

Caring for the Homeless with the Theology of the Cross

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Title:

The Role of Hope and Love on the Road to Recovery from Addiction and Homelessness

Thesis:

Without purpose, strong relational ties, and hope for the future - those suffering from addiction are more likely to remain addicted and living on the streets.

Particular problems to be addressed:

The core problem is to get people off the streets and to keep them off the streets. A corollary problem is the stigma associated with addiction, mental health issues, and homelessness.

The Dialogue:

Recently “Partners in Hope,” a two-day seminar on addiction recovery, co-hosted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the National League of Cities, was held in the nation’s capital. In his opening remarks, the U.S. Surgeon General spoke of his own family being affected by addiction. He said, “I share my family’s struggle to illustrate that addiction can happen to anyone — even the brother of the U.S. Surgeon General. By sharing my story, I hope to give others the courage to share theirs, so that together we can fight stigma.” Adams said the challenge for faith-based organizations who want to help addicts “is that they must make it more attractive for an addict to recover than to get high, because [recovery seems like] ... an impossible dream. ... It is just easier to stay high when you are alienated from family and no one will hire you.”

He went on to say the church holds a vital place in the recovery process and getting people off the streets due to addiction. Replacing despair with hope, and stigma with love, were key. After the introductory remarks, I was asked to participate in the opening panel to discuss how national faith-based organizations can affect change. To be sure, we are one of a few national church bodies to have an initiative specifically designed to address workforce development as an important element of addiction recovery and in ending homelessness. Whether it is recidivism, lack of prior work experience, or not having a mailing address to give to potential employers - these are all barriers to finding employment and the income needed for housing. And if there are those who are deemed unemployable, although they have the capacity to work, the church can become a place for giving second chances and a new path forward.

Of course, this requires congregations and agencies to be equipped to move beyond simply giving aid to becoming more enterprising. Social enterprise is an important tool in providing mercy with dignity and having a right understanding of the sanctity of human life. Each person is created in the image of God and has God-given capabilities, gifts, and talents. Therefore, as it relates to first article gifts, work itself is sacred in that it is a gift from God to serve in a workforce vocation. To be what Luther called masks of God in that we serve our neighbor to provide for others in their daily bread. In Matthew 20, as it is told in The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, there were those in the days of Christ who stood idle in the marketplace rather than working, because no one was willing to hire them. But with that said, is the importance of the theology of the cross - seeing in the weak and despised and lowly, that which is from God and of utmost value. It is how we view, for ourselves, the homeless addict or mentally ill person, that reveals our theology of the cross as it relates to homelessness.

Like Job's friends it is easy for us to cast judgment on those who are in such a vulnerable position. Surely, as these friends alluded, it is by our own poor choices and behaviors that the poor now find themselves down and out. It is easy for us, like the rich man, who passed the homeless Lazarus at his gate every day, to look down upon such a wretch, to see them as less than, or even subhuman. After all they are viewed as weak, desperate, criminals, liars, sinful, or just pathetic beggars. And yet we need to recognize that this is the human condition... no we are not all addicted specifically to narcotic drugs or are living on the streets... but we all have our idols that can physically and spiritually possess us, and we all are deserving of finding ourselves outside the city walls. And we most certainly would con ourselves, and even God if we could, into believing that we are somehow worthy - in and of ourselves - of the riches of the Kingdom. We are all weak and desperate and habitual lawbreakers and con artists... and yes when it comes to our deservedness, pathetic bottom feeding beggars. I believe this is the only path to truly removing the stigma of homelessness, by seeing the human condition of sin in us all, if we are truly concerned with a theology of the cross. Then, and only then, are we on the correct playing field to have true empathy and compassion. To truly understand the grace of God, who with reckless abandon, has pity on us most unworthy beggars, and in turn has made us heirs of a kingdom.

By way of an actual case, I will use a man named "Jack." Jack grew up in a Lutheran home and went to a Lutheran grade school. Like many homeless addicts, he fell in with the wrong crowd at a young age and found himself living on the streets. As for me, like many pastors, I sought out to turn his life around. I thought if I can locate him, and offer my assistance, certainly he would recover his life. And yet, even with a police escort into the seedier parts of the city where Jack was known to circulate, I was unable to locate him at first. This helped me to first consider that some lost sheep want to remain lost rather than to be found. Because when I finally did receive a tip on how to find him, he did not need to seem to need the assistance I thought he did. He had a means for monthly income, a place to live in, and clean clothes. That meant he had made a conscious decision to live on the streets to maintain his habit and run with his friends.

As a seelsorger and spiritual diagnostician, I assumed this meant a rebellious sinner needs the great weight of the law. But something else that I discovered, was that for many addicts, there is often no shortage of guilt and shame as the Law has done its work. Jack had stolen from his family, become uncharacteristically violent, and was not there for his own father's health issues or even funeral. The addiction had become all consuming, turning him inward, while at the same time crushing him with accusation and indignity. Even as the Law and Gospel were administered, sometimes in prison visits, the drugs remained his idol that possessed him in body and soul. This is most certainly akin to the prodigal: lust for pleasure and filled with greed and pride and deceit to slake an insatiable desire.

Jack's family, not wanting to enable him further and for their own safety, were forced to basically disown him. And yet what of the prodigal Father in Heaven? I use Jack as an example rather than a multitude of other more successful cases, because it is a good example of how we could say "Well we tried, and he doesn't really want our help, and so let's move on." This is not biblical. For the Good Shepherd, he can never say the 99 are enough when there are 100. His search is relentless. And for the woman who lost her coin, she searches through the night, into the darkest corners, until her treasure is found. And speaking of treasure, there is no cost too great to buy the treasure where it has been buried. It is hard to say if Jack was simply too far gone both mentally and physically to recover after so many years of addiction, and yet the Church never gives up on her son. Yes, this is important, this is not a nameless stranger, Jack is the baptismal name that was given at the font - the very womb of rebirth.

Jack spoke often in prison of a lost dream of going to culinary school to become a chef. The church then continues to reach out in hope. And this is of grave theological importance. Just as we would not allow for false teaching in the church, to deny mercy, to teach against it even, is by all accounts, heresy. And more than that when we read the Large Catechism description of the 5th commandment, Luther minces no words to equate not caring for the least as culpability to murder. And so too, in Christ's own words describing the Day of Judgment, it is by no mistake that the title Christ uses when He says "As you have done for the least of these, you have done for me"... he is referred to as King... because in God's taxonomy... to not care for the poor is a treason against the royal family. And thanks be to God, the prodigal Father is always on the ready to welcome us home, to place the familial ring on the finger and crown of eternal life upon the head. Jack is someone's son, and he is OUR brother. By proclaiming repentance, we pray that he would be jarred to his senses as the prodigal child, and by the Gospel we pray He would find His way back home.

Conclusion:

So, in conclusion, when it comes to recovery and homelessness, a few things bear repeating. First off, is the importance of being involved in either the initial recovery or engaging the person almost immediately after being released from a recovery facility. At this point a loving and safe environment needs to be provided that gives structure and leads them on a new path. This includes rebuilding human relationships. A common thread related to homelessness seems to be broken ties to family and friends. And while those under our care need both the Law and the Gospel, we must remember that we do not want to reinforce the stigma of their situation being any worse than our common human condition. There is no shortage of shame in being homeless, with a constant barrage of being made to feel as society's refuse, and so hope for the future is vital to recovery. Indeed we must find ourselves in the muck and the mire of a very messy life. But we must also provide unconditional love, tough love as it might be, and a way to lift them out of their circumstances. To break the cycle of these circumstances that are keeping them in their present conditions. So to conclude by reversing the thesis in the positive. By giving purpose, helping to rebuild strong relational ties, and providing hope for the future - those suffering from addiction are less likely to remain addicted and living on the streets and more likely to remain on the road to recovery.