

Homiletics, Homilies, and Homemaking

Ed Loring

The Open Door Community, Atlanta, Georgia

Charles Thomas lives, along with three other men, on my back porch. I step over him every night, and leave him there because “there is no room in the inn.” “Sorry. We are full,” I silently shout. Charles eats in our soup kitchen, bathes in our baths, dresses from our clothes closet, and often is given leftovers from our supper table. Luke is four years old and not our youngest member. Luke keeps on asking, “Why? Why is Charles outside? Why is Charles not coming in for dinner? Why is...?” The peculiar power named homelessness in America has not yet tamed Luke. I often wonder: Is Charles Lazarus? Am I Dives? (Luke 16:19-31).

I

We are living in an exciting period of history! As Christendom cracks apart, new light and sound make their way through the holes in the walls. Never before have mainline Euro-American Christians had such an opportunity to hear Jesus speak as we do now. The raggedy poor are in our midst; the cry of Christ is in our ears, the marginalized are at the center of our dreams and imaginations. Rather than purchase another gun or a house, just a wee bit further outside the perimeter, why not look to see who is coming to dinner?

Of course, there are problems. With the realization that housing is more of a justice struggle than a charity program, many people lost interest in the homeless—the undeserving poor. The growth of Habitat for Humanity and Jimmy Carter’s Atlanta Project are examples of the search for hopeful products. Some folk are going so far as to build fences and employ security guards to keep their homes and churches free from the likes of Lazarus. But this is the exciting part. *No longer can we address the gospel of Jesus Christ concerning the poor without acknowledging our poverty.* The old problem of the relevancy of proclamation is answered. The crumbling of Christendom and the hardness of heart toward the homeless is the fertile soil for planting gospel seeds. Some will yield, it has been said, thirtyfold, some sixty, others ninety!

Let me begin with my conclusion. *The Church of Jesus Christ is not called to build houses. We are mandated to make houses.* Within the various vocations of the Christian life only martyrdom is more noble and exacting than homemaking. The message from the pulpit, the policy from the Elders, the action by the people of God are very simple, concrete, and direct. Please listen to our friend Isaiah:

“Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor”
(58:7a).

And from Paul:

“Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers” (Romans 12:13).

When preaching the gospel concerning homeless men and women, boys and girls, Christians need only to be called to hospitality and welcome. Open our homes

or a small room in our church to those on the outside. That is biblical love. From the shared task of homemaking emerges the justice agenda: housing as a human right. But that is for the next century. Today let us just live together as the body of Jesus Christ.

II

Charles Thomas is missing several teeth. He has a warrior's grin. The streets are like prisms—hell holes for the biblical love ethic. Agape and nonviolence are simply suburban syrup without covenantal promises, baptismal vows, and a community of mutual accountability. Please never evangelize a homeless person without making home with them. They could easily get killed. Charles worships with us most Sunday afternoons. He grabs a handful of Jesus' bread and he gulps the bloody grape juice. About 8:30 p.m. he goes back outside to our porch. There is no room for him in the inn.

Christendom is breaking up and God is, once again, at work among white middle-class folk. Filled with blessings and hope Yahweh refuses to let us go. The time is at hand for us to overcome two tremendous liabilities which have crippled us for centuries. Both must be addressed as we preach to people who live in houses about making home with those who live on the streets.

First, we are finally at the time when we can admit that Martin Luther was absolutely wrong to call James "a right strawy epistle." James is as essential for faith and practice as is Paul. Justification by faith alone in the Euro-American families of faith has undergirded slavery, racism, capitalism, sexism, war, the tobacco lobby, the growth of suburbia, and psychological substitutes for biblical revelation. Justification by grace is clearly biblical. "Alone" is an ideological tool for the defense of power and abuse.

James is correct. This book must be preached and practiced as a corrective to the one-sidedness of Luther's fateful doctrine. Listen:

My sisters and brothers, what good is it for someone to say that they have faith if their actions do not prove it? Can that faith save her? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!' if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead (James 2:14-17).

We need more than balance, more than a dialectic between faith and works. We need to preach and practice faith and works lifting James up and settling Luther down. A new theology of works as essential to justification by faith will enable us to become homemakers with the homeless.

A second Lutheran legacy which continues to weaken the Euro-American mainline Christian witness, and is a cause of homelessness among baptized believers, is the inherent classism of Luther's decision to side with the Princes during the Peasants' War of 1524 and 1525. Undergirded by the erroneous emphasis on justification by faith alone, Luther chose the wrong side of the conflict. "Which side are you on?" is a question every Christian must face every day. The gospel is clear while church history is cloudy. We must make reparations for the ways Luther's momentous decision has shaped our faith and practice. Jesus, like the peasants, was slaughtered by princes. We are called by Christ to side with the oppressed against the

oppressor. We cannot have our faith and not practice it too.

To bring a street person into home or church is to honor both justification by faith and the good works of charity and justice. To make home with the stranger beings is—little by little—to undo the history of white folks since 1525 who time after time have been on the wrong side. Ask any Native American, African American, labor pool worker, homeless person, Sandinista, Blues or Rock and Roll singer.

The cracks in Christendom are letting fresh air flow through. We are being called to an old way of life in a new day. Rather than transforming culture into our image of Christ, we may live with him in the flesh and agony of the poor. Only Lazarus could heal Dives, but by his death the gap was too wide to bring them together. We have about thirty-seven years left before Lazarus is so far away from the Euro-American mainline churches that we cannot reach him.

III

While Charles lies snoring on my back porch in the early morning hours, another friend sits studying his Bible. His commentary is his life. His faith is that Moses and Jesus are liberators. His hope is that he will be led by the Holy Ghost to a house and a good job. His reality is that he is despised and rejected among most of us. He is dying a slow and incredibly painful death. He has no gas chamber or oven to face, only endless wandering with no where to go until his body breaks and he is dead.

There are three biblical resources I wish to note for preaching and practicing homemaking among the housed and the houseless.

First is the Cain and Abel story (Genesis 4:1-16), a central theme of the Euro-American experience in loneliness. Though we came to these wondrous shores for religious freedom and economic opportunity, the cost has been too much for us to bear. White folk are, like Cain, marked. We bear in our souls and spirits a curse that has yet to be transformed into the graceful blessing that it may yet become: "You will be a homeless wanderer on the earth" (4:12b). Cain, the betrayer of his brother, had to leave God's presence, his home, and live in a land called "Wandering" or "Nod" which is east of Eden. The power of connection through imagination is redemptively here for us. *We are the homeless ones*. We, white and rich like Dives, yearn for community and connectedness. Like Cain we fear and tread the land upon which we so hungrily walk. As we are empowered to claim our homelessness, our loneliness, our aimless wanderings looking for a pulpit without the agony of sermon preparation, we can connect with the Lazarus outside our doors and on our city sidewalks. In these days to claim Cain is to renounce Dives.

Second, none of us will find home on earth. If we are homemakers we must be careful that home is not our idol. One cause of homelessness among baptized believers is the belief among many that home is a this-worldly possibility. But Jesus tells us:

There are many rooms in my Parent's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am. You know the way that leads to the place where I am going (John 14:2-4).

Last fall while driving on the famous U.S. Highway 61 toward the King Biscuit Blues Festival, Nibs Stroupe and I talked about the theological and political

significance of life after death. Nibs taught me that a fundamental meaning of this doctrine is that we cannot find home on earth. This is a most helpful insight for preaching and practicing homemaking. We are wanderers on the earth seeking home, experiencing a foretaste as we become homemakers with the homeless. Yet home always eludes us while on earth east of Eden. We strive for home for Jesus is our homemaker. How, asks Thomas, can we get home? Replies Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life..." (John 14:5b-6a). I am the home.

Paul's letter to Philemon is the third biblical resource for sermon preparation on homemaking between rich and poor, African American and Euro-American, housed and homeless. Like Jesus, this letter, too, has been neglected. Not because of the battles about norms and hermeneutics, but because of the terrible way the Bible meets us where we are.

Cain reveals that we are homeless wanderers. Luke teaches that homemaking is possible only as we invite Lazarus into our houses. Jesus tells that our home is ultimately in heaven. Jesus is the homeless in and of themselves. Philemon reveals the center of our political and sociological identity, and then proceeds with a biblical love ethic. We, North American mainline white Christian folk are slaveholders. That is, we say "yes." We say "no." We are the oppressors. In Atlanta which is 65 percent African American with a black mayor, city council president, majority of city council, it is the white business community—lead by Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians—that determine public policy. "Votes count, resources decide." This Philemon letter is peculiarly addressed to us as Christendom cracks open. The Bible understands us as slaveholders. We must open our hearts to this revelation.

Paul gives us a biblical ethic. While the slaves are still slaves, the poor still poor, the oppressed yet oppressed, blacks still black, gays still homosexuals, we are to bring them into our homes.

Paul does not assert that Philemon is to free Onesimus. Rather, he is to make home with him. Philemon is to practice hospitality; he is to welcome the slave inside as a brother—a member of the family. This is a radical love ethic rooted in covenantal promise and baptismal vows that create a common life. This is no house building for the working poor every Saturday morning (houseslaves as Malcolm X would say), good though that be. This is a life together rooted in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ "and now we are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, Euro-Americans and African Americans, between slaves and free, men and women; we are all one in union with Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27b-28).

Ironically, the very scriptures used by proslavery Christians in eighteenth and nineteenth century America are resources for us today as we discover the radicality of life together and homemaking in the body of Christ. The church cannot wait for the end of slavery, poverty, or oppression to occur; wish it as we do. We must this very day open our homes to the homeless poor. Out of a life together shall emerge a renewed church and a political agenda which will include housing as a human right and constitutional guarantee.

IV

Without taking the poor, the wanderer, the slave, and Lazarus into our homes and churches to practice the vocation of homemaking, the white mainline Protestant church is doomed to die a dismal death. We have about thirty-seven years before the chasm is too wide for Lazarus to cross. Which side are you on? Oh, which side are you on?