

The Experience of Being Homeless...

[Continued from page 1]

It is the condition of homelessness that Jesus adopted for his lifestyle and ministry. It is the homeless people in the world that we should strive to be like.

For those of us with homes and families and garages and attics full of stuff it should be disorienting and a little frightening to read the fourteenth chapter of the gospel of Luke. There Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of God in which he says that not everyone who could be at the banquet table will make it to their seats. The reason some never arrive is that they are caught up in their reliance upon their possessions and upon their relationships. The ones who do eat bread in the kingdom of God are poor people who don't have possessions to distract them. And people like the poor who are also not self-reliant: the crippled, the blind and the lame. Jesus describes the master of house taking people in off the street who are presumably empty-handed. This is the crowd we should all want to be a part of.

Following that parable Jesus gives a call to discipleship in which he says the only way to be a disciple is to break away from your family. To leave your home and family. On top of that he says the only way to be a disciple is to give up all your possessions. In other words the only way to be a disciple of Jesus is to be like him: homeless. Jesus had a mother and siblings but the gospels tell us they did not understand him and they were not among his followers. And when we meet Jesus he had not married, he had not settled down, he had not taken a job. He had no address. He had no possessions.

And he called for his disciples to adopt this lifestyle of homelessness. In Matthew 9 he tells them not to carry their own food, but to rely upon others to feed them. He tells them not to wear shoes. And in Luke 6 he says things like "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

There is something wrong in having to be poor, in having to be hungry. No one should have to live that way. But there are truths about life and about the kingdom of God that can be found in those conditions, Jesus said. Even blessings.

When my daughter Audrey was getting read to graduate from high school in 2003 she was invited by the News Journal to enter an essay contest for "Academic All-stars". The topic for the essay was to write about who had been a hero in your life. Most of the finalists ended up writing about family members who had inspired them. Audrey wrote about the children at the homeless shelter in Newark. She wrote this:

"I define a hero as a person who demonstrates character strengths that I would like to emulate, and who is able to overcome difficulties gracefully. I have found many heroes at Emmaus House, the homeless shelter at which I have volunteered about once a week for the past three years.

"Although the faces often change, the same spirit of courage and love remains. Many of the children that I work with remain happy and joyful, even when they have had to change schools and adjust to a new house with new rules and new people. It inspires me to see the determination that they use to tackle life and the ability that they have to look beyond material things for true fulfillment in loving relationships with others.

"I love going to Emmaus House when I have had a bad day because the children teach me how to look past myself to the good of others. I often desire to be more like the children that I work with, to have the strength to deal with huge obstacles that lie in my way while keeping a smile on my face and enjoying my life."

One of the qualities that Audrey sees in the homeless children at Emmaus House is a capacity for joy and enjoyment in the midst of their difficulties. I think that's the lesson she would most like to bring into her own life. I have din-

ner at Wayfarer's House twice a month and the conversation around the dining room is always uplifting and enjoyable. The mood at the dining hall at Clairvaux Farm has the same lightness and determined optimism. I see people brought together by difficult circumstances who now have to share their meals and share their lives, and who do it graciously. There is a woman who sits in the corner of the dining hall of Clairvaux Farm who always has a smile. That I always find her with her Bible open there partly explains it. But only partly. Because while God gave her her pretty face, she chooses to wear it with a smile.

A second quality my daughter observed among homeless children in Newark I have observed in homeless children in Elkton. That is an ability to live with love and satisfaction without the aid of a lot of material possessions. I started going to Wayfarer's House to lead a Bible study and that's how I got invited to dinner. After a few weeks the adult interest in the Bible study dwindled, but two girls in house, in the second and fourth grades, wanted to participate. So I did my best to talk to them about "the purpose-driven life." The next week when I arrived the youngest, Teairra, was drawing me a picture during supper. It was a picture of a Bible. Then she drew a picture of a church, with me up front as the minister. Her older sister Mellissa rendered another version of the same scene. I've now given up on the adults and meet with Teairra, Mellissa and their friend Gretchen to talk about Moses or David or Jesus and learn how to look up bible verses.

These children liked having their own bible lesson with the minister and to say thank you they wanted to give me a gift. They don't have the money right now to go out and buy something. Most of their material possessions they left behind before coming to Wayfarer's House. But they had a tablet of paper that said at the top of every page "just for you" and they drew me pictures of things they thought I would like: a Bible,

a church. They shared the best they have. They shared themselves.

A third quality often in evidence among homeless persons, which can teach us about discipleship in the kingdom of God, is a radical dependency in their relationship to the world. Jesus suggests that it is related to a radical dependency upon God. C.M. Sherman introduced himself by saying that that he had been homeless in Atlanta for twenty years before being taken in by the Open Door Community, but that it was not by choice. "I am not homeless of my own accord," he said. "There was nothing I could do to help myself." And he described working out of the labor pool in that city, making just enough to get something to eat each day before returning to his cat hole. Speaking of the homeless he observed, "They don't have a voice. They can't fight. I laid out there twenty years. I knew it wasn't right, but there wasn't anything I could do about it."

People who lived like C.M. Sherman did for twenty years are described in the book of Hebrews as heroes of faith. Sometimes the eleventh chapter of Hebrews is described as the Bible's "hall of fame" because it gives a record of the lives of people of faith that "received approval" and whom we should emulate. Included are people who "went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute." They wandered and lived "in caves and holes in the ground." And these were people "of whom the world was not worthy".

Jesus makes the same sort of judgment in his parable of the banquet in the kingdom of God. The ones who make it and find their seats are ones with nothing left to lose. When the call comes, they can leave the world behind. The folks with investments and securities get to keep possession of the world, but miss the better invitation.

God is determined to have a party, Jesus tells us. But not everyone will find their way. The homeless have a better chance of making it there than the rest.