

MY NIGHT OF LIVING HOMELESS



By Rev. Dr. Steven D. Schave
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IT'S CLOSE TO 6:00 P.M. and parking spots in front of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Cincinnati are at a premium. The church is in the heart of Over the Rhine, once considered the most dangerous neighborhood in the country. Here, it's best to find a safe place under a street lamp and the watchful eye of surveillance cameras. The community is in the midst of a transformation which makes for eclectic neighbors that swing the economic pendulum. A young professional woman walks a dog on the sidewalk next to a renovated urban loft. She passes by a strung-out homeless man who is on his way to eat a free meal at the church.

Upon entering the church, I am greeted by Pastor John Suguitan who does a double take. He is not accustomed to seeing me, the director of Urban & Inner-City Mission for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, looking like a homeless person. I am immediately introduced to Tony, one of our homeless crew that we will be staying with overnight. Tony's not a confirmed member of Prince of Peace Lutheran, yet. But, like many others who come to a weekly devotion such as this, Tony tells me with a pride-filled smile that this is his church and he loves it. He feels welcome. This is his family. Tony was in jail recently for disorderly conduct after lapsing back into alcohol, but he's glad to be back. Next to arrive is Brandon, a confirmed member of the church who also happens to be homeless. He has a new phone in hand. It is an important tool for his social network using texting as the main means of communication to plan their daily events together.

The guys tell me a little about our evening plans. My first question: Why are we staying outside rather than in a homeless shelter? For some in my group, it is a confinement issue. For others, they feel safer staying outside, away from the abuse that so often happens in homeless shelters. It is something Tony politely calls "being rowdy." And besides, they tell me, they feel there is safety in numbers, even if we are on the street. I quickly realize that homelessness is about more than home ownership. The homeless community is a people group with its own subgroups. There are subgroups like the young people who have left home, groups of struggling addicts who are enslaved to drugs and groups like ours made up of Christians who look out for one another. I feel very blessed to be allowed into their group this night.

Before things get started at church, Pastor Suguitan takes me outside to get a quick look at his new urban garden. The garden will help the church community not

only by providing food, but it will serve as a means for some people who are dealing with addiction by giving them some much needed structure and tranquility. There is a brand new gazebo in the center, and the garden is surrounded by an attractive black wrought iron fence. But Brandon doesn't hesitate to jab "Pastor John" about how one of the garden's fence posts is higher than all the others. I enjoy their banter but now it's time to worship. It is a simple liturgy that all can follow. One of the homeless men reads from Romans 8. Pastor gives a devotion on the joy that awaits us in heaven and how it is greater than any suffering we may face in this life. The Good News is preached here, where great human suffering and misery combine. Prayers are offered and a benediction given to close the service.

And now that we have broken bread together, Pastor says farewell to the crowd that swelled to a full house as the dinner progressed. He steps into his makeshift office to wrap things up and then goes to change his clothes. He comes out wearing a baseball cap with a cross logo, a Nike athletic shirt and cargo shorts. He's got a hiker's backpack with his nicely rolled up sleeping bag connected. I joke that he looks like a "yuppy." I soon discover that it doesn't matter much, as he is quickly identified as the beloved "Pastor John" no matter where we go in downtown Cincinnati. He has no chance of being incognito. It is quite obvious by the affection shown by others that he is a prominent figure in the community, known for his jovial compassion. It will be an evening of both challenges and joys.

I am introduced to a few others who will be going out with us for the night as we leave the church. Pastor puts our valuables in the back closet that is triple locked and barred. He shows me the security system and I joke that my keys and wallet are now stored in Fort Knox. Unfortunately it is a necessary measure after a rash of recent church break-ins. But now it's time for us to head out and meet up with the rest of our crew. We head out the door and Pastor announces with a shout, "I'm homeless!"

Our first stop is the newly restored park near the art center, just down the street from the church where we will meet the others. I expected to be an outside observer on the periphery, but upon our arrival at the park, I begin to see what it is to be homeless. Thru my own eyes, I see the people who try not to make eye contact, who grab their children's hands and divert them to the other side of the sidewalk, who assume you mean them harm or who just don't want anything gross to rub off on them. We are being treated like modern day lepers. Throughout the night, without exaggeration, I will see human beings created in the image of God looked upon as meaningless, worthless, something to be tossed out like trash.

And yet, the park is in full swing. The jazz band plays while couples eat and talk and dance. There are a few gay couples who are celebrated by the downtown crowd based on the number of rainbow splattered signs that boast of pride. The park is now certainly a hot spot for the new urbanites in the community and those who work nearby. Sitting on a bench by the interactive water park, we watch as jets of water shoot out of the ground like geysers synchronized to music and lights. Brandon walks over to the water with Sandy and they playfully hop through the streams of shooting water. Brandon decides to put his face in the water to feel its force. As he removes his sweater, his raised T-shirt exposes many tattoos and scars.



BRANDON AND SANDY PLAYING IN INTERACTIVE WATER PARK.

While waiting at the park for the others, I ask my hosts how people end up homeless and how they manage the daily logistics of life. They are surprisingly open about their stories and their way of life. They want to tell me everything. I had always wondered where they keep their belongings if they don't live at a shelter. Some homeless people can afford a gym membership, which means they have access to lockers and showers. But for most, it is a matter of stashing your things in a secret location. As for why they are in their situation, the answers run the gamut. Some say how it was self-inflicted. They grew up with every opportunity but got caught up with the wrong crowd. Before they knew it, they were hooked on drugs. Some say they were abused, like one middle-aged woman who said she decided years ago that she'd rather take her chances on the street than to be pimped out by her mom's boyfriend. Some say it was simply circumstances outside of their control. They had jobs and a good life just a few years back, but it was all swept away, much like it was for Job.

Speaking of Job, we all realize there are scam artists with their "Hungry and Homeless" signs, which I saw as expected. Some people using these signs are acquaintances

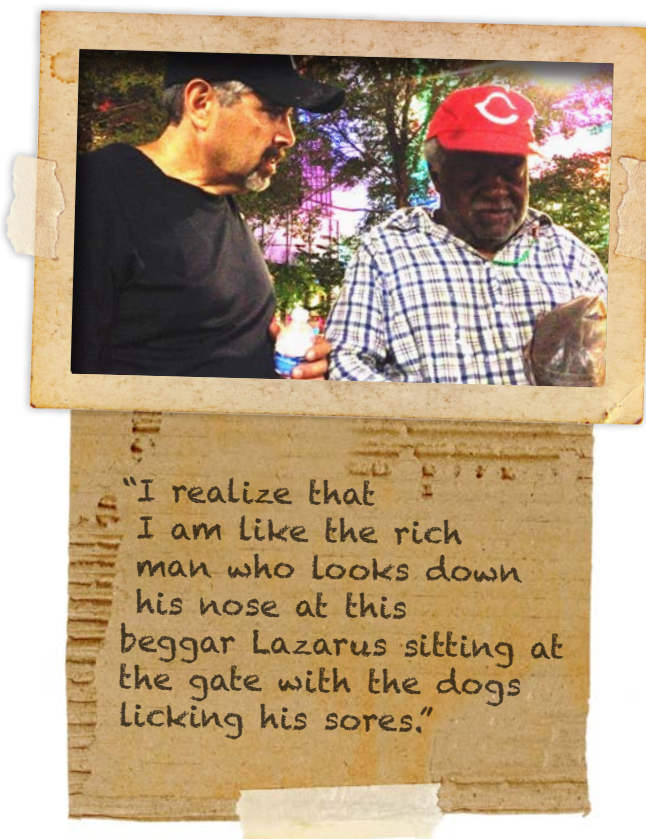
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of Pastor and truly in need. But it is easy for us to be like Job's friends, who are looking for the reason why someone is in extreme poverty and homeless. But it makes precious little difference why people are in their situation. We are called to show mercy, period. We are all sinner and saint and need the Law and Gospel. Perhaps for the swindler, we need tough love and caution in not enabling destructive behavior. But Christ alone can transform the lives of those who have only known a cycle of abuse, violence or dysfunction. For many of us, we will never know the type of suffering or addiction or mental illness that has led to these broken lives. And the common thread of homelessness seems to be a string of broken relationships or simply a matter of distance that has left family bonds severed. Who else but the church can mend these wounds and their relationships with God and their families? Such incredibly agonizing stories many of us will never know.

And here I am in the middle of a largely hidden world. There is swing dancing, fine dining and physically fit joggers. But there also is the blemish of unspeakable suffering and brokenness, a world in which no outsider wants to gaze, a world in which its dwellers never expected to exist. Tonight the veneer of the urban nightlife will be stripped away for me as I glimpse into a world otherwise not seen. But make no mistake, in the midst of tragic stories and circumstances, one thing not missing this night, much to my surprise, is joy. Joyfulness filled with humor, laughter and dancing, lots of dancing. The group is now assembled and the dance has begun. Pastor leads the guys in some sort of Cliff Huxtable looking jig to get the evening started. There is one last introduction before we head out. Pastor recognizes a high-ranking police officer who is the liaison to the faith community and a faithful servant to all of the residents, even the homeless. Pastor lets the officer in on what we are about to undertake. The officer wishes us well and thanks us for our willingness to care for the homeless. Time to head out. It is Reggae night at Fountain Square with live music and dancing.

Tony grabs a cigarette butt from the curb. It's waste not want not I suppose as we walk through the bustling streets. Along the way, Pastor has no shortage of hugs, smiles and a word of encouragement to give, whether it is someone at the bus stop or on the corner with a sign. Many of the people he greets I would have never even realized are homeless by looking at them. At Fountain Square, we meet up with a few more people. We take a seat at the table and enjoy an unseasonably cool evening next to the beautiful, wealthy people who are getting their groove on and seem to have things all together. It feels like we are watching TMZ on TV.

It is an eclectic bunch at Reggae night and we are greeted by many. One well-dressed young man in a colorful suit heard of what we were doing. He tells Pastor that it means a lot to the people of the community. It shows how much he cares and he wants Pastor to know how much he is cared for as well. We also are approached by an elderly gentleman who seems to have led a hard life, given the creases etched into his face. But tonight a tear flows from a hardened tear duct. Pastor knew something was wrong with the man. Unfortunately we hear how one of the man's family members was gunned down. The man hands us a rolled up piece of paper with a picture of the deceased on it, listing the reward for justice to be done. He says that he knows justice will prevail in the kingdom to come, from a just and merciful God. He is consoled by Pastor.



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The next man I visit is someone I realize, in a sense, I have met many, many times before. He rides his rickety bike up to us and looks at us with bloodshot eyes. He gives us a toothless smile complete with abscessed gums. I know this guy. I realize that I am like the rich man who looks down his nose at this beggar Lazarus sitting at the gate with the dogs licking his sores. I walk by people like him day after day, my eyes pointed down. Even when I cared for him as the hands and feet of Christ, I looked down on this man who needed my help. That is until the words of Christ in Matthew 25 finally sink in as I serve dinner to the least of our brothers. I look into those eyes as so many times before and I see a toothless smile. But this time I hear the words of Christ the King when He says, as you have done it to the least of these my brothers you have done it to me. DONE. IT. TO. ME. I'm not the Christ who has come to Lord over. No, looking into those eyes, I finally see the apple of God's eye that He sent His Son to die for ... I know this guy ... because IT IS Christ the King. As I do for him, I do for Christ. Yes, me a lowly beggar with nothing to offer to God. I now serve my King in this man and so many others like him. This is the guest of honor at the table at something like the Wednesday night dinner at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church that I just left. I just met him but I already know him, and I let him know my pleasure in meeting him. He is the last who will be first in the kingdom.

The poignant moment passes, silliness ensues and goofiness disrupts. It's time for us to leave. There is a late night feeding ministry that happens on a nearby street corner and we need to start heading back for safety's sake. But before we go, the crew needs to dance. I am regaled with many moves, such as the one that can only be called a belly dance, in which everyone rubs their bellies as they move their hips to the Reggae beat. Seems an appropriate dance step before going to eat and settling in for the night. Pastor starts talking and the crew reminds him that we need to go. He jokes that he needs a day planner to keep up with his busy homeless schedule and how he would be in much better shape if he walked as much as they did. As they explain the schedule that is routine to them, I am struck by the fact that they order their days by devotion to God's Word and receiving Christian charity with great regularity. It is time for us to be cared for by Christians.

On the way, we pass by a corner drug store. I stop dead in my tracks. I recognize, there sitting on the steps, one of my own lost sheep from a parish I once served. He is the son of two of my former parish members and he is now living on the streets downtown. I first met him years ago after I was asked to track him down and get him help. I had even visited him in prison when he was arrested for possession of narcotics. I offered to help but



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A LATE NIGHT STREET CORNER FEEDING MINISTRY.

he never took me up on my offer or those from others. He chose to remain on the streets instead. It has been a long while since I last saw him. In the time since, his hair has grayed, his lips marred from the crack pipe. This lost sheep didn't want to be found. Some sheep want to hide in the dark places, places we'd rather not go for fear muck and mire might get on us. And so we see people like him as unclean. They are our modern day lepers. But do you know what you see through Christ's eyes? That's someone's son, that's MY lost brother. That's the coin so precious that Christ would freely give all that He has to find it.

On my search for him that day years ago, I looked into eyes, covered in clouds, and saw a soul filled with thick darkness. I saw the track marks of the wolf's bite up and down the flesh of his forearms. He was like prey consumed by addiction, despair and hopelessness. He was hungry, thirsty, hurting, lost. But will Christ leave these lost sheep in the lion's den? Will He leave them in the depths of the corners of hell? No, because He sends us to seek the lost and to bring them to His table. He sends us to reach into the jaws to rescue, not stopping, but seeking well into the night with the light of the Gospel, diligently sweeping no matter how remote the location. We seek the lost until there is joy before the angels of God over that one sinner who repents, until Christ returns to gather us together again in that glorious day of celebration. The day is coming when the flock will be scattered prey no more, when Christ will bring back the strayed and bind up our wounds and strengthen the weak, when we will dwell securely in the care of our Good Shepherd and graze from the highest mountain pastures. I know this meeting tonight is not by chance. And it is certainly a reminder to never stop seeking the lost and giving another opportunity to pray, to tell and to show mercy. I realize later that I left my blanket on the corner with my lost sheep. I pray that he will put it to good use, along with the business card for Pastor that we leave for him as an invitation to a place of mercy and grace. It is hard to walk away from him, but we must move on to our next location.

It seems like many homeless people frequently gather around the street corner where we head. Here, the language gets more colorful, the characters sketchier and the vibe more boisterous. A Cadillac Escalade arrives with a pastor in preppy clothes. There is a group of 20-somethings and even a family with a small child. They seem out of place among the homeless, hanging out with these semi-dangerous folks. But they seem like they have no care in the world. The church members gather in a circle to bless the food and begin serving. I wasn't sure if I should take food, but everyone was so nice, I just couldn't say no. Dinner is a rolled up processed meat

patty shaped to look like ribs, served on day-old bread. But as the old axiom goes, beggars can't be choosers. And being Cincinnati and all, of course there is chili. It is not the food that strikes me. It is the love that's served with it. I am truly amazed that even the young ladies in the church group are fearless in serving us on the street.

But I am most struck when a young man approaches me with an offer of food. I feel so small. I've never been offered food before except from my parents. Middle class and wealthy people get the seats of honor and are treated with respect when they go out for food. But that's not what I had experienced so far in my short time as a homeless person. I am completely caught off guard when the young man approaches me with care and dignity. He calls me sir. It is genuine Christian love he shows. He sees me as someone with worth. And that is when it literally almost knocks me off my feet. I have always been on the giving end of this mercy, but for the first time I feel what it is like to be on the receiving end. It is the pinnacle of my experience so far this night when a Christian comes and invades my world. Instead of treating me like refuse to be flushed, he shows true mercy to me. I walk away and weep for a moment, now knowing how it might feel for someone when I show mercy. I come back and tell the young man about my feelings. I admit that when he originally approached me, I was skeptical that he was just some hipster church guy doing a good deed out of obligation. But it turns out that this very well put together young man was in my place just two years ago. Out on the street. He was an unemployed addict until the church broke into his world with Christ and His love. Because of the love that he received, he wanted to give love. It was an experience I will never forget.

For the rest of my crew, thanks be to God, this was just a regular occurrence. They are now ready to find a place to sleep. Little did I know the logistical analysis that goes into choosing a place of rest. You must consider safety, weather conditions and other factors. We settle on a public location, near a park, not too far from the police station. Tony runs over to one of his secret stashes and realizes that someone has taken his pillow. But we still have enough to make due. On our way, we do a little dumpster diving. I'm not sure what Tony is looking for some of the time, but his main purpose is to find some cardboard to sleep on. I am the envy of the group because I find a nice-sized piece of cardboard that will accommodate my 6-foot-2 foot frame. We play a couple of games involving garbage cans. We

guess the smell during one game and we guess the animal that is running around inside the can in another. Some cities are known for rats, but tonight, there are some mighty big creatures running wild in the hood in Cincinnati. Raccoons!

As we walk, there is a man on the corner playing his guitar. It sounds like a lullaby to many of the people who have found a place to sleep on the steps of a building or on a porch close by. It's hard not to think that in some way these people have been tossed to the curb or forced to scurry into a corner to hide. It is a powerful image to see people sleeping outside the doors of a church. I pray that one day they will come inside and be welcomed if they haven't already. As for our little congregation of homeless, we reach our destination. We set up our makeshift homeless camp and we are not alone. Clusters of people are scattered about. We say hello to many of them as we make our way to the top. It is a bit disconcerting knowing there are so many strangers running about. I think about the people who get their kicks by attacking the homeless, easy prey and good targets for the knock-out game or gang initiation. Who will really care anyway if some homeless person gets hurt,



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MAKESHIFT HOMELESS CAMP WHERE WE WILL SLEEP.

they assume. To be safer, we go to the top of the structure and find a place with enough space and a walled barrier in front. In an effort to keep riffraff like us away, the building pipes blaring classical music through the outdoor sound system. This makes it impossible for us to hear someone approaching, and yet I have no trouble hearing the sounds of street cleaners, buses, sirens and gun shots. Not even a nice Bach cantata can take away the lack of security I now feel. Any amount of safety is stripped away, leaving me and the others exposed to danger. We are vulnerable. Indeed the sonata by Chopin about death and grave doesn't help much. Even as people slink about and the sounds of shouts and gunshots ring out, my party, including Pastor, sleep right through it. Perhaps I am a little more alert because all I have is my bag to rest my head on and a hoody to keep me warm. I am grateful for the two extra water bottles that were given to me when we got fed since they are now the bulk of my headrest. We are up off the ground on a brick structure, but my legs are dangling over the edge. Eventually I just move to the concrete below to be able to spread out. The deeper the night goes, the more my body shakes from the cold concrete. It is a cool evening. I can't imagine what winter will bring for these folks. And yet, the people around me are sleeping in peace. Before we slumber, Pastor says a prayer for rest and protection and folks remind one another that Jesus loves us. I feel blessed to be a part of this hodgepodge family. I have only been gone a week from my own family, but being here on the street, trying to sleep, only intensifies how much I miss them. I look forward to dawn, for night to pass, for the sun to rise and bring both warmth and light. My eyelids grow heavy until the next abrupt sound disrupts the melodies of symphonies. I finally sleep for a few hours.

"Ding ding, ding ding!" The phone alarm clocks start going off at dawn and daybreak means it's time for breakfast. We make our way to the mission that will serve us breakfast. Other homeless people rolled up in blankets litter the steps that we pass by. It is eerily quiet. Our crowd is pretty peppy

so early in the morning, laughing and joking. Tony makes frequent stops to check out the trash cans. Again, heaven knows what he is looking for. He scours the streets. A cigarette found is a cigarette earned. Once we get to the mission, there is already a crowd. There are plenty of conversations as I notice that this little community is more tight-knit than most suburban neighborhoods. Pastor again is the center of attention as the server now becomes the served. A disabled man greets Pastor with a hug. The young man's body shakes involuntarily, his hands wave randomly. He speaks with difficulty. And yet this doesn't stop Pastor from kindly interacting with him as he does with anyone else. It is a beautiful sight to start the day. But it is not all sunshine at the break of day. A man named Short Dawg runs up to the group, looking for a fight. It seems someone else said the wrong thing to him and now he is looking for trouble. He can't seem to track down his target, but it won't stop him from talking about guns and violence and prison. Sounds as though Short Dawg hasn't slept since he got out of jail. He is erratic. I've been around long enough to know this is no joke. This is the most tense moment, when the fight or flight instinct engages. I run things down in my mind, should things go horribly wrong. But then a stately, soft-spoken, well-respected elderly homeless man talks to Short Dawg. He speaks soothingly and smoothly like David's harp and Short Dawg seems assuaged. Everyone goes back to business, until the doors open for breakfast. Our crew heads inside. Some check in with a card and others

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sign in. We find a seat and Pastor prays. Then once the workers at the mission realize Pastor is there, he is asked to pray for the whole group. As for me, I sit at a separate table with a couple of our guys and mostly strangers. They are none the wiser that I am an infiltrator. There isn't much talk but I continue to look on and observe. I am amazed at the very diverse group of people sitting at the tables. We are brought up to the food line where we are given our food by smiling workers. I toss an orange in my hand and push my tray as they pour gravy on my biscuits. I am thankful for this warm meal and even more so for the joy that is shared. The food servers must use a combination of discipline and tough love to keep order, but they do it with genuine warmth and compassion.

Afterward, our crew is fed and ready to shower. We walk to the bath house to get our pre-arranged tickets. Pastor and I learn we will be at the front of the line when they start letting people in. We have some time to kill so we head out to get some free coffee. As we walk, the crew points out a place of aid that was once a popular location for them to sleep, but now they say they are chased off because a bad seed refused to leave and caused trouble with aggressive begging and other mischief including public urination. They get a chuckle from telling stories. We are on our way to get some bad free coffee while we wait for the bath house to open, but then we pass a coffee shop.

I become a crowd pleaser when I remember that I have my ID and a \$10 bill hidden in my sock for survival money. Caffeine seems like an appropriate survival need at this moment. It's not a lot of money but we can share a few cups together. We grab the big comfy couch in the middle of the hipster coffeehouse and find outlets to charge our phones. I feel like an unwelcomed guest. But with \$8 worth of coffee in hand, we say a toast and get to poking fun at one another. They rib me about not being the soundest of sleepers. I hammer back about being surrounded by sleep talkers, buzz saw snorers and dancing fools who wake up with leg cramps screaming and hopping around. We are having a glorious time and I marvel at how I am among these silly, funny people who are looked down on by many passersbys. A little snarl here, a pity smile there. But no matter. One benefit of being a paying customer is to harness the power of the giant metal spoon which has a key chained to it — to unlock the bathroom. The bathroom seems so luxurious. I wash the sleep from my eyes in the bathroom sink, but I'm more than ready to head to the bath house for a real shower.

Once we arrive at our shower destination, we are ushered in with the first group. They call me forward to sign in and ask what I will need. I can have a towel and bar of soap. Yes, please! I say. They will even give me a set of

clothes if I give them the ones I am wearing. If I come back tomorrow, they will give me back my clothes cleaned, pressed, hung from a hanger and covered in plastic. Now that is service. I could make it until Jesus returns on two sets of clothes. I take a seat and wait to be called. Once I am called back, it is a nice enough facility and all, but I'm told I will want to mop out my stall to prevent from getting athlete's foot. It is a small price to pay for a hot shower. Again, I am the fastest. So I joke with the guys afterward how they are slower than my teenage daughters in the bathroom. I brush my teeth and feel pretty civilized. I'm ready to take on the day, which is good because we are ready for our next stop at what looks like one of the nicest urban coffee shops I have ever seen.

It has a large community seating area, murals that grace the walls with their beauty and a big screen TV no less. And yet the clientele? It is filled with homeless people, except the folks who have come to serve at this Christian place of mercy. The director gives us a tour of the facility, which includes an outdoor bistro in back and a fully decked out living room. Turns out this space is used for counseling, courses and even for exercise classes. My friend Brandon, who is a little on the big side, asks Pastor to go to the organization's Facebook page to see some photographs from a recent yoga class. Brandon proceeds to shows us a picture of him doing the "happy baby" pose where he looks like a good-sized baby spread



Stop at coffee shop while we wait for the bath house.

on the floor. We all have a good laugh about this image that I won't get out of my head for a while. We make our way back to the front where they are serving coffee, tea and water along with a very nice spread of pastries and donuts. Everyone gathers as a community at the table and we have a word of prayer, asking for God to intercede for us and our families. The prayer is interrupted by a young man who stops by to let the group know that he is in recovery and has even found a job. Those who are in this inner circle share in his joy just as they have with one another's burdens. After prayer they start a Bible study on the book of Revelation. It is a great comfort for all of us to be taken out of our tribulations and into the house of our Father, in the place that Christ has already prepared. We thank our hosts but we need to leave to make it to the Bridge Ministry that is being hosted at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church.

As we walk into the church, people are gathering for a word of prayer before they serve food and coffee and the study of God's Word. This is a ministry that cares for the whole person, spiritually and physically. The Word of God is at the center of this care, to be the bridge between being broken by sin and dependent to being made whole and self-sufficient. Volunteers have come to be mentors and advocates. Recipients are being instructed in computer and job skills.

Why it is important to have a ministry such as this, one that is distinctly Lutheran? I say no one is more equipped to care for our poor than those of our confession of faith. With the richness of our theology of the cross and fervor of our devotion to the sanctity of life, we can care for the least of our brothers with excellence. We understand the great reversal as it relates to the cross. What does the world see when it looks at the bag lady on the corner? It most likely sees a helpless, worthless, mentally ill person who adds limited value to society. What does God see? Put on your lenses of the cross. This is a human being created in the image of God, the most beautiful work of art in all of His creation. This is a soul with such incredible

value that the Father would give His one and only begotten Son, who He loves, to ransom her from sin, death and the devil. More than all the silver and gold in the world, the payment is the precious suffering and innocent death of the very Son of God. This person has more intrinsic value than all of the riches of the world. She is God's most prized possession. In the great reversal, pimps, prostitutes, gang bangers, drug addicts and yes, a bag lady, who have been baptized and believe, will go before us to lead the way into heaven, and all of heaven will rejoice when one sinner is forgiven of his or her sins and receives eternal life. We understand justification by faith and the righteousness that God pours upon us and places upon our lips.

So often broken sinners avoid the church and her mercy because they are convinced that they are unworthy of this pure grace and must clean up their act before having access to God and His holy mysteries. And yet, we invite them to come before God to be cleansed, that they might come into His presence and to be made holy by His Word and Sacraments. And so we offer more than a prosperity Gospel, which simply promises to feed the belly and our natural sinful desire. We offer more than an emotive appeal to seek healing in a spiritual experience that looks for God within the corruption of our heart.

We offer more than an accusing Law that demands obedience for God to enact mercy in our lives. We give a Christ who died while we were yet sinners, who in the Garden of Gethsemane could have looked upon our unworthiness and said to hell with us or called down legions of angels to destroy us as He hung from a cross for our disobedience and rebellion and violence. No, God incarnate in the flesh, poured Himself out. He gave Himself to us in real and tangible ways that fill our senses with His presence, to give us forgiveness, to make us royal heirs and a holy priesthood. This is why the Lutheran church needs to invade the dark alleys, to hit the mean streets, to welcome the honored guest to our table to break bread, to invite sinners standing on the street corner to come to the wedding banquet and to place on them the



The Word of God is at the center of this care, to be the bridge between being broken by sin and dependent to being made whole and self-sufficient.

robe of a wedding guest. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has the capacity to bring Christ and His mercy to our homeless population and those in extreme poverty, bar none! And it has been an honor to see our LCMS church at the heart of the city caring for the orphan, the widow and the poor. It was an honor to live among this community for one night as just another misfit and outcast who God brings into His kingdom as a beloved child.

I step into Pastor's office to gather my belongings. A little sleep deprived and on sensory overload, I look up on the wall and see a picture of Christ down on His knees, wearing a crown of thorns, covered in stripes and a cross upon His back. I think of all the suffering and shame and scandal of a community with no clothes, no dignity and no place to place their heads. I am overwhelmed to think, dear God, my Savior has endured it all, for them, for me. All the suffering, all the scandal, all the abuse, all the violence, all the shame, all the naked scandal, He carried it all on His back. He bore it in His flesh, He buried it, He descended into hell and said, give it all over to Me. He rose again, He ascended into Heaven where He will take us unto Himself in His mercy.

Pastor and I have spent most of our ministry working with people in extreme poverty. We wanted a bird's eye view and now, for the first time, we are completely overwhelmed by knowing the cross of those we serve and the love and appreciation they have for those who care for them. I am in complete awe that in some miniscule way we may have helped to carry the cross for those most marginalized through our ministries and have been a guardian for the most vulnerable and weak.

It is 350 miles from Cincinnati to St Louis where I live. Every mile I drive toward home is a mile farther away from

my newfound friends. I have left them to walk in danger. The Cincinnati skyline grows smaller and smaller in my rear view mirror. My heart breaks as I think about the abuse, jail and death that will be a part of the daily liturgy for the little congregation that I have left behind. Every mile is a mile away from their cold concrete and brutal world. But it is a mile closer to my beautiful family, my comfortable home, my Sleep Number bed and memory foam pillow, all of which I take for granted on a daily basis. I've learned how homelessness and extreme poverty does not discriminate and how it can strike like lightning or disease or calamity. I've learned that homeless people are people created in the image of God. They are funny, silly and joyful. And as the distance grows further between me and them, the more compelled I am to make a difference for them. This means I will tell their story, through their eyes. It is a tale that is beautifully ugly and sorrowfully sweet. It is a mystery, a tragedy, a comedy. These are stories of brokenness and sadness and yet the greatest stories of redemption that you will ever hear. I realize, for as much as it has pained me, this is why I have left my own inner-city congregation and community to fight and work and pray to keep Christ and His mercy in our cities.

