

Parking lot palms: Hebrews 5:1-10

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

We are now seen by the world as having joined the ranks of those who know "poverty" in a way we have not experienced it ever before. There have been wars, depressions and tragedies of major proportions, but this one [September 11] somehow is different. This time the blow has staggered us. . . . We are a people of great wealth and resources who for a moment have the opportunity to join Lazarus in a beggar's view of the world. We can learn an incredible lesson from down here about values and priorities, about needs and wants, about the way much of the rest of the world views us. It is an opportunity the rich man of the parable did not have until it was too late. It is the "wisdom of the poor." If we can grasp this wisdom, perhaps we will alter our prayer from "God bless America" to "God make America a blessing to all the nations of the world." (Pastor Richard Michel, Trinity Lutheran Church, Staten Island)

The early believers grasped on to an image of Jesus as the priest who is in solidarity with humanity at its most vulnerable. The Book of Hebrews gives us a vision of divine solidarity, "able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is subject to weakness." The one who "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears," is the one who "learned obedience through what he suffered."

Ministries to and with the poor are usually the road not taken by seminaries, candidates, programs, initiatives, resources. The massive effort by the whole world to be at Ground Zero in person, prayer and support magnifies the ground zeros we have missed: AIDS, spending more for jails than schools in some of our communities, the 20 million American children who go to bed hungry every night, the grinding poverty of much of the world. Jimmy Carter told us once that the hardest thing to do in this world is for a person in poverty and a person of privilege to be placed in the same room together.

Electra was four years old and lived with her mother in a welfare motel among prostitutes and drug abusers and the poorest of the poor. At a Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless, a pastor met Electra and her mother and invited them to stay with

her for a weekend. Electra noticed that her new friends prayed before meals and implored them, "Please, teach me the God words." She then taught them to her neighbors in the motel. Her mother told us that the child could no longer bite into a peanut butter sandwich without making everyone around her say the God words.

Our great high priest chooses to stand with these people, and from their midst to renew the church and teach it once again the God words.

"Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf."

When you invite the poor they come. Edgar lived alone in the same motel as Electra. He often walked two miles to our church. He was a bit rough around the edges and would sometimes get loud and demanding. My heart sank on Palm Sunday when he was waiting in the sanctuary for me after a full day of liturgies, first communions and pastoral conversations. I knew that Edgar would need a ride and some of my time, some bits and pieces of what I could produce toward his survival, and I wanted to go home.

On the drive back to his motel he talked my ear off and criticized the sermon. I prayed for patience. When I pulled into the parking lot of the run-down motor inn, a door opened and an elderly woman emerged. She knocked on another door and another elderly woman peeked out. They limped to our car. Others waiting at the edges of the parking lot followed. I realized that they were expecting us. For the first time I noticed that Edgar's hand grasped a bunch of palms. He had promised to bring his neighbors palms from our liturgy.

With all his rough edges, Edgar was the only person who passed for a pastor in that backwater parish of broken souls. There could be no more fertile soil for biblical "church growth" than this concrete parking lot and these waiting children of God and their wisdom "from below."

He gave the elderly lady a palm branch through his window and she clutched her piece of palm as if it were the Hope diamond. I watched in awe as the palms from our liturgy were distributed among those like Jesus "in the days of his flesh." Edgar got out of the car. "Bless us!" he commanded me. I got out of the car, blessed their palms, placed my hands on each forehead and pronounced benediction. If I had had bread and wine I would have fed them right there.

“He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness . . . So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.”

Our context for mission must have something to do with turning our church’s life toward a model of “priests according to the order of Melchizedek,” as well as the deep corporal and spiritual needs shared by all humanity in the solidarity at Ground Zero.

God willing, our lamentations are not the isolation and depression of wounded entitlement or private grief, but the community at the foot of the cross moving outward in solidarity and love toward the sorrow of the world for which Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered.”