

I think I've told y'all about Mercy Church, the ecumenical services we did in the basement of Christ Church, Little Rock. There were a few clergy, a few well-meaning folks, and a lot who slept under the dome of the sky rather than a bedroom ceiling. Whoever you were, whatever state you were in, you were welcome there. You didn't have to be sober. You didn't have to be clean. Mostly, as long as you weren't hurting anybody, you were welcome. Anyway, us well-meaning folks that went home to roofs over our heads had ideas. And it's a good thing we ran those ideas by the rest of Mercy Church before we put 'em into practice, 'cause a lot of the time, we missed the mark. Once, we were sitting around thinking of things we could do to help, so we offered use of the church's washer and dryer. We thought, hey, we can give 'em a set of scrubs to wear while their clothes are getting clean, and then they'll leave with a nice set smelling like crisp detergent. One of the unhoused people balked. As it turned out, there was a shelter at another church up the road, and they did exactly that. But they did more. You had to meet curfew. You couldn't be on any substance stronger than coffee. You had to listen to some preaching and an altar call. If you were grumpy or short with a volunteer, you'd be kicked out and banned for life, sometimes without the clothes you brought in with you. In other words, if we made folks wear scrubs, they'd assume we were the same kind of place where the rules were more important than the people. And that's the last thing we wanted to be.

Actually, going back long before my ordained days, every church I've ever worked in has a similar problem. When a person walks into the place with five layers of different sized coats, a bag with all their belongings, a story on their lips, and a desperate look to their eyes, we help. Or, we want to help. In St. Elmo, Tennessee, that looked like a couch to rest on and a plate full of cut-up donuts. In Newport, Arkansas, that looked like a bookshelf full of basic groceries complete with Vienna sausages. At Christ Church, that looked like an overnight shelter for when temperatures dipped below freezing. Here, we do a lot. We've got a couple of sleeper sofas and a whole heap of blankets. We've got soup in the freezer. We keep hand warmers and thick socks to give away. There's Narcan in the office in case someone ODs. There's little backpacks full of hygiene products. And maybe most importantly, there's you. When we find someone asleep on the couch, we don't run 'em off. We put on a pot of coffee.

There's this old saying that says to get into heaven, you've gotta have a letter of recommendation from the poor. I love that. We offer kindness. We offer food, clothing, and shelter. We offer listening ears. We rarely offer prayer outright, unless it's wanted. Now, that might sound a little strange, but let me be clear. Not all churches are as kind as this one. Hamilton's doing pretty well, but Hamilton isn't the only place folks encounter church people. We're a good bunch most of the time. But church people can do a lot of harm, even unintentionally, and there's also quite a few church people that do cause harm intentionally with hearts hardened by a national famine of empathy. I remember a good Christian soul saying that we shouldn't help the poor because, as he put it, "Poor people are poor because of poor decisions." Y'all. If we're looking for excuses not to help people, our religion's jumped the shark. The poor will always be with us: that's an opportunity to serve the least of these, not an excuse to turn our backs.

Anyway, one of the hardest things in all these churches I've served in is getting to the place where what we can offer ends. We want to solve all the problems and help all the people. But we can't. We've only got so much to give, so many hands to lend, and so many couches to sleep on. If I had my druthers, we'd keep a social worker on staff, provide health care, provide meals and beds, and keep the mental health cavalry on speed dial. But we can't do all those things. I suppose there's a real question of whether or not we even *should*, but I kinda hate having to ask.

Way back and way over in Capernaum, Jesus and his crew rolled into the synagogue for some old time religion, and he did a bang up job. In the middle of what I can only imagine was an especially compelling point we don't get to hear, a man possessed by a demon interrupted the sermon. Jesus cast the demon out, everyone was amazed, and he got a reputation as the real deal. I love this story. The people of the synagogue didn't seem bothered at all that this possessed guy was there. I'm guessing he was a known entity, and everyone sorta agreed to welcome him, even if he might act out from time to time. If they knew he had a demon, how much cooler is that? Even the possessed had a place in God's house.

A quick sidebar: there's a temptation, especially in modern times, to discount demon possession as what we know to be mental health conditions. Look, I don't know if demon possession involves horns or just needs a little serotonin boost, but I think we do unintended damage calling mental health issues "demons." When we do that, we're telling people they've got evil in 'em and what they need is a priest rather than a therapist. So maybe don't do that.

Back to the story. It's lovely that they welcome this possessed fella in their midst even though he might cause trouble. It's also lovely that Jesus cast out the demon but not the man. Whatever was eating at him, it needed to go but he could stay. There's a miracle in the demon-casting-out part of this, of course, but I think there's a little bit of a communal miracle, too. These folks laid the groundwork for Jesus to show up. They made space for the man, accepted him in their community, sat next to him in the pews. I can imagine someone bringing a dish of leftovers to the temple just for him. I can imagine a few worried souls standing in the parking lot worrying about what's going to happen to him. I can imagine a whole lot of big hearts praying and giving and longing to help but not really knowing what else to do. And then Jesus showed up and fixed the root cause. He addressed the demon, not the symptoms. Not only did it work, but the people couldn't help but see what just happened. Someone actually helped. I mean, everyone helped, but Jesus actually solved the problem.

St. Thomas', I think we're doing a wonderful job of being that congregation setting the stage for Jesus to show up, accepting, building relationships, feeding, listening, comforting, and doing all that stuff to make space for respite and rest. We care for the person and we care for the soul. I'm sure you've heard the whole "thoughts and prayers" thing, and I'm sure you've heard the justifiable critiques. "Thoughts and prayers" is a wonderful sentiment. Do that. But also, don't stop there. "Thoughts and prayers" is where we start, and then we show up and do and we don't stop until it's fixed. If we're really looking at the massive heap of social problems, showing up and doing's gonna be needed for a mighty long time.

Actually, it reminds me of a Desmond Tutu line where he said, "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." He also said that when he suggested this, people called him a socialist to discount his work. That's a societal demon needs casting out right there. I don't care if you're a socialist, a democrat, or an anarchist. If you're here to help the poor, we can work together. Also, isn't it just fascinating how much of our society wants to address the symptoms of our myriad problems while refusing to fix the structures that amplify them? Hmm.

I guess where all this leads is a question: what happens when real, tangible help actually shows up? In the case of Jesus, people perk up. In our case, I don't know just yet. We've seen a lot of people come to us for help. And we've given a lot. I already mentioned the couches, the soups, the coffee. But there's also grocery store gift cards, a furnace that works, hot meals with community. Of everything we do, when I get most proud is when I hear those folks in need bragging on you. One of 'em a year or two back said, "I thought all churches were the same. But everyone else turned me away. Look, I know I smell bad sometimes, and I know I'm not always easy to be around, but it means so much that someone was here and just ... nice." That's a direct quote, by the way, a recommendation letter from the poor, if ever there was one.

So yes, we are doing good here. And yes, we're meeting a ton of immediate needs every day. But I still wonder. We're doing so much, but we're meeting needs that almost feel manufactured. We wouldn't need to provide a roof if everyone had housing. We wouldn't need to keep warm clothes on hand if everyone had enough money for a good coat and a pair of socks. We wouldn't need to pay hospital bills if everyone had healthcare. As our world devolves increasingly further into meanness, we need to be asking why so many people keep falling in the river. Our society's got demons, and y'all they are not all that hard to figure out. Think and pray about 'em, but don't stop there. Do something, be kind, listen to what people actually need, meet those needs, and cast out the demons that single out the poor. Like Jesus, that's how we'll get a reputation as the real deal. And like Capernaum, all will be amazed.