

## Bread for the World Sunday

St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver  
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November 23, 2014

**Ezekiel 34:11-16; 20-24, Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46**

I have lost count of how many people I have seen, just this week, at intersections asking for money. With cardboard signs in hand, sometimes with oxygen machines, working or not, occasionally with wheel chairs, needed or not, these men and women ask something of us.

What do you do when you see them? Do you have a consistent practice? Or do you, like me, make a different choice with each encounter? Upon what do you base your decisions? Many of you have read the book *Toxic Charity* and know that a hand out is not always a hand up. Still, these individuals need something. And they also point us to much greater needs in our world.

What thoughts and queries linger in your mind as you respond or refrain from responding...which is, of course, also a response?

The other night at our dinner table, Nathan was telling us about the ACLU's fight of a proposed ban on smoking on the 16<sup>th</sup> street mall. The purpose of the ban, according to Nathan, is not primarily to address a public health issue. After all, smoking is legal outdoors, generally speaking. And we do not regulate our gross over consumption of sugar or alcohol in like manner.

The purpose of the ban is to discourage "those people" those "indigent, homeless, poor, dirty, panhandling people" from crossing our paths as we are trying to dine and shop and work in the area.

A similar ban that was passed in Boulder has been heralded as doing much to rid the area of unwanted elements.

I was impressed to hear Nathan speak forcefully about the ACLU's work to block this initiative. Impressed because I know Nathan. I've seen his discomfort more than once when he's been approached by people panhandling.

"I'm impressed to hear the work your advocating on this issue," I told him. "I know how uncomfortable panhandling makes you."

“That’s true,” he said. “It does.” “But we don’t have a constitutional right to be free of discomfort.”

Well, every few weeks, something gets said at my dinner table that makes me sit up and take notice. Such was the case when Nathan said these words. Indeed. We do not have a constitutional right to be free of discomfort. So obvious. So true.

Perhaps, this morning, as we begin a new liturgical year, you and I do well to consider amending this sentence just a bit for our purposes. *We* do not have a *baptismal* right to be free of discomfort.

Today, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday and Bread for the World Sunday. And we head toward Thanksgiving. Two of these holy days or holidays, Christ the King and Thanksgiving, can too easily lure us toward triumphalism—Christian or North American, or both. It seems a good thing that Bread for the World, a grassroots Christian organization with a serious track record in the fight to end hunger here and abroad, has wisely claimed this Sunday to ask Christians across our country to focus on what we can do to end hunger and extreme poverty.

A primary challenge, I believe, to our compassionate action on behalf of those who hunger, is discomfort. We are uncomfortable with a complex web of multi-faceted realities around us. What is real need? When are we being handled...panhandled or otherwise? And what should we be doing to get to the real needs? We scarcely have the time, energy or know-how to cut through this complexity to get to the heart of our work—even to know what that work is.

So, we doubt ourselves, our abilities to effect change where real suffering exists. We grow weary and cynical. Guilt and shame seem like weapons used against us. We want to do the right thing, but we’re not always sure what that is.

There is no doubt of the need. Some 805 million people in the world lack the food necessary to lead healthy lives. That’s one in nine people on earth. And the vast majority of these people live in developing countries where 13.5 per cent of the population is undernourished.

Our efforts have had an impact. The number of hungry people has dropped approximately 34% over the past two decades. The work matters. But 805 million is not an acceptable number. *One* is not an acceptable number, when most of us can eat our fill most any day. Yet, it is also true, that even here, in our parish, some members go hungry at various times of the month when money is short.

Bread for the World leaders say the goal of halving the percentage of people who suffer from extreme hunger by 2015 is an achievable goal.

Now, that's something to work for.

So, the question is, how do we get from that place of discomfort in our guts about panhandling and every other kind of ask that daily bombards us...how do we get from that discomfort to a place of right action?

There is one exquisite phrase from the letter to the church in Ephesus today that just might help us begin to make the journey from our discomfort to our work on behalf of brothers and sisters who hunger.

Listen:

*I pray that God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.*

To me, this little phrase, "with the eyes of your heart enlightened," is the foundation from which all Christian acts of charity and justice spring.

Our life in Christ is not about *shoulds* and *oughts*, not about wearisome duty. It is, rather, a life of becoming enlightened, luminous from within. It is that inner light that will make us unable to stand by idly while others suffer.

Your response to world hunger is more like painting something beautiful that comes from within your spirit than it is like getting your least favorite homework done.

Compassionate action is a work of art.

It's still work, but it is fueled by passion not by guilt. The passion can drive us even when the work is arduous, which it often is.

When Michelangelo was painting the Sistine Chapel, he grew weary of the task. He hadn't wanted the job in the first place, seeing himself as more a sculptor than a painter. But the Pope prevailed and won.

At one point, Michaelangelo's discomfort, physically and mentally, with the task of painting the chapel prompted him to write a poem—a playful lament written to his friend Giovanni—tongue and cheek, most believe, but still expressing through sharp humor, his serious discomfort with the task. Listen to Gail Mazur's English interpretation of the poem:

Michelangelo: To Giovanni da Pistoia "When the Author Was Painting the Vault of the Sistine Chapel" —

1509

*I've already grown a goiter from this torture,  
hunched up here like a cat in Lombardy  
(or anywhere else where the stagnant water's poison).  
My stomach's squashed under my chin,  
my beard's pointing at heaven, my brain's crushed in a casket,  
my breast twists like a harpy's.  
My brush, above me all the time,  
dribbles paint so my face makes a fine floor for droppings!  
My haunches are grinding into my guts,  
my poor ass strains to work as a counterweight,  
every gesture I make is blind and aimless.  
My skin hangs loose below me,  
my spine's all knotted from folding over itself.  
I'm bent taut as a Syrian bow.  
Because I'm stuck like this, my thoughts are crazy, perfidious tripe:  
anyone shoots badly through a crooked blowpipe.  
My painting is dead.  
Defend it for me, Giovanni, protect my honor.  
I am not in the right place—I am not a painter."*

Even said tongue and cheek, the words "I am not in the right place—I am not a painter," said by Michelangelo catch us up short. Imagine him saying that. After you read this poem, it's hard to romanticize his work to bring us the Sistine Chapel.

We romanticize Mother Teresa and others who have shown us how to work for justice for the poor. But they, too, grew weary. Their haunches ground into their guts, too. It's no different with you and me. The work of being a Christian in the face of extreme poverty is hard. Sometimes every gesture we make seems, as Michelangelo said, blind and aimless.

Former poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, reflecting on this poem, says, "After a certain point,...our admiration for great works of art can...harden into a pious coating that repels real attention.... Sometimes, a fresh look or a hosing-down is helpful—if only by restoring the meaning of "work" to the phrase "work of art."

I strongly suspect the same can be said of our works of mercy and justice. After a certain point, our views on even our Christian call to compassion can become jaded—hardening into a pious coating that repels real attention.

Perhaps we, too, need to restore the meaning of “work” to our “works of mercy and justice” and understand that, as with other works of art, the art of compassion requires effort that makes us uncomfortable and requires us to contort our bodies and our spirits in ways that allow new seeing.

And perhaps, too, we need to pray that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened. So that every encounter we have with extreme poverty may spark the light within us to act, not from guilt, but from passionate loving kindness that discerns right action.

In lives as full as ours, I’m grateful for people like those at Bread for the Word bring to our eyes new images to show us the face of hunger. Who bring to our minds new statistics to help us understand the problem. And who give us steps, small incremental steps. Taken together, they become big steps that help create real change—like a 34 % decrease in world hunger since 1990.

We can make a difference. We do make a difference. *We* do not have a *baptismal* right to be free of discomfort. Indeed, you might say we have a baptismal responsibility to walk right into the center of it.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, every act of compassion becomes a work of art. Effort that seems aimless and wearisome now can reap a masterpiece no less stunning than the Sistine Chapel.

So, let’s lift our brushes. Let’s make art together.