

“The Cross We Share”

August 31, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28

The Rev. William T. Hennessy

It was a very hot July day when Michael first made his way downtown to volunteer at the homeless shelter. He wanted to make a difference with his life. Born in the suburbs, never really being deprived of anything, he wanted to help out others less fortunate. As he walked the ten blocks from where he had parked his car, he was a little surprised to see so many people on the streets wearing such heavy clothing. One man was actually wearing a parka and looked like he was drowning in it.

In his t-shirt and shorts Michael strolled into the shelter to find out what he needed to do. “Well, you can help set up the cots. People are going to be lining up to get in in about half an hour.” Cots. Just plain canvas cots. No blankets this time of year, no pillows, even. After setting up the cots he went into the kitchen to help with the food. It was stew, and pretty hot by the looks of it. He thought sandwiches and jell-o might be better for this weather.

He put on an apron and a ball cap and a pair of plastic gloves and took his place at the dinner line. When the doors opened he was stunned by the number of people who poured in. At first, he kept his eyes on the pot he was ladling from. He didn’t really know what to say, but just wanted to do his job right. Then something caught his eye.

It was a piece of synthetic fur around a hood. It was the man he had seen in the parka outside. Without thinking Michael blurted, “Wow! How can you stand to wear that thing in this heat?” The man just stared at him, seemed to stare right through him, sort of vacant. He shrugged his shoulders, “It’s all I’ve got. Everything I own is in here.”

That’s when Michael looked up and around and began to see the people there for the first time. He realized this wasn’t just a bunch of men down on their luck. There were women and children. There were people who looked like they didn’t belong there, their eyes wide and stunned, like deer in the headlights. He had no idea.

After everyone had been served, instead of grabbing a plate himself, he went into the hall and sat down across from the man with the parka. Little beads of sweat dripped into his stew as he ate. He ate slowly, not lapping it up like he was starving, but deliberately like he wanted to savor it a little. “This is the first hot meal I’ve had this week,” and he said it sort of casually, not resentfully or even gratefully, just a matter of fact.

Watching the man eat, Michael couldn’t help but wonder how he’d come to this. How had this man ended up here? He wanted to ask, but figured it wasn’t any of his

business. He had always assumed that people who lived on the streets were there because they'd blown it somehow. He'd never really said it, but he sort of felt like they had made their beds themselves. And that may have been true about some of the people there, but looking around he realized it couldn't possibly have been true about all of them.

Michael returned home that night feeling very confused. And very troubled. He couldn't just let go of what he had seen; he couldn't just leave it at the shelter. In his comfortable, air-conditioned home, lying on a soft bed, all he could see when he shut his eyes was the misery of that man sitting across from him.....

Well, that was some years ago and it was a turning point in Michael's life. He began spending more and more time at the shelter. In the middle of the summer he'd go down there wearing heavy blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt and a jacket. He knew he might never really understand what these folks were going through, but he wanted to somehow share their condition just a little. And he began to dig into the problem of homelessness in his city. He became an advocate for the poor and started to learn how job loss or lack of insurance or mental illness or abuse could drive folks into homelessness. And he invited others, people he knew, people who were comfortable, whose lives never touched the poverty all around them, he invited them to experience what he had.

Michael found his cross that day. It was one he could have ignored. He didn't have to pick it up, but it called him, it compelled him, to lay it on his shoulders and carry it. Maybe that's what Jesus means. Maybe picking up our cross means entering another's experience of suffering and making it our own. When we do that we lose our lives in a certain way. We let go of old comforts and securities and allow ourselves to be shaped by the movement of God's Spirit within us. It can be very painful and troubling, and at times feel like more of a burden than we can bear. But it's the path Jesus invites us to walk with him, the cross he invites us to share.

So what cross is calling you? What cross will you share? Jesus is inviting you to pick it up; pick it up and join him. Lose your life so you can find it again.

You know, Michael never did see that man in the parka again. Turns out he wasn't a regular fixture at the shelter and no one seemed to know anything about him. But at night when Michael lay on his bed and closed his eyes he could still see that man's face on the other side of the table, always a reminder of the cross he shared.

Amen