

# The NewesLetter Vol. 28, no. 1

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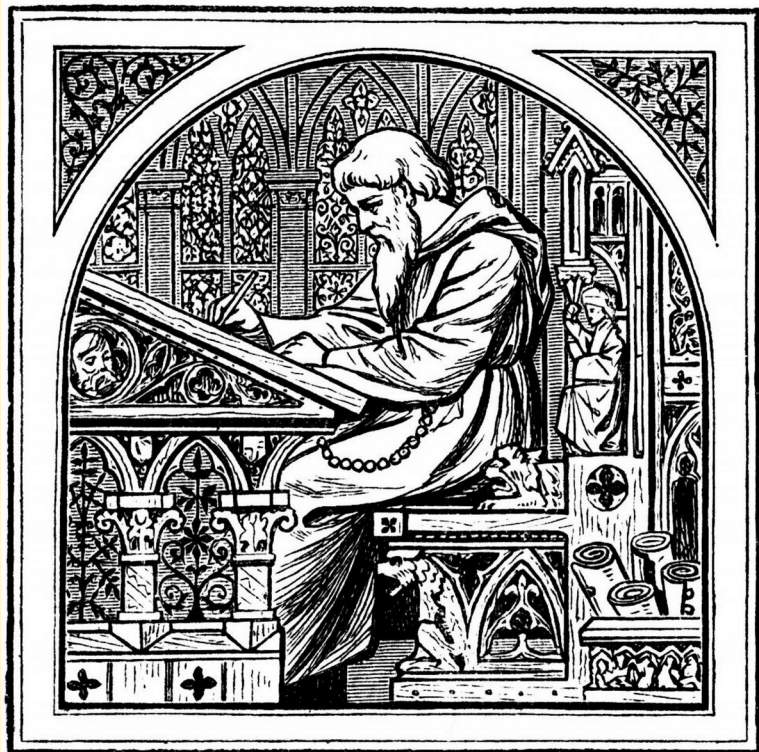
Due to travel and ranch duties, I had not seen Coky, my promise-keeper partner/spiritual director for over a month, so I made sure today (Sunday) to reschedule my early Monday morning meeting for Tuesday, because, as I told him, I needed tomorrow to be at Shepherd's Hand, the local soup kitchen and unhoused-person resource center. Needless to say, he was surprised. "Sounds like a lot has happened since we last met," he said. "Yes," I said, "We have a lot to talk about."

When I finished our last NewesLetter (June) I had just returned from Abilene, Texas and the Pittsburgh area, preparing to dive into research on American women religious. Then, surprise! Things began to happen. I have learned to ask myself when things happen, especially as I have grown older: are these *opportunities* or *temptations*? And my relationship with Coky [and with Cheri] are means by which I address that question. Indeed, Coky had already confirmed my direction with regards to Shepherd's Hand in August. Nonetheless, he did not know just how far things had developed. Furthermore, Shepherd's Hand was just one of the things that have happened since June. Let me catch you up.



First it was invitations to write. I have already told you about the *Plough* magazine article on "The Home a Monastery" (now available at <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/communal-living/the-home-a-monastery>) and the *Teleios* journal article on "Christian Community at a Distance: Does It Work?" (available at <https://www.teleiosjournal.com/> – sorry for the paywalls, but if it was hard copy

you would have to buy the journal. That's just how folks do things these days). I am still waiting for the "Resurrection" reflection to be published. But anyway, soon after I returned from my spring travels I received (1) an invitation from the editors of the international *Routledge Handbook for the Sociology of Monasticism* to write a chapter on "the sociology of new monasticism." I grabbed a colleague who is a sociologist and we are in the process of finalizing with the editors the abstract—the basic plan—of our chapter.



Then (2) I received an opportunity to write an article for *Christianity Today* magazine on "a new monastic invitation for the next generation" (tentative subtitle). Writing this article required interviewing most of the key figures of what was known as "new monasticism" back in the early 2000s, a wonderful experience! In the end, it looks like the *Christianity Today* article (to be published in the January/February issue) will discuss the most recent developments with a few of my reflections on the possibilities for today, and I will

publish all the material I did on earlier expressions in some other location—even this week I have received invitation to write for two publications that might work for this.

Then, if that were not enough (3), I was exploring an idea and was invited to write an article for *Spiritus* journal (the journal of The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality – the flagship journal of my field of study and a journal in which I have never published an article, yet) on "the monastic impulse" exploring the spirituality of why some people long to become nuns, monks, sisters, join intentional communities, and so on. Needless to say, that topic is right down my alley and I am excited to dive more deeply into that question.

Because there were deadlines related to these invitations, I laid aside my research on American women religious and dived into sociology and new monasticism.

And then in August I found myself wading—and then swimming ever deeper—into the plight of the unhoused in Montrose and Shepherd’s Hand. It all started earlier with a simple, but clear, call to be available to my daughter Claire, who is now a therapist here and cares for unhoused folk (having spent many years in San Francisco in ministry to the unhoused). This led to my volunteering in July to serve on the board of Shepherd’s Hand, in August to help mobilize a group of citizens to speak to the city council about a proposed ordinance to outlaw sleeping in public property when there is no shelter currently available, in September to navigate the next steps for the Shepherd’s Hand ministry as the executive director resigned, and now in October to moving into the role of board chair, starting the hiring process for a new executive director, and helping the staff and volunteers to keep things going. God has been present in the midst of all this and I sense a new season of anointing for this ministry.

I remember the days when I used to write NewsLetters and tell stories of the things I was doing not only globally, but locally. Well, my involvement locally has been minimal for some time—until now. On November 4<sup>th</sup> Claire and I will be speaking to a group of folks gathered at the local Methodist church (where, in 2001, I taught a ten-week class on Islam after 9-11) on “Homelessness 101.” Claire will provide the wisdom



from a therapist on the streets. Our friend and substance abuse specialist Valentina will provide her own wisdom. My role is to say something about the Christian perspective. What does God think about “homelessness”? Here are a couple of thoughts to start with –

## **Reflections: A Christian Perspective on “Homelessness”**

### **Part One – Providing Homes, Proclaiming Justice**

Every night, people—many people—try to sleep outside. Lack of housing is a simple fact, not only nationally, but also locally. Let’s take my own small town of Montrose, for example. There are likely more than one hundred people every night who must sleep outside in Montrose. It was 24 degrees Fahrenheit this morning.



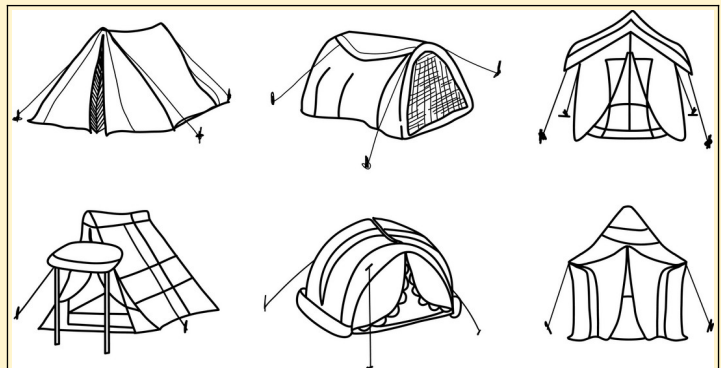
Most of us do not really notice many of our simple acts of physical survival. We pull up the covers when it gets cold. We get up and relieve ourselves in our bathrooms, rooms which we also use for hygiene purposes. We prepare our meals in kitchens and eat them in dining rooms. We

store our possessions in houses or apartments. But what if we do not have access to these rooms, these “private” places? If private places are unavailable, we are obliged to perform these basic acts of survival in “public” places. We sleep on sidewalks or under bridges or in a vehicle, near to light if possible to ensure safety. If commercial establishments allow only customers access to restrooms, we are obliged to relieve ourselves in alleys. We store (hide) our possessions in a small thicket of bushes in a city park. We gratefully receive food given to us wherever it may be offered. We do what we must to survive.

In our previous NewsLetter I asked about what God does for a living and what that means for what we do for a living. I suggested that God is in the business of preserving creation and that we have been invited to share with God in this work. So what I ask today is “How does this invitation of God, our human and Christian “vocation,” affect our approach to people who find themselves sleeping outside?”

### **First, God is concerned about providing people homes**

From the opening chapters of Genesis to the final chapters of Revelation, we see a God who is interested in giving people a home. God places Adam and Eve in a cozy garden. God leads Abraham to a new home in Canaan. God delivers Israel from the hand of the Egyptians, leads them through the wilderness (forty years of portable tent-city living!), and establishes them back in their



home. Psalm 68: 6 declares that God, “gives the desolate a home to live in.” Finally, in the book of Revelation we share in the excitement of the fulfillment of history as humanity proclaims, “See, the home of God is among mortals.” The heart of God is to care for creatures: providing shelter, security, community, and an environment where humans can thrive in the midst of ordinary life. This is entirely in keeping with what we learned in the previous NewsLetter.

Indeed, this sense of the value of “home” is so strong that the Gospels describe the choice of Jesus and the apostles into an itinerant ministry as a deprivation of normal life. Thus Jesus warns those who might choose to follow him without considering the costs carefully, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58). The apostle Paul describes the conditions of his missionary work similarly: “To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless.” (1 Corinthians 4:11). Homelessness in Scripture is here described as a voluntary deprivation. God’s ordinary desire is that people have a “place” to live.

This is why offering hospitality to people who do not have a place to sleep is praised in Scripture. Isaiah 58 describes the “fast” that God highly values:

<sup>6</sup> “Is this not the fast which I choose,  
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,  
To undo the bands of the yoke,  
And to let the oppressed go free  
And break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> “Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry  
And bring the homeless poor into the house;  
When you see the naked, to cover him;  
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

<sup>8</sup> “Then your light will break out like the dawn,  
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;  
And your righteousness will go before you;  
The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Likewise, Jesus praises those who visit him in prison, feed him when hungry, or welcome him when he is homeless, proclaiming that “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

God is the loving Father who makes a home for the people of his creation and who desires that we follow his example in offering hospitality to others who may not have homes. And indeed, Christians have led the way throughout history in providing shelters for people suffering without a place to sleep. Yes, compassion for the unhoused is to be lauded. But I believe that we must take a further step.

**Second, God is concerned about justice, about human beings providing one another fair access to the basic needs of human life.**

Christian care is not merely a matter of visiting the orphan and widow in distress (though it is that; see James 1:27). It is also about advocating for the just treatment of those who tend to suffer in the midst of difficult social systems. Thus the Lord lifts up king Josiah as an example, declaring that “‘He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; Then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?’ Declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 22:16; see also Isaiah 10:2; Amos 5:10-15; Malachi 3:5). God seems particularly concerned that the most needy among us—those with the least power in any given system: the poor, the alien, the widow, and so on—receive fair treatment and that they do not have their basic livelihood threatened by the nature (or abuse) of the social structures of any given culture.



Perhaps a couple of particular laws might illustrate this principle. In Deuteronomy 24 the people of God are instructed that,

“When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You

shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the Lord your God. You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay

them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt” (Deuteronomy 24:10-15).

So, what is going on here? Here we find someone making a loan but unable to keep the collateral offered in security of this loan. Why? Is this not unfair for the lender? The point is this: it is one thing to offer a luxury item as collateral for a loan, but it is an entirely different matter to lose one’s very means of survival (a blanket/cloak, the wages for the day). To deprive the poor of their basic acts of survival is to “incur guilt.” This is not just a weakness of compassion, but rather, this is a matter of injustice committed to the poor who, in the eyes of God, have a right to a blanket, to daily wages.

Similarly, a few verses earlier God commands the Israelites that “No one shall take a hand mill or an upper millstone in pledge, for he would be taking a life in pledge” (Deuteronomy 24:6). “Taking a life in pledge.” This is the point. A millstone was a family’s means of creating bread. No matter how desperate a poor person might be, we are unjust when we deprive another of the possibility of fulfilling their basic acts of human survival.

## **Conclusion**

God created human beings in His own image. Human beings are the peak of God’s creative work. As such all human beings are worthy of treatment with dignity. If an artist were to make a magnificent vase—very beautiful and very delicate—and place it upon a mantle, we would be offending the artist to roughly grab the vase off the mantle and toss it around carelessly. To mistreat the artist’s precious creation is to violate one’s relationship with the artist. And so it is with God. Why have we claimed that slavery is wrong? It is a violation of the dignity of a human being and as such it is a violation against the God who made us. Furthermore, it is the very expression of our dignity to share with God’s work in caring for creation, even those who have no house and no power to acquire personal security.

As friends of God and followers of Christ we are invited to share the heart of God for others and seek to provide shelter, security, community, and an environment where humans can thrive in the midst of ordinary life. We are also invited to advocate for justice when the survival of the weak is at risk. Just as William Wilberforce and John Woolman followed God by advocating for the rights of slaves, so I believe we must, as Christians, support the rights of people without housing to perform the simple acts of survival that most of us perform in our private places but that unhoused persons are obliged to perform in public places.

There are many issues I have not addressed here—particularly the most practical ones, the ones I am facing daily in my own involvement here with Shepherd’s Hand. Homelessness is a complex problem and deserves complex solutions. Issues of employment, substance use, and many other questions need to be explored. I will offer a few more thoughts in future NewsLetters. Let these reflections here bring us to prayer, a prayer of openness that can lead us to appropriate action.

May the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all.

By God’s Grace,

Evan B. Howard

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Images:

- Medieval astronomer surprized by what he sees.
- Medieval writing desk
- Victorian London - Homeless people asleep on the street (c. 1890)
- Citizen's oath, new town inhabitants swearing the citizen's oath, woodcut, 16th century,