

The Fruit of the Tree – Just Like Me

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for being here today. I know that you, like me, have a heart for helping the homeless and disadvantaged.

I don't know why my family and I were never homeless, because we could have been, might have been, and perhaps even should have been. Perhaps it is for a time such as this – so that I can tell you my story.

To me, God is like that Mighty Oak that Debbie spoke about. And we, all of us, are the fruit of His goodness and might – we are the acorns. On a special day, long ago, that Might Oak gently bent a branch and tenderly and intentionally placed the acorn that was me, in the right and perfect place under His wide and sheltering care. I was placed as an only child with my father and mother whom I honor with my story.

My father was a veteran wounded in WWII. National statistics show that 40% of homeless men are veterans. At the time of my birth, he owned his own business which he was forced to close when the Korean War put an end to importing the needed materials. One of the most commonly cited causes of homelessness is unemployment.

Into my toddler days, my Mother had a budding career in the Office of the U.S. Senator from North Dakota. When I was 3 years old, she was diagnosed with a chronic, severe mental illness, paranoid schizophrenia. She was put into a state mental hospital until I was 11 and then lived in our home until I was 19. Of the 72 years she lived, she spent over 30 years in a state mental hospital and 10 years in a very poor group home for the mentally ill when the State of Maryland deinstitutionalized the mentally ill and released most from the hospitals. If she had lived in today's world, I am convinced she would have been living on the streets. 39% of the homeless report some form of mental health problem with 25% meeting the criteria for serious mental illness. I do not know why my Mother was not homeless.

The number one cause of personal bankruptcy is catastrophic medical expenses. Can you imagine the cost of 30 years in a mental hospital and another 10 in a group home? If we had had to bear those expenses, my small family would have been homeless. I do not know why we were not.

Then there is my own journey to near homelessness. At the age of 36 with my son just 12, I began my recovery from alcoholism, which is a spiritual, physical and mental disease. I was one step from losing my

job which meant I was just one more step from losing my home. My young son and I could have been in a shelter or on the street. One out of 50 American children is homeless each year. 38% of the homeless report alcohol use problems and 26% report other drug use problems.

Although I was never physically homeless, and I don't know why, I was certainly homeless in spirit. Before I found help, I would go to church, a church just like yours and mine. almost always having been drinking. I would cry and pray the most fervent prayers of my life – very simply “God help me.” And He did! I went to church to find God and He met me there.

I could go to your church because, in spite of my drinking, I looked like you – I fit in. My Mother did not. She tried but she was unable to care for her physical appearance. If we gave her nice clothes, they were stolen. She had minimal medical and dental care so she had few teeth. And she spoke aloud about her delusions - such as - the communists have overtaken God. And, in spite of all that, she loved her God fiercely and unendingly. She would have fit in grandly at Lord of the Streets Episcopal Church. God and all of us who volunteer or help in anyway would have welcomed her and loved her just as she was.

This is the reason that I am so passionate about Lord of the Streets. As our new vicar said, LOTS is what a church should be – a hospital for the wounded and not just a sanctuary for the perfect.

I will never, ever discount all the many services that our homeless need, some of which we provide at LOTS and some of which are provided by the many other organizations helping our parishioners. However, we are the ONLY home of God for the homeless. They fit in! I love that our parishioners, who are not just physically homeless but many who are just like I was – spiritually homeless - can find God there – feel God there and see Him in the faces of our volunteers and in each other!

Now I'd like to tell you what I know to be true – that Jesus was within my Mother and I see him in the faces of our homeless parishioners. My Mother demonstrated to me the unconditional love and forgiveness of God. When people scorned or shunned her, when they had contempt for her, when they avoided her, laughed at her or were unkind to her, often me, her own daughter, she loved me and them – and then she loved us more. She never, ever felt sorry for herself – for the bad hand she had been dealt in life. And she, like all our parishioners, have great courage. I cannot imagine how frightening it must be to not

know where you will sleep or when you may next eat. It scares me just thinking about it.

And, my mother showed me about unending generosity. She was provided shelter and food in the hospital. My father gave her \$90 a month (just slightly over \$1,000 a year) until her death in 1999 to buy everything else she needed - her clothing, toiletries, gifts, treats (a cup of coffee, a candy bar, a soda). Yet she always gave whatever she had joyfully to her friends – her clothes, money for cigarettes and candy, whatever she had that she thought they might want or need. And, she gave to the church where she didn't fit in and she made contributions to the politicians of her choice - perhaps only \$.50 or a dollar. And, for every occasion of the year, she bought a card and sent a dollar or two to my son, her only grandchild. She signed them always, "God loves you and so do I."

And I see that same generosity in our homeless parishioners. We have our 7:00 a.m. Sunday service at the beautiful Trinity Episcopal Church where 250 or so homeless gather to pray and sing and find God. During the service, we take up a collection as do other churches. We use the lovely brass collections plates from Trinity, similar to this one, to pass among our homeless parishioners. One Sunday, passing the

collection plate was my duty and it always humbles me so. A man was fumbling in his pockets as the plate was passed by him. I had moved about 10 pews down from him when he came rushing after me to add his few coins. Such commitment and generosity I have never seen before or after in any other church! At a recent Sunday service, we welcomed 220 homeless men and women and our offering to God totaled \$32.47 - 82 pennies, 13 nickels, 25 dimes, 14 quarters, \$25.00 in paper currency plus 1 peso, a lottery coin, and an earring. You can see a symbol of this offering in the glass bowl which sits on the top branches of the Urban Mighty Oak in the center of your table. It is being offered to God in gratitude by our homeless parishioners.

I know of your generosity for you are here and many if not most of you give frequently and freely of your time and treasures in support of Lord of the Streets Episcopal Church. We are entirely dependent upon that support to allow us to be the hands and feet, and most importantly, the heart of God to our homeless parishioners.

Also, flying above your Urban Oak is a butterfly which represents Thomas and the many others you have helped by your generosity find freedom from physical poverty or poverty of spirit. Scattered underneath are God's acorns which represent all of us. I invite you to

take one with you today to remind you, in the days to come, of the gift of God that you are to this world and particularly to Lord of the Streets Episcopal Church.

In the center of your program, you will find an offering card. I ask you to prayerfully fumble in your pockets, as did that homeless man, and joyfully give whatever more you can to God so that we can help the lost and least of His beloved children.

This envelope was given by Arnold and was in that same collection plate totaling \$32.47. His generous offering of 27 cents was placed in this beautiful envelope provided by Trinity Church. On the outside, he had written, "For this is all I have in this world." I wonder if you and I can take another step toward giving with such a generous spirit, with complete abandon - with the heart of Jesus - as did Arnold.