

Title:

Applying Law and Gospel When Housing the Homeless

Thesis:

Housing and caring for the homeless within the confines of the church will include handling situations that arise when homeless individual do not follow the rules. In addition to law-contexts, the care-giver guides the individual to the way of the Gospel through catechesis.

Particular problems to be addressed:

The question is how to mentor someone who simply wants to use the church as a facility to do whatever they want, when they want. The root of their behavior is usually fear and depression. Many give lip service to the Word, yet their actions are far from it. The Pastor's goal is that they understand the law in its full sternness and the Gospel in its full sweetness.

Case study:

In the California Bay Area homelessness is rampant. Not only do we have the "typical" homeless community, due to the ludicrous housing market, we also have many formerly housed people, including members of our church, finding themselves without housing. Currently, two young homeless men (one of whom is a church member) are living in the church basement. A parishioner says, "Pastor, have you seen the church kitchen?" I replied, "No, I have not." When I go to look in the kitchen, it is a mess, dishes are everywhere. A huge piece of meat was left in a large pan. At the steps of the basement, there are beer cans everywhere. It smells like weed in the kitchen. I text the two men, we'll call them Billy and Bob, about the offenses. Bob replied, washing his hands, saying it was not him. Billy does not reply. Two hours later, the mess is cleaned up. I talk with Bob about the mess. Was there a party here last night? Bob replies, "Oh no, just cooking for myself." I ask, "What about the beer cans?" Bob responds, "Those are not mine. My friends drink them at their home and then bring them here to church so I can recycle them because I don't have a job and I need some money." I ask, "What about the weed smell?" Bob replies, "I have never smoked weed here." Beside myself, I tell Bob that I am concerned about him. I say, "Bob, you are leaving in three weeks. You have no job, no place to go, and no money." Bob says, "I will be alright." I replied, "Do you know that God loves you?" We discussed 1 John 4:10: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Bob lowers his head and says, "Yes, I know that Jesus loves me. I am just trying to get everything together. I just got a job and then my ankle breaks." I reply gently, "God knows about suffering as well, and He cares for you in your suffering." We continued to talk, and I prayed for him. Bob has many things that are going on in his life. Yet as the Pastor I did not set good boundaries. Nor did I apply the law right away when sin was discovered. I waited for a while because I was busy, or on other occasions I simply wished the

situation would resolve itself. I let Bob get away with a lot. When I did hold him accountable, he did push back; yet it allowed me the opportunity to speak the Gospel as well. I learned that I should have set crystal clear rules as well as try to visit with Bob more often to see how he was doing. As Bob reaches the end of his stay at the church, I am thankful for the time I have had teaching him, and I pray that he will come back to church to receive God's gifts after he is no longer living 20 steps from the sanctuary.

Conclusion:

Housing the homeless is difficult, especially on church property. When they are living right under your nose, their sins are very apparent. They are also often seen by many members of the church, which can lead to a lot of drama. Unless the homeless persons are highly motivated, it is easy for them to slide into their comfortable dark den of depression and not leave. They need to hear the Gospel and that they are loved and valued as heirs of Christ. They also need to hear the law, especially when these individuals break rules and disrespect the church. Ultimately, in the future, we will not be housing the homeless in our church basement. We are creating a workout space for church and outreach purposes there. After having housed six people in the church over the past two years, the most valuable lesson learned is that a pastor or mercy-worker alone cannot create a living environment for the homeless in which they will thrive and be able to find housing. This would be a fulltime job which cannot be done alone. Nevertheless, the church will continue to help and mentor homeless individuals. The congregation (and pastor) will be better situated to do so if these persons are not living on the premises.

Rev. Isaac Schuller

First Immanuel

San Jose, California