

What Should We Do with Homeless People?

Rise and Shine – August 26th

Matthew 25:37-40

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (For context, read 25:31-46.)

According to these words from Jesus, helping the needy, which certainly includes the homeless, is not optional for those who wish to be judged faithful to God.

In the news

Can a community make it illegal to be homeless?

The debate arose in Cincinnati, as it has this year in cities like Los Angeles, Seattle and Nashville, after dozens of homeless people set up camp near the heart of the city. It started here on Third Street, just blocks from office buildings, the Bengals' stadium and a major freeway.

After the camp grew to include tents and belongings, a judge declared homeless camps a public nuisance and banned them in the affected part of downtown. When people from the camp moved to just beyond the boundaries set by the judge, he expanded the ban to include most of the city.

U.S. District Judge Timothy Black said the expanded order "effectively made being homeless in most of Cincinnati illegal." And he said that was OK, as long as there's enough room in shelters for homeless people living on the streets.

If being homeless itself can be declared illegal, as Black suggested in his ruling, how does the relationship between communities and their homeless population change? "A decision like this in Cincinnati is problematic because it ignores a population that needs our help," said Eve Garrow, a policy analyst for the American Civil Liberties Union in Southern California. "We're facing a whole new set of moral, ethical and potential legal issues coming down the road."

No one was arrested in Cincinnati for violating the ban, and a dozen or so people from the camps relocated this week to private property. The rest dispersed on their own, either to less conspicuous spots or to shelters.

Advocate Josh Spring told the Associated Press the group has been "chased by the city and the county" and has nowhere else to go. Spring said it'll be more difficult for services to reach homeless individuals after they've scattered, and some have gone into hiding. City officials who pushed for the camps' removal say their goal is to protect public safety, not to punish the homeless.

In his ruling, Black cited a 2006 case from Los Angeles. In that case, a federal appeals court ruled it was cruel and unusual punishment to arrest someone for being homeless if they had nowhere else to go, such as a shelter. Black's ruling said the availability of shelter space meant communities could make such arrests. The difference is subtle, Garrow said, but the ruling essentially used a decision that shielded the homeless from arrest in Los Angeles to justify arresting them in Cincinnati.

She said using shelter space as the deciding factor on whether police can arrest the homeless is dangerous because all shelters aren't created equal. Some lack access to social services and some are restricted based on age, sex or criminal record. Homeless couples, or homeless people with pets cannot find shelters that allow them to remain with their loved ones.

The issue has become an important one for downtown business owners who are forced to consider if the presence of homeless individuals hinders their sales.

For Fountain Square Chipotle manager Megan Clemmons, the homeless are both customers and, occasionally, problems. About 15 homeless people a day buy meals at the Chipotle. A few times Clemmons has had to call police when homeless people act out in the store. During an especially stormy day, Clemmons remembers a man pulling the fire alarm so he would be arrested and taken out of the weather. More recently, police responded when a homeless man refused to stop pouring water on himself in the restaurant.

At Tom + Chee on Court Street, manager Dave DiGiacomo said a purchase is required to sit at tables or use the restroom. Still, panhandlers on the sidewalk outside the store drive off regular customers.

Sixth Street Panera Bread manager Davya Landoll said she has to use discretion when dealing with homeless customers. When temperatures rise in the summer, Landoll gives away more water cups and lets people cool off inside, even if they can't buy anything.

"We are a business. We make money, but if you're just sitting there and you just need a cool spot, I get it. It's hot out there," she said. But Landoll acknowledges that can sometimes alienate other customers.

"It may sound nasty and mean, but somebody paying 15 bucks for a salad and sandwich combo doesn't want to sit there next to someone who's not well-groomed. Some of them smell, and it can just kind of turn people off," Landoll said. "It's tricky because you're trying to maintain a business and also trying to have a heart.

Homelessness is not a protected class like race or religion, meaning it isn't explicitly illegal for a business to deny a person service because they are homeless. Tristia Bauman, senior attorney for the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, said it's often a judgment based on appearance, but there's more to the problem than meets the eye.

"Too often homeless people are not engaged in any type of threatening behavior. They just look homeless, and for that reason a business doesn't want them inside or they don't want them around," Bauman said.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 22:26-27

If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. (For context, read 22:21-27.)

The basic point of this Old Testament law is that compassion, mercy and a sense of community should trump personal benefit. True, for a lender to return a pawned cloak before the debtor repays the loan does not help the lender's bottom line, but it may save the debtor's life, and it recognizes the common humanity of both the lender and the debtor. It places community above personal aggrandizement or personal comfort.

And note that God adds the statement about his character: "I am compassionate." Another function of the law was to tell people how to be holy

as God is holy. Since compassion is part of God's holiness, then people who seek to be holy ought also to be compassionate.

Questions: How might these verses apply to Cincinnati's homelessness problem? To what extent does our high standard of living constitute taking our neighbor's coat? Can we reasonably assuage any guilt we feel for our level of prosperity by addressing social problems like homelessness?

Mark 14:7

For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. (For context, read 14:3-9.)

This text is often quoted out of context, sometimes as a way of saying that since Jesus said we'd always have the poor with us, we probably can't do much about the problem of poverty so we ought to leave well enough alone and tend to religious things. It can even be quoted to suggest that Jesus intends for some people to be poor.

But in this text, Jesus is paraphrasing Moses in Deuteronomy 15:11: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" And Moses' words are part of a larger passage that says when the people come into their land, they must recognize that everything they have comes from God and they have an obligation to take care of the poor among them.

Questions: What are the limits of your obligations to the homeless? What have you done when a homeless person has shown up at church? Do you think you have done too much? Enough? Do you believe there is any solution to the problem of homelessness? What are the differences between being "poor" and being "needy"?

Prayer for the Poor and the Neglected (BCP p.826)

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*