The housed, the homeless, and the right to be somewhere

Faced with someone trying to deny me shelter from the rain, I thought, are you kidding?

by Jennifer M. McBride in the March 15, 2017 issue

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On Maundy Thursday, four of us from the Open Door, an intentionally interracial, residential, Christian community in Atlanta, stretch out in Woodruff Park, attempting to warm up under the rising sun. At the edge of Georgia State University, nestled among downtown skyscrapers, the park marks contested space that business professionals, college students, and homeless people daily navigate. Recent beautification projects are noticeable, like the fountain framing one end of the lawn, but there are subtle renovations as well, architectural details intended to make the park inhospitable to people who are homeless: benches with center divides obstructing attempts to lie down and flowerpots lining the marble wall where homeless people once sat.

These details are particularly apparent this day to those of us who spent the night on the streets just hours before, celebrating the Open Door's Holy Week sacrament of following the vagrant Christ, a practice that allows us to glimpse the hell of homelessness. We gather in this contested space now to rest and to reflect on our night in light of the lectionary reading—Peter's confession of faith, denial of Jesus, and bitter lament.

In a 1933 sermon on this text, titled "Peter and the Church Struggle," Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of the one whom Jesus addressed: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." Who is this Peter? Bonhoeffer asks. Peter is the one who confessed his faith. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," he says in response to Jesus' pointed question, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter is the one who "denied his Lord," indeed on "the same night Judas betrayed him." But Peter is also the one who "went out and wept bitterly." Thus, Bonhoeffer concludes, "Peter's church is not only the church which confesses its faith, nor only the church which denies its Lord; it is the church which still can weep."

Lent and Holy Week comprise a season of formation, preparing Christians for Good Friday and Easter, initiating us into the way of the cross and ultimately into the power of the resurrection. If Peter is our guide, indeed our rock and foundation, the only community prepared to face the cross and receive redemptive power is a people that lament. The church of Peter is not merely a body of believers then, a body that acknowledges its sin as a general truth, but is a people shaped by a profound understanding and honest accounting of how it has denied Jesus, the one whom we encounter, Matthew 25 tells us, in the guise of the oppressed. The church of Peter is the church that laments the specific ways it denies and ostracizes those who, like Jesus in his final days, are most despised.

The social and political significance of Lent and Holy Week is precisely this lament—the ability to open oneself up to the pains and needs of the world. This may happen only when we listen to the depth of suffering experienced by people victimized by structural sin and grieve the ways in which we have overlooked or ignored that pain. Embodied lament then takes the shape of political activism and protest—practices that help the discipleship community grow in empathy and solidarity with those who suffer harm. In turn, lament functions as a wellspring of hope. It becomes the force that stimulates active participation in the repair of the world.

Lament as political protest takes a specific shape during Holy Week. Every year, members of the Open Door spend the week on the streets in 24-hour blocks to gain a more immediate understanding of the pain of homelessness. “We go out on the streets during Holy Week to remember the Passion of Jesus Christ as we walk the *via dolorosa* of the homeless poor,” says cofounder Murphy Davis, who began the practice in 1985 when Palm Sunday fell on the last day of March, the night most shelters in the city of Atlanta would close for the season.

Walking this *via dolorosa*—this way of sorrow—helps those of us who are housed observe firsthand that, as Davis says, “homelessness is like a slow execution, [since] the monotony of the day, the exhaustion, the punishment your body takes from the weather, the lack of healthy food, the slavery of labor pools—all lead to death.” It also helps us accept responsibility for the fact that so many citizens of Atlanta are sentenced to this punishment. Although the gritty and graphic details of street life cannot be experienced or observed in just 24 hours or even a week—“for some people every week is Holy Week,” one homeless man said to me—the practice draws the housed into a more embodied understanding of homelessness, in turn increasing our capacity for lament and for constructive acts of hope.

The homeless and the housed have divergent relationships to space, a realization that becomes clear my first time on the streets. A group of us are sleeping behind Trinity United Methodist Church for a few hours until we are all awakened at 3:00 a.m. by a great gush of wind that seconds later brings with it lightning, thunder, and a torrential downpour. We knew there was a possibility of a thunderstorm, and before going to sleep we took notice of the parking garage across the way.

As the wind howls and the rain begins, resident volunteer Quiana Hawkins and I quickly gather our things, and with skullcaps on our heads and cardboard tucked under our arms, we take off toward the well-lit garage as two homeless men sleeping yards away from us bolt into the darkness in the other direction. We arrive as a security guard behind glass jumps out of his seat, and assuming we are homeless, frantically waves his arms and says, “No! No! No! You can’t be here!” To which Quiana responds instinctively and with a tone that conveys the obviousness of the situation, “But there’s lightning and it’s pouring down rain.” “Please, may we stand here?” I plead in a tone that, like Quiana’s, demands basic human decency. “Just until the storm passes?” With a deeply confused look on his face, as if he is now noticing that we are not homeless and yet knew that we had been sleeping by the church across the way, the attendant sits back down without explicitly giving us

permission but nevertheless allowing us to stay.

As the rest of our group makes their way to the garage, Quiana and I stand there processing what has just happened. To the attendant, we undoubtedly looked homeless as we slept by the church and then raced across the concrete with our dark clothes and cardboard in hand, but perhaps upon arrival in our encounter with him, we did not have the presence of those who are homeless. For instead of hiding from police and security lest we wind up in jail, we had a basic sense of claim to the parking garage. It was raining and we needed shelter, simple as that. What I take immediately from that experience is the different relationship that those who are housed and those who are homeless have to space. For the housed, there is some basic sense of belonging, a basic sense of a right to be somewhere. For the homeless, there is experience after experience of exclusion with the clear message that they do not have that same right simply to exist somewhere.

In Atlanta, this message is made explicit through numerous signs—“No Trespassing,” “No Loitering”—and, more recently, through blue-light security cameras on almost every downtown street corner. The cameras have successfully done their intended work of controlling the movement of homeless people, pushing them deeper into hiding, while also communicating to people like me to beware of “people like them.”

This message of exclusion is communicated in a unique and extreme way to the Morning Prayer gathering of the Church of the Common Ground, an Episcopal worshiping community that seeks to be “a sacramental presence on the streets.” Maundy Thursday of our Holy Week vigil, we attend what happens to be the last service in their storefront space in a part of downtown where the reality of homelessness is impossible to miss. There we hear the everyday prayers of chronic and episodic homeless people, many of which include concerns about jail and prison. “Lord, give us our daily bread,” one woman prays. “We thank you that we are hungry but not starving, homeless but not locked up.” The next week, the congregation has to move its gathering to the corner of an adjacent parking lot, where they say their prayers under a tree that provides enough shade for all—until the owners of the lot cut the tree down.

Holy Week is a time when the community responds to the call of Romans 12 to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice” in an intentional and concentrated manner—the admonition that Ed Loring, cofounder of the Open Door, calls “the

disciple's primary method of social analysis." This methodology helps Christians "be not conformed to the pattern of this world" (in this case, conformed to the pattern of exclusion) "but be transformed by the renewing of minds" in order "to discern . . . the will of God." In regard to the right to belong somewhere, or more specifically, the human right to housing and shelter, it only took one night on the streets for my mind to be renewed.

I am in a profession where knowledge is gained mostly in the classroom through books, by reading and debating multiple and opposing arguments, many of which can sound quite convincing, all at the same time. The social analysis that comes from embodied engagement often proves to be the clarifying factor.

In a theology or ethics course, for example, one may read a school of thought that argues that the language of "rights" is detrimental to Christian ethics because it is too individualistic or bolsters democratic liberalism, which some argue leaves no room for particular Christian commitments in the public realm. When I first heard these arguments in graduate school, they gave me pause. Maybe as a Christian I should not speak of a "human right" to such things as housing, I thought.

Other lines of thinking appeal to realism and argue that while the notion of human rights may well serve as a common moral language across cultures and faith traditions, not everything, like housing, can or should count as a human right. We have to be realistic, so that argument goes, about if and how a society could pay for something like housing if it were deemed a right. "Good point," I have thought in the classroom.

But what I learned through my body the night of Holy Wednesday on the streets of downtown Atlanta amid a threatening storm is that I believe that shelter is a right. I believe it is a right for me. When faced with someone who was trying to deny me this, I thought, "Are you kidding? You're not going to let us get shelter in an empty parking garage?" "There's lightning and it's pouring down rain," voiced Quiana. If I hold this deeply embedded belief in the right to shelter for myself, I must hold it for others. I must work for it for others. Because of this embodied knowledge, I now have no problem claiming unequivocally that it is the will of God that all be housed because housing is a human right. By placing my body in a new situation, in unfamiliar space, my mind has been renewed.

When Open Door members invite homeless people into their home, perceived enemies become friends. Those friendships in turn expand and transform space, not only during Holy Week as they give us entrance to the streets where we would not otherwise go, but also in our everyday lives as we see homeless friends around the neighborhood and in adjacent localities—in all the various places where their presence is scorned at worst and tolerated at best. Because of these friendships, I am more likely to speak to other homeless men I do not yet know, further expanding the possibility of friendship and a mutual sense of belonging.

The streets are intimate but not safe or desirable; they are familiar but not spaces of belonging—not a home. Nor are they the shared space of belonging—the space of social flourishing and transformed relations—that defines beloved community.

We find that shared space of belonging back at the Open Door during the Saturday night Easter vigil. After a cookout, homeless friends are invited to spend the night in the front yard with members of the community and wake up to an extravagant Easter brunch. Although I have little experience falling asleep to the constant noise of traffic and the bars across the street, when I see the watchful eye of Calvin Kimborough, who is tasked to stay awake and protect that space, I feel safe and am better able to rest. While lying on the streets, I was quite aware of the position of my body, the least vulnerable position being on my back, but in the front yard I am able to relax and get more comfortable. I glimpse why homeless people who come to worship can barely stay awake, often dozing in and out of sleep. Because homelessness requires constant vigilance—sleeping with one eye open, so to speak—exhaustion often takes over in safe and welcoming space.

The journey toward beloved community begins with this transformation of space that resists alienation and exclusion. It begins with the creation of shared spaces of belonging, which may come in various forms, from services of Morning Prayer to houses of hospitality. For the housed, it includes a journey toward the streets, a journey of embodied lament that makes the fight for decent and affordable housing—the repair of the world—urgent and concrete.

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