divorce—the reasons for homelessness were numerous. However, one thread ran through each story: Poor people suffer tremendous consequences for even small mistakes or misfortunes. Incidents that usually have no drastic consequences for middle-class folks—because of our money, our connections, our education, even our self-confidence—can be devastating for those who are poor. How many middle-class folks go to jail for having to urinate? How many wealthy people become homeless because of a divorce or even an addiction, much less because of a traffic violation, which for one of our hosts was the first step toward homelessness? During this time of sharing, the vulnerability of poor people became a tangible reality.

As the evening progressed—from the initial welcome to the cardboard

hunt to the shared stories—barriers were slowly being chipped away as roles were reversed. However, the most important event was yet to come. As the chill began to set in and people began to shuffle around, I noticed one homeless man—James—had quietly gotten up and left the circle. He went over to a knapsack and rummaged around for a few moments. When he returned, he had a box of donuts that he had stashed away to share with the group of visiting strangers. He took the box of donuts, broke it open, and gave it to the person next to him, who took a donut and passed on the rest. I realized immediately that we were sharing communion. I remembered Jesus—a homeless Jesus, an oppressed Jesus—feeding the five thousand with a few loaves and fish. I remembered Jesus sharing meals with the outcasts. I remembered Jesus giving bread to his disciples at the Last Supper and at the table in Emmaus. James knew we needed to share a meal together. So he brought the donuts and gave them to us. And in the odd circle of strangers—rich and poor, black and white, housed and homeless—Jesus was present, and we shared food as equals. It was a joyful, thankful, Eucharistic celebration, a foretaste of that great banquet when all God’s children will sit together at table in shalom!

When Jesus, at the Last Supper, said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he was not simply instituting a sacrament. Jesus was also telling his disciples to continue the table fellowship he had modeled during his time with them—table fellowship with strangers and enemies, tax collectors and sinners, insiders and outsiders. In such table fellowship Jesus is present, breaking down barriers between people and bringing about reconciliation. At such meals our oppressive social order, reinforced in everyday table practices, is undermined, and the reign of God breaks into the world. When we practice Jesus’ peculiar “table manners,” our activity coincides with God’s activity in the world—and that is sacramental. “Do *this* in remembrance of me.”

Questions

- Where have I experienced “communion” during my service assignment?

- Where might I offer “communion” to someone else?

- How am I being called to more deeply shift my perspective on myself, God, others, the world?

Prayer

God, open our eyes to those around us. Give us the courage and love to reach out in communion to others who may be different from us. Amen.



Salome Preisendanz serves at Downtown Soup Kitchen's Hope Center in Anchorage, Alaska.

Photo by Susan Nisly