The Least of These

Essays Toward a Theology of Homelessness

Dan Kiniry and Jeff Hood

Introduction

This is a book about words. It is also a book about a park in Bryan, Texas, where for nearly twenty years one of us has cooked and eaten and argued with and loved a weekly gathering of people who would otherwise be strangers — some housed, some not. But it began, in the way that a lot of theology begins, with a dissatisfaction about vocabulary. We kept noticing that the English words Christians use to talk about our relationship to the poor — home, hunger, charity, isolation, enough, and a dozen others — had drifted so far from what the Scriptures seem to mean by them that the ordinary use of the words was actively working against the ordinary work of the gospel. You could not talk about the least of these in standard American English without quietly insulting them. You could not describe ministry to them without implying that they were projects. You could not even describe yourself, as a Christian in relation to them, without falling into a paternalism that the New Testament does not authorize.

In late summer and early fall of 2022, we began sitting down once a week with a recorder between us and going through those words one at a time.

The essays that follow are what came out of those conversations. They are less an argument than a field report. We have tried to trace what happens to each word — home, hunger, charity, isolation, enough — when you take it seriously alongside the people it is supposed to be about.

A note on who is doing the talking. Dan Kiniry is the hands-on half of this book. He started a potluck at Neal Park in September 2007, and nearly twenty years later it is still going, every Sunday, with no budget, no nonprofit status, no formal leadership structure, and no grant application anywhere in its history. Anyone can come. Anyone can bring food. Anyone is welcome to serve; everyone is welcome to eat. The gathering has held a remarkably diverse cross section of Bryan — unhoused folks, addicts, pastors, organizers, children, widows, lawyers, ex-cons, a rotating cast of dogs — across nearly twenty unbroken years, most of which passed without anyone outside the park noticing. Dan has spent those years learning the language of the street from the inside, including a stretch of nights he spent sleeping outside himself, and including a series of small failures of the savior complex that he is generous enough to narrate in the essays that follow.

Jeff Hood is the theologian of the book — which is to say, the one who insists on worrying about words. Jeff has pastored, organized, protested, served as a spiritual advisor to men on death row, and written a shelf of books on the theology of the margins. He has watched Dan's work at the park for years and insisted, through a hundred conversations, that what Dan has been doing in the park is not a charity, not a project, not a nonprofit, and not a ministry in the usual American sense, but a sacrament — and that the language Christians have available for talking about it is not yet adequate. This book is an attempt to make some of that language adequate.

The governing scriptural text is Matthew 25. When Jesus speaks about the judgment of the nations, he describes the judgment not in doctrinal or spiritual terms but in terms of six concrete situations: hunger, thirst, foreignness, nakedness, illness, and imprisonment. He says that the people who meet him in those situations are on one side of the verdict and the people who do not meet him there are on the other. The striking detail is that neither side, at the end, knows they have been meeting him. "When did we see you hungry?" ask the sheep. "When did we see you hungry?" ask the goats. Jesus answers both groups the same way: inasmuch as you did it, or

did not do it, to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

If we believe Jesus meant this — if we believe it is not a decorative parable about being nice to people but an actual description of where Christ is to be met — then the implications run in every direction. If Christ dwells with the hungry, then our table is a test. If Christ dwells with the stranger, then our door is a test. If Christ dwells with the poor, then our wallet is a test. If Christ dwells with the imprisoned, then our criminal legal system is a test. And the test is harder than American Christianity generally acknowledges, because the default settings of our culture — economic, political, linguistic, religious — are pushing us, all of us, constantly, in the opposite direction. We have built a civilization that makes it hard to meet Christ where he said he would be.

This book's small project is to push back against that current in one place: the vocabulary. Because vocabulary matters. The words we use to describe what we are doing shape what we are capable of doing. A ministry that calls itself a charity is going to behave differently from a ministry that calls itself a communion, even if the pot of chili is identical. A person who describes

someone else as impoverished is going to relate to them differently from a person who describes them as poor, even if the bank accounts are identical. A culture that names the condition of people sleeping outside as homelessness is going to behave differently from a culture that names it as being without a house, even if the lived experience is identical. The words do not describe the work neutrally. The words actually help produce the work.

So we have written six essays, each on one of the words that has been giving us trouble. The Home essay takes on the capitalistic narrowing of home to mean the deeded structure on the corner lot, and tries to recover the scriptural sense of home as the place where God is and where hospitality happens. The Hunger essay takes on the distinction between physical and spiritual hunger, the centrality of Matthew 25's first mark of Christ, and the discovery at Neal Park that the hunger most aching in folks experiencing homelessness is not the stomach's. The Charity essay tries to pry the word caritas loose from its patronizing American afterlife, reclaiming it as the highest form of love — the cross-bearing, dignity-preserving, mutually-receiving love that loves neighbor as self. The Isolation essay looks at the

psychic weight of being rejected by the community, uses Gethsemane as a lens, and argues that isolation is actually the first wound of homelessness, the one that has to be addressed before any other help can be absorbed. The Enough essay takes up the quiet spiritual miracle that Dan has watched for nearly twenty years — the way that enough keeps arriving when nobody was sure it would — and traces the theology of sufficiency that has been hiding inside that pattern. The Resistance essay, finally, closes the book by arguing that street resistance on behalf of the poor is not a political add-on to the Christian life but worship itself — the liturgy of the cathedral the American church keeps walking past.

None of these essays are meant as a final word. They are meant as something closer to notes from a conversation that we hope continues in other people's lives. If you read them and find that they give you better words for work you are already doing, we will be grateful. If you read them and find that they make you uncomfortable about a word you thought you understood, we will be more grateful. The only thing worse than a theology of homelessness that is wrong is a theology of homelessness that does not exist, and American Christianity has been coasting on that second option for too long.

The final note we want to make before the essays begin is that none of this is meant as a scolding. It is meant, honestly, as an invitation — to the table, to the park, to the door, to the cross. The gospel offers something more than a moral obligation. It offers a place to go where the most unlikely forms of joy turn out to be waiting. Dan did not stick with the Neal Park potluck for nearly twenty years because it was righteous work. He stuck with it because it was where he was most fully alive. Jeff did not spend his theological career on the least of these because it was the respectable use of a seminary degree. He spent it there because it was where the gospel was actually going on. The invitation this book is trying to make is the same invitation Jesus makes from one end of the New Testament to the other: come and see. The home of God is not where you were told it was. The hospitality of heaven is not running on the schedule the church office handed you. Christ is already eating with the tax collectors and the sinners and the folks sleeping in the breezeway of the probation office. There is a seat at the table. There is always, somehow, enough.

Home

The English word home has been badly handled. It has been made to mean the physical structure you sleep in, the address on your driver's license, the equity line on your bank statement. From there it is a short step to calling someone without such a structure "homeless" and meaning something about their spiritual condition as well as their housing situation. The whole arrangement is an artifact of a particular economic imagination — call it capitalism, though that is too small a word — in which having is the precondition for being, and being without is being less than.

This is not how the Scriptures talk about home. In Scripture, home is a theological category before it is an economic one. God is our home. The psalmist sings that the Lord has been our dwelling place in all generations. Jesus announces that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head and yet promises that where two or three are gathered he is in the midst of them. When Paul quotes the Greek poets to the philosophers on Mars Hill, he does so to say that in God we live and move and have our being. The home the Scriptures know is God, and God is a home that moves. God is a home that

goes looking for people. God is a home that comes and sits with those who have no other home on a blanket in the corner of a parking lot.

Once you see this, you start to see it everywhere. Dan Kiniry, who founded the Sunday potluck at Neal Park in Bryan, Texas nearly twenty years ago, used to know a man — also named Jeff, which complicates the telling of this story — who had no lease and no key and no address the state would recognize. Jeff had a spot, though. It was out of the rain. Nobody could creep up on him there. He called it his little corner of heaven. He was, by every technical measure the federal government cares about, chronically homeless. He was, by every measure that matters more, home. He had found a place where he could relax and be himself, and he had the spiritual clarity to name it what it was.

This is the move the gospel keeps trying to teach us to make. It is not that we should pretend people have shelter when they do not. It is that shelter is not the same thing as home, and that some of those who seem most deficient in the first are closest to the heart of the second. The least of these, Jesus says in Matthew 25, are where he dwells. If Jesus dwells with them, they are not without a home — they are at home with God. It is those of us who have built

our houses carefully, filled them with objects, and locked our doors to the Christ knocking on them who should begin to ask whether we know what home means at all.

A real home is a place you can invite others into. That is almost the definition of the thing. If you cannot open your door to someone who is cold, if you cannot share your table with a friend, if your "home" is a space constructed to keep everyone else out, then it is not functioning as a home in any biblical sense; it is a warehouse for your person. This is one of the quiet cruelties of our housing system — that so many of the spaces we call homes for the poor are spaces that forbid hospitality as a condition of occupancy. If you are on HUD, you can give only a little bit of welcome before the housing authority concludes someone else is living there and takes your apartment away. If you are in a shelter, you cannot invite your friends over. If you are sleeping in the back of your truck, the parking lot is yours only until someone tells you to move along. The capacity to welcome is structurally stripped from poor housing almost everywhere it exists. And yet the people inside those spaces often still find ways to welcome. Dan has slept next to men on cardboard by the downtown probation office who made room without a

second thought. It did not take any convincing. They were not confused about what to do when someone showed up needing a place. They were more fluent in home than most homeowners.

There is a duality at work here. To experience homelessness is to experience a particular kind of spiritual homelessness — rejection by the community, the feeling that every door in the world is closed to you. But it is also, paradoxically, to experience the nearness of God, because God draws near to those who suffer. Dan has heard more prayers of thanksgiving at the park than in most sanctuaries, and the most common of them goes something like this: Thank you, God, for waking me up on the right side of the dirt this morning. That is a prayer to make a seminary student weep. It is a prayer of someone who has found home in the simple fact of being alive on the earth, under the sky, with other breathing people. It is a prayer that knows where God lives.

I have come to think of home as the place you always return to, which means home is wherever God is, because God is where we are always returning. No matter how far we wander, God's welcome keeps calling us back. This is one of the reasons I am a universalist. If God is our home, and God's love is

inexhaustible, then there is nowhere any of us can go to put ourselves beyond the reach of that welcoming. And if God works like that, then God's people have to work like that too. To be a person of God is to be someone whose home is constantly being opened — spiritually, yes, but also literally, at the door — to those who have been shut out. Our job is to imitate the hospitality of heaven in the small act of keeping the porch light on.

The English language already hints at this connection, if you know where to listen. We talk about our homies. What if we talked about our godies? You have your homies; I have my godies. It sounds ridiculous only because we have forgotten the wordplay was always there. Home and the homes of God are not etymologically distant. They are the same territory viewed from two slightly different angles. Wherever we find joy, wherever we find fulfillment, wherever we find each other across the distances we have built — that is a home. That is where God lives. And our physical houses are only homes to the extent that they participate in that larger reality.

The work of providing home to one another, then, is sacramental work. We do not usually think of it that way. When Christians list the sacraments, they list the Lord's Supper and baptism and, in some traditions, marriage and

confession and foot-washing. They do not list hospitality to the stranger. But hospitality to the stranger is where Jesus said he would be found, which makes it at least a strong candidate for sacramental status. It is a way of touching God. It is a way of being touched by God. It is a way of letting the life of heaven interrupt the ordinary shape of a Tuesday afternoon. The potluck at Neal Park has functioned this way for Dan and for hundreds of others over nearly twenty years, and he has noticed something about it: food always shows up. There is no budget. There is no planning committee. There is no guaranteed food supply. Dan himself usually does not bring anything. And yet every Sunday someone brings enough, and somehow between the people who have too much and the people who have too little, a meal emerges that looks a great deal like the loaves and fishes. That is not management. That is not organizing. That is a sacrament.

I would like to propose some new sacramental language, or maybe some very old language recovered. When we offer communion in our churches, we use formulas that have been polished over centuries — the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, the cup of salvation. Those formulas belong to the table we set inside the sanctuary. What about the table we set in the park,

or on the porch, or in the extra bedroom? What should we say when we open a door to someone who has no other door to go through? I would like to try this: the home of God, the hospitality of heaven. Say it when you open the door. Say it under your breath when you put out the extra plate. Say it when you drive across town to pick up someone who has no ride. It names what is really happening. It refuses the language of project and client and volunteer. It insists that what is being offered and received is not charity in the patronizing sense but the actual presence of the divine, dispensed through the coincidence of two people in a room.

Dan learned this language the hard way, which is the only way any of us learn it. When he first started the potluck meals, he thought his job was to be a kind of Martha — busy, anxious, lifting people up, teaching them how to improve their lives. He burned out within months. It turned out that kind of energy is not actually a human relationship; it is a performance of righteousness in the direction of people who needed a friend. Slowly he realized he was supposed to be Mary at Jesus' feet. His job was to be present, to receive the presence of the others, and to let the weekly coincidence of bodies at the picnic tables do whatever God was going to do through it. Once

he let go of the project, the sacrament showed up. This is almost always the order of operations. You cannot have home and a savior complex in the same room.

I look out my window at the houses on my street, and I have started asking a different question than I used to. I used to ask how many of them were occupied, how many had families, how many were rentals or owned. Now I ask how many of them are actually homes. How many of them are places where God shows up because hospitality shows up? How many of them have beds that are kept ready for the friend who gets evicted? How many of them are places where someone without an address knows they could come? On any street in America the number is small. This is not a scolding observation; my own house often falls short. It is just an honest one. If home is where God is, and if God is where the least of these are, then the real estate market is telling us almost nothing about where the homes are.

The call, then, is to make our houses into homes by letting God's people — particularly God's poorest and most rejected people — come inside. Not as projects. Not as case files. As guests, which is to say, as the Christ we have been looking for. When my wife hears me open the door to a stranger, she

says I act as if this were the home of God, as if I were never going to turn anyone away. That is, I hope, what she is noticing. That is what I want our house to be. That is what I want every Christian's house to be. The home of God, the hospitality of heaven. A physical door that opens onto a spiritual reality. A place where the least of these become the most of these because we have stopped pretending we are the hosts and started remembering that the host was always Jesus, and we were always the guests, and everyone who walks through the door is his body coming home.

Hunger

There is an evangelical chorus I grew up with that goes, more or less, "Hungry, I am desperate for you." It was sung in youth group with closed eyes and raised hands, and a buddy of mine used to sit next to me and sing a cruder variation under his breath that I will not repeat here, though I have not forgotten it. The song was not, on balance, very good. But it was reaching for something real. It was trying to say that the deepest hunger of a human life is a hunger for God, and that food on its own does not touch it. The evangelical tradition got that part right, even if the chorus was awkward. Hunger is a spiritual construct before it is a physical one.

I have come to believe that if someone is physically hungry in a community, it is because the relationship of that community to them is already missing. The physical hunger is downstream. First there is the gulf — the rupture between the person and the people who ought to have been feeding them — and only then, sitting in that gulf, does the stomach start to ache. You cannot address the stomach without addressing the gulf. Food banks and soup kitchens are necessary, and thank God for them, but they are triage. They do

not close the gulf. They keep the person alive while the gulf remains open. A community that is actually in communion with its poor does not need as many food banks, because the meal is already happening across the kitchen table, and has been for a long time.

This is what Dan and the folks at Neal Park discovered early, though not immediately. When the potluck started, the operating theory was simple: people were hungry, so we would bring food. Within a few weeks Dan noticed that the theory was incomplete. The primary hunger being fed at the park was not physical. It was the hunger of people who had been cast out of the human community to come back into it, to eat at a table where nobody asked them for anything, to be called brother and sister by strangers who meant it. One Sunday they showed up with less food than they needed. Several people did not get a plate. Dan was sick with worry that he had failed everyone. When he finally spoke to the people who had gone without, they did not look failed. They said: we are just so happy you are here. That was the sentence that rearranged his understanding. The meal was a pretext. The presence was the meal.

Matthew 25 is usually read as a kind of checklist — feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, clothe the naked — and Christians have argued for two thousand years about whether the checklist is about works-righteousness or the fruits of grace or something else. But notice the order. Jesus lists six marks of the presence of Christ in the world, and the first one, before thirst or nakedness or imprisonment, is hunger. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." Hunger comes first because food is the most basic physical need but also because sharing food is the most basic relational act. A family that will not eat with you is no longer a family. A neighbor who will not eat with you is functionally a stranger. The easiest, quickest, most ancient way to rejoin someone to the human community is to put food on a plate and hand them a fork. Jesus knew this. He started with it.

There is a distinction worth making here between physical hunger and spiritual hunger, though in practice they tangle. When you are physically hungry, your stomach rumbles; your body weakens. When you are spiritually hungry, your heart rumbles. Something is yearning. Something is missing. The soul is weak the way the body is weak, and the two hungers

often travel together. What the Neal Park potluck meets — what any honest ministry of hospitality meets — is both at once. You do not have to choose.

But you can get both wrong. If you are physically hungry and someone feeds you a sixteen-ounce ribeye in one sitting, your stomach will hurt for hours. You needed food but not that much food, not that fast. The same principle holds for spiritual feeding. Too many ministries to the poor feed people an enormous, heavy meal of doctrine — What do you think about this? What do you think about that? You need to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ; you need to understand your state of sin; you need to understand the plan of salvation. The would-be ministers mean well. They have a lot of theology they are excited to share. But the effect on the soul is the same as a huge steak on an empty stomach. It makes people's souls hurt. It does not help. It makes it hurt.

Dan once lived for a stretch in an apartment with a group of men who had been homeless. They were surviving on food from the church food pantry. The food was technically sufficient. In calories and volume it was enough. But it was so bland, so stripped of the goodness a human body actually craves — the meat and fat and grease and sugar — that after a while he could

not bring himself to eat any more of it. He would look at the food and feel ill. The pantry had given them enough to live on and not enough to live by. Too much of too little. Eventually the kindest thing about that apartment was when somebody cooked a real meal — rich, flavorful, excessive, the kind of food you give someone you love. That was when they were fed. The spiritual lesson is the same. When we come together and give each other our best food, the food we ourselves want to eat, we are filled. When we come together and are not preached at as if we are deficient compared to someone else, we are filled. Dan says of the potlucks: I might have enough food at home, but when I sit with my brothers and sisters and get to care for them, I am filled in a way that keeps me going for the week. That is not a food pantry. That is a banquet.

Scripture calls this giving the first fruits. Christ does not ask us to give what is left over; he asks us to give what is first and best. Our economic system, operating in the other direction, has trained us to give crumbs and expect the recipient to be grateful. We collect canned goods that no one in our own pantry would eat and donate them to people whose needs, we assume, are less refined than ours. This is a performance of evil. It is evil because it lies

about who God is and who our neighbor is. We serve a God who says, I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance — which is always also the command to share life in abundance, because to love your neighbor as yourself means to give your neighbor the first fruits you would want for yourself. If we refuse this, we think we are preserving something, but in fact we are sabotaging our own souls. We hear the common moralism: if you give things away, you will have less. The truer statement is the opposite: if you do not give things away, your soul will be bankrupt. Your spirit will be bankrupt. The storehouse is empty regardless; we are just arguing about which kind of empty we prefer. Jesus wanted us to be honest about this, which is why he kept pointing to the rich and saying, look, that man is the one who is starving.

There is a further element that the gospels insist on, and I have come to think it is the whole heart of the matter. Jesus kept inviting the worst of the worst to come and eat. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Collaborators. People the religious establishment considered so compromised that sitting at a table with them was itself a kind of defilement. And Jesus sat at a table with them. He did this not as a gracious concession but as a form of prophecy. The table

was a sign of what the kingdom of God looks like. If our table does not look like that — if the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the homeless folks and the immigrants are not physically sitting at our table, drinking our coffee, eating our pot roast — then we have not really set a Christian table. We have set some other kind of table and called it Christian, and the prayer we say at it has turned into hypocrisy.

Most churches recite some version of the grace, Be present at my table, Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. It is a beautiful prayer. It is also a prayer that implicates us, because Jesus made clear that he is present at a table to the extent that his people are present. If the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the homeless folks and the immigrants are not physically at your table, then whatever you are praying, you are not actually praying that prayer. You are praying a ghost of it. Luke 14 contains one of Jesus's least popular sayings: when you throw a lunch or a dinner party, do not invite your rich friends and neighbors, but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Christians have spent centuries attempting to allegorize this instruction into submission. We have made it a metaphor. Jesus means it. It is not a metaphor. It is an incarnation of the kingdom of God. If we write it off as a

metaphor we will simply miss out; the kingdom will arrive in other people's living rooms.

The inverse of hunger is not mere satiety. It is the fullness of love — the fullness of God. When I talk to people about God, I do not want to do what so many evangelists have done, which is to hand them a list of obligations and ask whether they are hungry enough yet to sign up. I do not want to ask anybody whether they have prayed today or been saved today or done their quiet time or tithed. I want to invite them to the banquet. I want to say, look, God's love is a banquet, it is a feast, it is a table heavy with more than we can eat. Who wants to follow a God who is constantly interrogating? We already have governments for that. God is the opposite. God is the host who keeps putting more food on the table. God is the thrown dinner party that does not end when the sun goes down. Take, eat, Jesus said, and you will never be hungry again. He meant it.

This means we have to be willing to sit at the same table as the poor, not serving them and then leaving, but eating the same food at the same hour in the same chairs. Because we are not God. We are not the ones who are going to feed them. We recognize our own hunger, too, and we get filled —

physically and spiritually — by sharing a meal from a common pot. Too often we decide in advance that we have everything to give and the other person has nothing to give. That decision cuts us off from the fullness. We are all hungry, whether we recognize it or not. The only way out of the hunger is to dine together, whether at the food bank or the soup kitchen or the park or the church potluck or our own kitchen table. We eat from communion with one another. That is what we all eat. Nothing else finally satisfies.

The communion table, in the end, is open. All who are hungry are invited. I have believed in open communion for most of my adult life for theological reasons, but I have come to believe in it also because it is a working model for how the church ought to interact with the world. All who are hungry. Not just the catechized, not just the confirmed, not just the verified members in good standing, not just the people we have decided deserve it. All. And not a few of the hungry. All of the hungry. If we can live that way at the table on Sunday, we can begin to live that way at the table on Tuesday. And if we can live that way on Tuesday, we will find, slowly, that the gulf is closing and that our own hungry hearts are being filled by the same meal we thought we were providing.

Charity

Say the word charity in the American South and listen to what it carries. Technically, the word is one of the great words of the Christian tradition. In the King James translation of First Corinthians 13, it is the word Paul uses for love — the love that is patient and kind and bears all things and endures all things, the greatest of the three that abide. In the Latin of the medieval church, caritas was the highest theological virtue, the love by which we love God for God's own sake and our neighbor in God. It is, in its proper sense, the most serious word you can use about what a human being owes another human being. It is loving your neighbor as yourself. It is loving them, in fact, as if they were yourself.

And then you listen to how the word gets used in our actual sentences. It functions as a slur. To say of someone that they are "on charity" is to say something humiliating about them. To say of an organization that it is "just a charity" is to say it is well-meaning but a little pathetic. To call a program "charitable" is often a euphemism for condescending. The word has been captured by the culture and made to mean something close to its opposite —

a patronizing, project-based, transactional relationship between people with resources and people without them, in which the flow of resources is one-way and the flow of dignity is also one-way, and the person on the receiving end is expected to be grateful for whatever trickles down. It is, as Dan put it once, a bunch of Karen types getting together to raise money to give books to Black people, or food to folks who live in what their fundraising copy calls the inner city. That is the English word charity as most Americans actually use it.

Which means we have to make a choice. We can abandon the word — a reasonable case for doing so — or we can try to drag it back to what it is supposed to mean. I want to try the second, because I think the thing the word originally pointed at is too important to give up without a fight. Real charity, biblical charity, is the offering of the self. It is the sacrifice of the self. It is not a program. It is not a line item. It is Christ on the cross, which is the definition the Scriptures themselves give us. The crucifixion is the paradigm of charity; everything else calling itself charity has to measure up against that standard or admit that it is something else.

If this is what charity is, then entering a charitable relationship with people experiencing homelessness means being willing to go to the cross with them. Because they are being crucified. Not metaphorically — in a very real sense, the community crucifies them. They are shamed. They are ostracized. They are made to suffer. They are arrested for sleeping, ticketed for existing, moved along for the crime of being visible. You cannot love them in any serious sense without also being willing to enter into that suffering, to let some of its pain land on you, to stand with them when it is expensive to stand with them. Any so-called charity that does not include this willingness is a program, not a love. It is Christianity without the cross — which, Dan likes to say, is not Christianity at all.

Charity is also receiving, which is a point our culture refuses to hear. We have trained ourselves to think of the giver as the superior party and the receiver as the inferior party. The entire posture of American charity is built around the nobility of giving and the awkwardness of receiving. But the gospels do not make that distinction. When Jesus arrives at the well in Samaria, he asks the Samaritan woman for a drink. He is the Messiah. She is, by every marker her culture cared about, compromised — wrong gender,

wrong ethnicity, wrong marital history. He asks her for a drink of water anyway. The first thing he does in that encounter is receive. That gesture gives her the dignity of being a giver. It tells her, without saying so, that she has something he wants, something he needs, something it is appropriate for her to provide. When the conversation turns toward her life, she can hear it, because it is happening between two people who have already exchanged something. This is the shape of real charity. Both sides are capable of giving. Both sides do give. The humility to receive is inseparable from the generosity to give. Without it, charity rots.

People ask Dan sometimes whether what he runs at the park is a charity. He tells them no. He tells them the most important thing that happens at the Sunday potluck is not that some people bring food and other people receive it. The most important thing is that everybody eats. Anyone can serve the food. Anyone can bring a dish. Nobody is assigned the role of giver or the role of receiver. It is much closer to a community meal than to a soup kitchen. Dan will acknowledge that there is an element of charity in the space — of course there is; people have needs, and other people meet them, and that is part of caring for your neighbor as yourself. Sometimes that looks

like putting someone in a motel room for a night. Sometimes it is raising money for a longer stay. Sometimes it is just a ride somewhere. But the structure of the gathering refuses the charity template. Everybody eats. Everybody brings something. Everybody is understood to have something to offer, and everybody is understood to have something to receive. It is not a charity. It is a kind of community that American religion has mostly forgotten how to build.

It is worth saying plainly where the American version of charity came from. In the South especially, the lineage goes back to slavery and to the movements of charitable white women who wanted to "uplift" Black people while remaining firmly opposed to abolishing the system that kept them down. The impulse to help has very often been, in practice, the impulse to help without relinquishing any power. You see the same pattern in the design of modern welfare. A person on a disability check is caught in an actively hostile arithmetic: if they earn enough money to live, they lose their disability. If they keep their disability, they cannot earn enough to live. The system has been constructed so that dignity and survival are placed in opposition. The food pantries and the various benefit programs often

operate on the same logic. You must give up a measure of your humanity to receive something to eat. You are treated as a number, as a case, as an intake form. It is almost impossible to escape this inheritance, particularly in the old South, because the soil is saturated with it.

There is a vocabulary problem mixed up in all of this, and it is worth sorting out. We use the words poor and impoverished almost interchangeably, but they are different words. Poor is an economic description. It says something about where a person is — namely, that they do not have much money. Impoverished is a description of a state of being. It implies that the person is constitutively lacking, deficient in themselves. The Scriptures say blessed are the poor. They do not say blessed are the impoverished. The difference matters. Jesus is blessing a condition, not diagnosing a deficit. When charity gets its language from "impoverished," it always ends up patronizing, because the word itself is patronizing. When charity uses "poor," it can still speak with dignity, because poor is just a fact, and you can care about someone's circumstances without implying anything about their soul.

The same problem runs through the word charity as it is commonly used. When we do charity for someone, we are saying something about who the

recipient is — namely, that they are deficient and in need of our largesse. When we love someone, we are saying something about how they deserve to be treated — which is to say, with love, because they are a person. The first language describes the other from the outside. The second language identifies with the other from within. Dan names it well: love means you are identifying with them. That is the difference. Without identification there is no love, only management.

There is also a problem with the telos of American charity. The goal is almost always understood to be the eventual elimination of poverty — to take the poor and make them no longer poor, to move them up. But this is very strange if you read the gospels. Jesus told a rich young man to sell what he had and give it to the poor and come follow him. He did not say, give it to the poor so they can stop being poor and become rich like you. He said give it and become, in some measure, poor alongside them. Jesus's mission is not the abolition of poverty in the sense of turning everyone into the middle class; it is the creation of a community in which needs are met because no one is hoarding enough to force others into deprivation. Charity that assumes the goal is to get the recipients to stop being poor and start being

wealthy like the givers is fundamentally anti-Christian. It has the arrow of the gospel pointed backward.

A real relationship with someone who is poor, when you yourself are not poor, has to involve a repentance that does not show up in the charity paradigm. Charity without repentance becomes a kind of self-satisfaction — look at what I have to give, look at these people with their personal deficits, look at how kind I am to try to fix them. The volunteer goes home feeling better about themselves, and nothing in their actual life has changed. That is not love. That is using the poor as a mirror.

There is a related distinction I think about often: the difference between blessing someone and being a blessing. When you bless someone, you are acting upon them. You are the active subject; they are the receiving object. When you are a blessing, you are doing something with them. You are a presence in their life, and they in yours, and the whole situation becomes a blessing to both. Dan tells a story that lives at this distinction. He was driving to work on a framing project at Tiny Hope Village, a permanent housing nonprofit for people who have been homeless, when he saw a man walking on the side of the road with all his bags. He stopped. The man was agitated.

Dan tried, he says, to minister to him — the old reflex — but then the man began ministering to Dan, reciting scripture that was suddenly and directly relevant to their conversation. Dan gave him a ride. On the way he mentioned the framing he had to do, and the man said, well, I know how to frame; I would love to see it. He came with Dan and framed up an entire doorway. Who was charitable in that story? Dan's question is the right one. It was a state of charity that both men were part of. He would have missed it entirely if he had kept driving.

This is the way relationships with the poor feel when they are real. You start out imagining you will be a blessing to someone, and the situation very quickly becomes a mutual blessing, and if you are honest you often walk away having received more than you gave. Otherwise you get bitter and burned out fast. Dan remembers being so depleted in the early years of the potluck that he was ready to quit — except he could not quit because he was the one in charge of the dishes. Eventually it dawned on him that his job was not to save anybody. His job was to show up, to enjoy the company, to be human together with the people at the park. The moment he understood that, a huge weight came off his shoulders. He stopped feeling that he had to

lie awake at night worrying about who was in a savior's role and who was in a charity case's role. He started sleeping better. He started noticing the dignity and the abilities of the people he had been trying to fix. That is the only posture from which real charity is possible.

At the bottom, it comes down to a question of mindset. Are you acting upon someone, or are you acting with them? Are you forcing love on them, or are you cooperating with them in something that is already happening? Love has to be a cooperation. It has to involve freedom. The other person must be free to be who they are, even in ways we might not like, because a human relationship without freedom is some other kind of thing — domination, codependency, abuse. The same categories that apply to a marriage or a friendship apply here. And the same accountability does, too. You can have codependent dynamics with the poor just as easily as with a spouse — perhaps more easily, because the cultural script is already pushing you toward it. You have to watch out for that in any relationship where one party feels they have more to bring to the table, because the temptation to make that asymmetry the whole basis of the relationship is always there.

What all of this amounts to is a God who loves us as we are, not if we reach some level of goodness or perfection. God loves us in spite of ourselves, not because of ourselves. The Christian doctrine of grace, when it is stated correctly, is that we are accepted before we have earned anything, and we go on being accepted after we have failed to earn anything. If that is what God's love looks like, then charity — real charity, caritas — has to look like that too. It cannot wait for the other person to be deserving. It does not measure worthiness. It does not audit. It identifies with. It is a blessing, not a blessing-upon. It is Christ going to the cross with the crucified of the world. Anything short of that is a program at best and a performance at worst. The church has enough programs. It needs more cross.

Isolation

You cannot understand homelessness without understanding isolation. If you are experiencing homelessness, you have been, more or less, rejected by the community. You walk around and every door is shut to you. You feel — and the feeling is mostly accurate — that you have been rejected by everyone. The effect is an overwhelming and depressing sense of isolation that shapes every other experience you have. You wake up inside it. You go to sleep inside it. It becomes the medium in which you exist. Hunger and cold and untreated illness are terrible, but for many people on the street, isolation is the part that breaks them first. It is the hardest thing about homelessness.

When Dan and the folks at Neal Park started doing meals, they thought their main ministry was giving food to people who were hungry. Within a few weeks they realized they were doing something else. They were easing isolation. The most important thing that was happening at the park was not the food. It was that people were being together, caring about one another,

treating each other as brothers and sisters by name. The food was the occasion. The company was the nourishment.

Dan has slept outside on enough nights to speak about this in the first person. Once he was sleeping in front of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Bryan, and the sense of loneliness was so overwhelming that for the first time in his life he understood the urge to hire a prostitute — not, he is careful to say, because he thought he would do it, but because he could suddenly feel the temptation from the inside. Any human contact. Any touch. Any signal, true or false, that somebody cared he existed. He would have paid for it. Another time he was up in Canada during the summer and decided to try, for educational purposes, to be homeless for a night. He made it about two hours. Then he paid for a hostel, because the depression of feeling uncared-for by anyone in the community had become more than he could carry. This was a middle-class white man with options. He had a credit card in his pocket the whole time. He could not handle two hours. What must it be to live in that condition for a year? Five years? For the rest of your life?

This is the thing that has to be addressed in any ministry with people experiencing homelessness, and it is the thing most ministries specifically

do not address. The standard pattern is to keep a polite distance. You serve food, but you do not sit down to eat. You hand out supplies, but you do not hand out your cell phone number. You run programs for clients, but you do not have friendships with them. Everyone involved knows that the line between server and served is not going to be crossed. And as a result, the isolation that drove people into the program in the first place is actually reinforced by the program, because the program has turned them into numbers. They have a case manager, which is to say, a professional whose job is to manage them. They do not have friends.

Homeless ministry without friendship is Christianity without the cross. We want the good parts of the faith without entering the hard part. We want the sense of doing the right thing without the discomfort of sharing the pain. It is tempting to keep people who are experiencing extreme suffering at a distance, because proximity costs something, and we are trained to avoid costs. And we comfort ourselves with the theological lie that we must be accepted because we have money and a home, and that they must be unaccepted because they do not. The gospel does not say any such thing. The

gospel says where Jesus lives. Modern western theology is very far from that address most of the time.

I want to think for a minute about the Garden of Gethsemane, because Gethsemane is the place in the gospels where the isolation of Jesus is most fully displayed. He asks his closest friends to stay awake with him. They sleep. He prays alone. He sweats what the Scriptures describe as blood. He tastes the possibility that even God has abandoned him. It is the worst night of his life, and he spends it at a distance from every other human being he loves. When Jesus later says on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — he is speaking out of that same isolation. It is the loneliness of being abandoned by the community and by God at the same time.

That loneliness is exactly the loneliness most people experiencing homelessness are told, by their culture, to accept as their lot. If you are poor, if you are on the street, then you are presumed to have been rejected not just by your neighbors but by God. Nobody puts it that bluntly, but the structure of the culture puts it there quietly. And part of the work of a theology of homelessness is to reject that whole arrangement. It is to say, with as much force as we can, that God is most fully experienced not with those who have

homes but with those who do not. That God draws near to the rejected. That where the world has closed the door, God is already through it. This is not a small adjustment to American Christianity; it is a reversal of its default assumptions. To do this kind of theology you have to be willing to go to the garden.

In the garden you find something astonishing, which is that the place of greatest rejection can become the place of greatest acceptance. Paradoxically, where the world has written someone off is often where God is most clearly present. Dan tells me that the space he used to be afraid of — the space of poverty and homelessness, the space he used to think of as the place of curse — has become for him the place of blessing. The people he expected to be broken beyond human contact have turned out, in his experience, to be some of the most accepting, most welcoming, most humble people he has ever met. Not every one of them, of course; they are human beings, and human beings are variable. But the average level of hospitality among the poorest people Dan knows is higher than the average level of hospitality among the wealthy. The space he used to think was cursed has become for him the space of the most evident grace.

We have done terrible violence to the word blessing. In popular American usage, blessing has come to mean material wealth. "I have been blessed" almost always means "I have money and a comfortable life." By implication, those who do not have these things have not been blessed. But blessing, rightly understood, is about the presence of God. It is about acceptance by God. It is about the sense that God is with you in your suffering, suffering with you. And it is about experiencing the community of those who are following in the way of the cross — who are seeking out this blessing by going to be close to those who suffer. When you enter that community, you find yourself both the giver and the receiver, and eventually you realize that the person you thought was only the receiver has been giving to you the whole time.

There is a game children play called cooties, in which touching the wrong person is supposed to give you a disease that is not really a disease. Most of us outgrew it in elementary school, though some of us just transferred its logic to a new set of people. The cooties logic now gets applied, as adults, to people who are homeless. Touch them, talk to them, get to know them, and somehow their condition will rub off on you. It is ridiculous when you say it

out loud, but it rules a lot of American behavior. Dan once had a friend get sick with tuberculosis and say, in all seriousness, that he was afraid he had caught it at the potluck. The phrase you cannot make up is that someone actually thought, in the year of our Lord two thousand and something, that going to a park to eat with poor people was how you caught TB. That is cooties logic.

There are better cooties available. If you enter into suffering and stay there long enough, you catch a different infection — the realization that it is deeply wrong for some people to have less than they need while others have more than they need. Once you catch that conviction, it changes your life. You cannot un-see it. You become incapable of accepting the ordinary arrangement of things as though it were natural. You enter, in Dan's phrase, the war that is being experienced. If you become friends with people who are on the streets, you can no longer accept that they are on the streets. That is the cost of the friendship. That is why people resist getting close. They are not exactly wrong to be afraid; something is going to change in them that they cannot reverse. But what they think will contaminate them is in fact the beginning of what will save them.

The question then becomes practical. What is the solution to isolation? Is it to get folks a home, or is it to get folks community? The honest answer is both. You cannot choose. An average middle-class person sitting at home does not have the unilateral power to end homelessness by building houses; the scale is wrong, the politics are wrong, the permitting is wrong. But that person does have the unilateral power to engage at a place of brotherhood, sisterhood, siblinghood, with folks experiencing homelessness. The solution begins, in Dan's words, with the posture of your heart and the posture of your ass — where you put it, to paraphrase Daniel Berrigan. You have to go where the isolation is. You have to sit down in it. You have to become community before you can become housing. But you also have to become housing. No relationship that treats your brother the way you want to be treated can leave him unhoused if you are housed. You have to start with the posture and end with the deed. It has to be both.

The rawness of honesty creates some of the most surprising connections. When I was growing up outside Atlanta, my family went to Braves games at the old Fulton County Stadium, and there was always a panhandler in the parking lot holding a sign that said, "Why lie, need beer." He got more money

than almost any other panhandler I have ever seen. It was partly because the sign was funny. But it was also because the sign was honest, and the honesty punctured the usual script. People going into the ballpark could look at the sign and think, well, if I were in his situation, I would want a beer too. The sign made human connection possible across a gap that was usually walled off. There is a lesson there about what happens when we let people experiencing homelessness tell the truth about their experience rather than requiring them to perform some narrative of recovery and gratitude. When the truth is available, connection becomes possible.

Compare that with the language games we ordinarily play. If somebody with resources has a problem with cocaine, we say they have an addiction, and we refer them to recovery. If someone on the street has the same problem with crack, we say they are a junkie, and we cross to the other side. Addiction is a mental health issue for one class of people and a character issue for another. The underlying condition is the same. The vocabulary changes because the vocabulary is really about our own comfort, not about theirs.

I think homelessness enrages so many people because it points at a truth about us that we do not want acknowledged. It says, out loud and in public,

that we are not as generous or as kind a society as we pretend. It says that we, personally, are not as generous or as kind as we pretend. And we have two options when that accusation arrives. We can go with it into the cross — into the community where Jesus lives — and repent, or we can shore up our self-image by dehumanizing the accuser. We can call them junkies. We can call them lazy. We can call them mentally ill in a dismissive tone. We can demand they be moved along. Jesus said he came not to bring peace but a sword, and engagement with homelessness brings that sword into the room. You realize there is a conflict between people storing up wealth and people without enough. You realize everybody is already on a side. You just have to admit which side you are on.

Some years ago Dan was hitchhiking near Corpus Christi, putting himself for the first time in his life in a position where he could not meet his own needs and had to rely on the kindness of strangers. Car after car passed him. He began to feel the rejection as a spiritual thing. Any one of those drivers could have met his need; they knew what he was asking; they chose not to. He began to feel, in a small way, what he now calls the rejection that homeless people absorb hour by hour. And then somebody stopped. He describes it

like the clouds opened up and the pearly gates came down and angels sang. It was — in that moment — the clearest sense of God's care he had ever felt. Not in spite of being outside the normal system of provision, but because of it. The ride was gospel. It was more gospel, he says, than any doctrine he had been taught up to that point about being a sinner washed clean. It was the manifestation of God's acceptance and God's love for him in the bodies of people who had chosen to slow down.

He started, after a while, making judgments about the drivers. He noticed that the cowboys in trucks never picked him up, and he began to resent them as a category. Then, at a gas station, he asked two cowboys if they were going his direction. They said “No, sorry.” He walked away feeling vindicated — of course. Then one of them came back and said, “Do you need a ride? We are going to a party, but we can take you a ways.” They put him in the back of the truck because the cab was full. They drove miles out of their way, at night, handed him two beers for the road, and said good luck. He did not drink the beers because he was worried about dehydration, but the gesture flattened his bitterness and taught him again that the gospel can show up anywhere. You can have people who profess the best theology and do

nothing with it. You can have people who profess the strangest, weirdest theology and be the hands and feet of Christ in ways they could not articulate if you asked. What matters is whether the theology is incarnate where the person actually lives.

There is a theology of the meal, a theology of the pickup, a theology of the home, a theology of the shelter, and each of them meets a physical need while also speaking to the isolation. A meal is community. A ride is community. A night indoors is community. Any act that closes a gap between people is, whether the actor knows it or not, anti-isolation work, which is also, whether the actor knows it or not, the work of the gospel.

For those of us with resources, there is a spiritual discipline here that I do not hear discussed very often. It is the discipline of going to where the isolation is. It is the willingness to place our bodies in the company of those the world has sequestered. Not as tourists. Not as benefactors. As people who need what they have — the redemption from our own spiritual isolation that seems only to be available in those rooms. We have been storing up things for ourselves, and the things have cut us off. The way back is through the people our storing-up has abandoned. Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell

what he had and give it to the poor and come follow him. I think, more and more, that the homeless person is standing in front of each of us right now saying the same thing. Sell what you have. Come follow me. That is, if we can receive it, the pathway out of the deeper isolation we did not even know we were living in.

It seems like bad news at first. It is actually good news. You find salvation there. You find a spiritual fullness in precisely the places that look empty, just as Gethsemane is where Jesus finds — not immediately, not without the long dark hours, but eventually — the resurrection. You find desolation, but then you find resurrection. The garden is not the end of the story. It is the hinge.

Enough

The word enough does two things at once, and the things it does pull in opposite directions. On the one hand, enough is what you say when you want something to stop. A parent in a kitchen with three kids climbing on each other says, enough. A spouse at the end of a long argument says, enough. Enough means: that is the limit, do not keep going, I cannot take any more of it. In that sense the word is a command. It is almost the same word as stop.

On the other hand, enough is a word of completion. It is what you say when the plate is full and you do not need more. It is the word Paul uses when he tells the Corinthians that God's grace is sufficient. It is a word of rest. It means: this is complete, this is whole, there is no deficit here. In that sense the word is not a command but a declaration. Not an instruction but a gift.

Both meanings matter, and they are not as far apart as they look. When a parent in a kitchen says enough to the kids who keep screaming for more food, the same word does both jobs at once. It tells the kids to stop, but it also tells them that there is, in fact, enough. Enough food. Enough love. Enough

everything. They do not have to keep clawing. The supply is not running out. The desperation can subside. Enough is the sentence that ends greed and opens grace in the same breath.

This double sense of the word is, I think, one of the deepest theological insights Scripture asks us to carry. We are supposed to say enough to our own greed, and we are supposed to believe that there is enough, and the two moves are one move. When the disciples stand on the hillside and tell Jesus there is not enough food for all these people, they are living entirely inside the scarcity half of the word. Jesus steps in and, with a few loaves and a few fish, says the other half: there is enough. There is, in fact, more than enough. You will pick over leftovers for days. The miracle of the feeding is a miracle about the word enough. Jesus keeps teaching us that word and we keep failing to learn it.

I have come to believe, partly because of my marriage, that real love is enough. In any long relationship there are seasons when the temptation is to conclude that your partner is not enough, your life is not enough, the love you have is not enough. That feeling is the scarcity lie dressed up in a domestic costume. When you experience real love, in moments where it is

actually present, you do not have to tell it to stop. It is enough. Enough in the second sense. Nothing is missing. The relationship is not a deficit you are trying to bridge with more of something; it is a fullness you are trying to learn how to receive. The same is true with God, with friends, with the presence of the poor at your table. When the thing is real, enough is the word that fits.

Dan has more to say about enough than perhaps any other word in the vocabulary of this ministry, and with good reason. The potluck at Neal Park is, at its core, a nearly twenty-year-long experiment in the word enough. Here is how it began. Dan and some friends decided to bring food to a park and eat with folks who were experiencing homelessness. Before the first meal even happened, the question in the back of everybody's mind was: is there going to be enough? Enough food? Enough people? Enough of whatever this was supposed to be? They made the first potluck, and brought tons of food, and then the person who had been assigned to invite homeless people simply did not, so there was no one there to eat except the people who had brought the food. Too much food and not enough people.

A few months later they tried again. This time Dan went himself and invited people he knew at the mission, and also his own friends. They showed up at the park, and there was enough. They decided to do it again in two weeks. Dan got scared again. What if there is not enough food this time? What if only the people with food come and they get discouraged because no homeless people are there, and they never come back? What if there is not enough? And there was enough. And then next week he got scared again. And there was enough. Week after week, month after month, the same small pattern. Dan would worry. The food would appear. The people would show up. There would be enough.

After a while he started to understand that he was watching a miracle. Not a loaves-and-fishes miracle with clouds parting, but a steady, quiet, weekly miracle of enough. It did not depend on him. It did not depend on his organizing skills or his planning. It did not depend on grants or nonprofits or budgets. There was no budget then and there is no budget now. There has never been a guarantee that food would be there. There still is not. And yet for nearly twenty years, every Sunday, there has been enough. He realized that his actual job was narrower than he had thought. His job was not to

make enough happen. His job was to show up, to invite people, and to let God be the one who, somehow, kept the thing going.

It sounds almost like a trick when you describe it, but what was happening internally for Dan is that he was learning to speak the word enough to himself. Enough stress, Dan. Enough food. Enough people. For whatever reason, there is enough. He would get up on Sunday morning, notice the fear beginning to climb, and say enough to it, and walk out the door trusting that enough was going to meet him there. And it did.

There was one exception worth naming, which we have mentioned in a previous chapter. One Sunday he showed up and the food was not sufficient. A number of people got plates. Several did not. Dan was terrified he had failed them. He went over to the people who had not gotten food, already rehearsing the apology he was going to give, and they stopped him. They said, do not worry about it. We are so thankful you are here with us. Even in need. Even coming hungry. They had still received enough — not because the food was enough, but because the presence was enough. That exception, rather than undoing the rule, deepened it. It taught him that enough was bigger than what he thought he was there to deliver. He was not just there

to bring food. By showing up, he was part of how God was giving enough — the spiritual enough of shared life — to everyone who came.

This has an individual spiritual application that I want to handle carefully, because it is easy to turn into the worst of prosperity-gospel nonsense. There is a way of talking about "manifesting" and "having all I need" that quickly becomes a theology of blame, in which people who lack food or shelter are understood to lack them because they have failed to believe correctly. That is not what I am pointing at. What I am pointing at is something more modest and more serious. It is the possibility of going through life on the assumption that you will, one way and another, encounter enough. Not wealth. Not grandeur. Not the consumer dream. Just enough. An orientation of expectation that moves toward enough rather than toward lack. That is an empowering belief. More than that, Dan says, it has turned out for him to be an empowering reality. When you walk in that trust, you find the trust confirmed.

He can say this with some authority after nearly twenty years. He still has nagging fears. He is a human being. But after nearly two decades of watching the pattern repeat, he has started to make his peace with it. There will be

enough. There has been enough. There is going to be enough. This is precisely the confidence that most earthly systems and organized charities lack. Their first question, before they do anything, is: is there enough? Enough funding? Enough capacity? Enough bandwidth to serve everyone who might show up? Will we be overrun? Will the resource dry up? These questions are not crazy — someone has to ask them in the world of nonprofits — but if they are the first questions, they will shoot the work in the foot before it can start. If Dan had asked is there enough before the first potluck, there would have been no potluck, because there was nothing. No money. No food. No institution. No plan. Just a few people and whatever some of them could bring. That turned out to be enough.

That is the miracle he wants to communicate to other people who are thinking about doing this kind of work. If you show up in a space with people experiencing homelessness not just to give but to be in solidarity with them — which includes giving, of course, but is larger than giving — God shows up with enough. You are enough, just bringing yourself. Whatever you have to share is enough. Sometimes he encourages people who have started to know someone from the street to invite them over for a night or two, just for

the respite from sleeping outside, and the most common pushback is: how am I going to put someone out after two nights? Dan's answer is always: one or two nights is better than no nights. He has done it himself. He has told people, I can put you up for two nights, and then, where do you want me to drop you off? You do not have to solve somebody's whole housing situation to offer them something real. Even a little is enough if a little is what you actually have. And sometimes God shows up with more than enough. Sometimes there are feasts at the park with baskets left over. Sometimes people walk home with plates under their arms. The loaves and fishes do not stop at the end of the biblical text.

There is something else about the people who come to the potluck that I want to name clearly, because it turns the usual framing on its head. The folks experiencing homelessness who come to the park arrive expecting enough. Whether that means food or fellowship or whatever is being offered, there is a certainty in their bearing that enough will be enough. How often do the rest of us wake up with that certainty? How often do we get out of bed and say, enough will be enough today, and what God has for me today is enough? Hardly ever. We get up into deficit and spend the day trying to fill it. And I

do not want to romanticize homelessness — that is its own kind of dishonesty — but we have to notice the spiritual capacity that is often present in people we have written off. The poor will inherit the earth, in part because they already know the word enough in a way the rich have forgotten. And the rich will not, in part, because they are allergic to the word. There is something salvific in that space called enough, and the poor are often the first ones to see it.

For about ten years, a little church service was held at the park by many of the same people who attended the potlucks. At this service — kept deliberately separate, both in time and in place, from the potluck, so that nobody had to sit through it to eat — the most common prayer people offered is this: “Thank you, God, for waking me up on the right side of the dirt this morning.” That is the prayer of someone who is inheriting the earth just by being on it. That is the prayer of someone for whom waking up alive is enough. That is the prayer of someone who knows the word.

The separation of the church service from the meal matters, and it matters because it honors the word enough. Most so-called ministries to homeless people tie the religious service and the meal together so that people have to

sit through the preaching to get the food. That is coercion dressed up as evangelism. At Neal Park, the service was at one end of the park, the meal was at the other, and there was a gap of time in between. You could go to both. You could go to neither. You could go to one. Whichever you chose, it was enough. Nobody was disappointed. Nobody was penalized. There was no gatekeeper demanding more from you. Everything that was offered was offered freely, and if you wanted one part and not another, that was fine, and if you came only to sit on a bench and not do anything at all, that was also fine. Enough.

This is hard to accept for those of us who come from ministry backgrounds, because ministry culture is deeply committed to producing sexy outcomes. We want to see people come off the street. We want to see people get sober. We want to see people get saved. We want to tell stories at fundraisers that move donors. Dan will admit — he admits it easily — that when he started, he pictured himself as a kind of Superman who was going to lift people up with his spiritual greatness. Super-Dan. He was going to write checks that solved problems. He was going to see transformations. He had goals for other people's lives that they themselves had not set, and when they did

not meet them, he felt like they were failing, even though they had never agreed to the goals in the first place. That is one of the great temptations of this kind of work, and it is poisonous. It replaces enough with a treadmill.

When Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you," I used to read that verse as depressing, as though Jesus were predicting that our problems would never be fixed. But lately I have read it differently. The poor, in Jesus's experience, are the ones who see life as enough. They do not spend the day chasing the next tier of consumer prestige. They are the prophets of enough. And maybe what Jesus was actually saying is: the prophets of enough will always be with you. If you want salvation, they will always be with you. They are going to keep showing up in your life to teach you the word you forgot in seminary. “The poor you will always have with you” is a promise, not a threat. Being with them is a form of being with Jesus, which was his whole point all along.

The Mary and Martha story rhymes with this. Mary sat at Jesus's feet, and Martha was busy with preparations, and Martha wanted Mary to help her. Martha thought the situation was "not enough" as it stood — not enough hands, not enough help, not enough attention to everything that needed

doing. Jesus told her that Mary had chosen the better part. What Mary understood is that being with him was enough. That is the lesson the prophets of enough have been trying to teach us. Being with them is enough to be with him. Not doing things for them. Not fixing them. Not saving them. Being with them.

If there is one institution structurally opposed to the word enough, it is capitalism. Capitalism depends on the idea that there is not enough, and the way it proves the claim to itself is by producing too much, and then saying there is still not enough. It manufactures scarcity out of abundance. That is its signature move. And this poisonous logic has crept from the marketplace into almost every other corner of our lives — into our marriages, where partners become "not enough"; into our parenting, where children become "not enough"; into our spirituality, where our prayer life is never enough, our quiet times are never enough, our tithing is never enough, our church attendance is never enough. Modern American religion has almost perfectly internalized the capitalist rule that enough is never enough.

But when you let this rule run your life, you set a trap for yourself you can never escape. If you wake up tomorrow and decide your marriage is not

enough, you will make your marriage not enough, because you have trained yourself to see lack. If you decide today that your life is not enough, that is what it will be. You have to learn the other discipline — to engage this day as if it is enough, to engage these relationships as if they are enough, to engage your actual life as if it is the life that is being given to you rather than a partial version of some better life you have not yet attained. This is hard. There is always the little voice inside that says, but if I just accept that it is enough, I will stagnate. I will stop growing. That voice is the capitalist ghost. It does not want you to rest.

The best witness against it is the witness of the poor, who at their best live inside the word enough in a way the rest of us can barely imagine. Not fetishizing — not pretending all poor people are saints, because none of us are saints — but noticing that the spiritual orientation available in that world is something our own world has largely lost. Enough is enough. You can have enough even when you do not seem to have enough. You have enough because you are here, because you were given this day, because God woke you up on the right side of the dirt. And when it looks, from the outside, like there is not enough, it is not that God does not have enough. It is that we

are not sharing enough. That is almost always the real situation, if we are honest. The scarcity we fear is usually a scarcity we are ourselves producing by our grip on what we already have.

Enough. Enough of the hoarding. Enough of the anxiety. Enough of the capitalist voice whispering that we are behind. Enough. There is enough. You are enough. What you have is enough. What God has for you today is enough. And when you stand in the park with the prophets of enough and break whatever bread has shown up, you will find that enough is not a limit. Enough is the beginning of the feast.

Resistance

There is a word that makes church people uncomfortable when you attach it to worship, and the word is resistance. Worship, in the American religious imagination, is something that happens on a pew at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. Resistance is something that happens on a sidewalk with a cardboard sign and a hoarse voice. The two categories are stored in different rooms of the Christian mind, and most people would prefer to keep them that way.

This book has been arguing that the two rooms are in fact the same room, and it is time to open the door. If Christ dwells with the least of these, as Matthew 25 insists he does, then the place where the least of these are being crushed is the place where Christ is being crushed, and the response of Christians to that crushing is, structurally and theologically, worship. Street resistance is not a political activity that Christians might, with misgivings, engage in. It is a form of prayer. It is liturgy performed with the whole body in public. It is worship offered in the cathedral of the poor.

The cathedral of the poor is the cathedral most American Christians walk past without noticing. A cathedral, strictly, is a building consecrated for the presence of God. It has an altar. It has a sanctuary. It has a congregation. It has a calendar of seasons and feasts. All of these exist, unnamed, on the street. The altar is the slab of concrete where someone sleeps. The sanctuary is the underpass, the alley, the abandoned lot the city has not yet gotten around to fencing. The congregation is the encampment, the friends gathered on a blanket, the improvised community that forms between people the rest of us have decided not to see. The liturgy is the daily labor of surviving: finding water, finding food, finding a place to lie down, finding someone to watch your things while you go relieve yourself. It is worship because it is life offered up under conditions that ought to have ended it, and yet it keeps being offered up, morning after morning, with the prayer Dan hears so often at the park — thank you, God, for waking me up on the right side of the dirt.

When the American church looks at this cathedral, it sees a problem. It sees people who should not be there and conditions that should not exist. The church looks at the underpass and thinks, how do we get these people into

proper housing? That is not a wrong question. It is a necessary question. But it is not the first question if you are a Christian. The first question is: what is happening here, theologically, right now, in this place? And the answer is that Christ is present in a cathedral that the state is trying to demolish.

Let the demolition be named plainly. In most American cities, the daily life of people sleeping on the street consists of a slow and ongoing war against their existence. Police arrive at dawn. Belongings are tossed. Tents are slashed. Medications lost. Photographs of dead relatives thrown in the garbage truck. Signs go up forbidding camping, sitting, lying down. Benches are retrofitted with dividers so that nobody can stretch out. Rocks are installed under overpasses so that nobody can lay down a bedroll. Spikes, which the architecture industry calls "hostile design," are cemented along window ledges. A whole industry of anti-rest has emerged, and it has done its work mostly in public view, mostly without Christian objection. Much of it is funded by tax dollars that include the tithes of Christians. Most of us do not know it is happening because we do not go to the cathedral where it is happening.

To go to that cathedral — to be present while the encampment is being swept, to stand with the people whose lives are being dismantled, to document the destruction, to name the officers carrying it out, to push back — is, in the language of this book, worship. It is the body offering itself in the place Christ is being assaulted. It is the Eucharist performed outside, where the bread is real bread and the body is an actual body on actual pavement. Paul told the Romans that we should present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship. When a Christian places her body between a sweep crew and the belongings of an unhoused neighbor, she is doing exactly what Paul said worship was. She is not engaging in politics. She is worshipping.

This is not a new theology. It is in fact one of the oldest things in the Scriptures, and the Hebrew prophets preached it with a force that American pulpits have largely declined to imitate. Amos said that God hated the feasts and the solemn assemblies of his people, and would not accept their burnt offerings, and would not listen to their songs. He said this because their worship was running parallel to their exploitation of the poor, and the two could not coexist. His prescription was not better liturgy. It was justice

rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Isaiah 58 gives the same picture from the other angle. The fast God chooses is not bowing the head or wearing sackcloth. It is loosing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into the house, covering the naked. Worship without resistance to the conditions that crush the poor is, according to the prophets, not worship at all. It is noise that God refuses to hear.

Jesus worked in this tradition. The one thing Jesus did in his public ministry that looks most clearly like what we would today call direct action was the cleansing of the temple. He came into a religious space where commerce was exploiting the poor, and he turned over the tables. He drove out the money changers with a whip he had made himself. He quoted the prophets while he did it. This was a disruptive, public, property-destroying act of political and religious confrontation. The gospels do not treat it as an embarrassing lapse by a mild-mannered teacher. They treat it as one of the central acts of his messianic self-disclosure. If Jesus thought it was appropriate for the Son of God to flip tables over the exploitation of the poor inside a religious

building, we can stop pretending that resistance on behalf of the poor in civic space is somehow undignified work for his followers.

The same Jesus healed in public in defiance of purity codes, ate with tax collectors in defiance of social taboo, named Herod a fox, and died at the hands of the state for reasons the state found very political. His whole public life was street resistance, and his whole public life was worship, because in him those categories had never been separated. If we have separated them, that is our problem. It is not a feature of the faith we received.

There is a theological subtlety worth naming, because activism that is not informed by it tends either to burn out or to go bad. Street resistance as worship is not primarily about winning. It is primarily about being where Christ is. A Christian at an encampment sweep is not there because she is sure she can stop the sweep. She may not be able to. She may be arrested and the sweep may continue anyway. She is there because that is where Christ is and because showing up where Christ is is what Christians are supposed to do. The outcome of the action is in God's hands. The presence of the actor is the whole point. This is how the early martyrs understood what they were doing, and it is how every serious tradition of Christian resistance

has understood it since. The outcome is not ours to control. The faithfulness is.

This reframing rescues resistance from two failure modes. It rescues it from despair, because whether you win or lose, you have still worshipped, and worship is its own reward. And it rescues it from triumphalism, because you are not at the sweep to be a hero; you are there to be a body where Christ's body is, which is a much humbler posture than the hero's. Most real resistance work, over the long haul, is this second thing. It is the small showing up. It is the unglamorous accompaniment. It is the long drive to the courthouse to sit in a back pew while someone fights an eviction. It is knowing the name of the officer who keeps telling a particular friend to move along. It is keeping a list, quietly, of the people the city has disappeared from the bridge abutment and asking where they went. It is worship in the cathedral of the poor, and its attendance numbers are not reported in denominational yearbooks.

There is a liturgy of arrest. Paul and Silas were in jail when they sang the hymn that shook the cell doors off their hinges. Peter preached the first Christian sermon after being released from custody for preaching the first

Christian sermon. John the Baptist lost his head for speaking the truth about a political marriage. Jesus was executed by the state on charges the state thought were political. Every serious Christian movement since has known that the handcuffs are part of the rubric. This does not mean every Christian is called to be arrested. It does mean that when Christians find themselves arrested for standing with the poor, they are not in disgrace but in a long and sacred line. The prayer said in a police wagon is as real a prayer as any. The confession of faith made by kneeling in front of a bulldozer is as real a confession as any recited in front of a baptismal font.

This does not require anyone to be reckless. Not everyone can be arrested. Not everyone can block a sweep. Not everyone has the legal status or the physical ability or the support network to do those things. The worship of the cathedral of the poor has many liturgies, and most of them are quieter than civil disobedience. Show up at the city council meeting when the anti-camping ordinance is on the agenda. Testify. Write the letter. Photograph hostile architecture and name which firm designed it and which nonprofit board approved it. Drive a friend to their appointment. Pay their phone bill. Learn their full name and use it. Go with them when they have to interact

with a system that does not want to see them as a person. These are the ordinary psalms of this cathedral. They do not make the news. They do not usually change the law. They do form, in the person who practices them, the deep habits of worship the prophets were trying to produce.

Dan has spent much of his adult life in the cathedral of the poor, even in seasons when he could not have named it that way. He has slept outside. He has hitchhiked. He has eaten weekly with people whom the city considers a nuisance. He has driven people to places the bus does not go. He has sat in emergency rooms. He has, without calling it resistance, resisted, because to stay in relationship with people who are under constant pressure to be moved along is itself a refusal of the logic that would move them along. The potluck at Neal Park has been, among other things, nearly twenty years of worship offered to God in the form of people not agreeing to stop seeing each other. That is what faithful presence looks like when it goes on long enough to accrue the density of a cathedral practice. It starts small. It stays. Eventually it becomes a place where God is reliably found.

There is a particular Christian sentence that has to be said clearly in this essay, because the church has spent decades trying to avoid saying it. Much

of what calls itself the American church is actively opposed to the worship that goes on in the cathedral of the poor. It lobbies for the anti-camping ordinances. It donates to the political campaigns of sheriffs who run sweeps. It pays chaplains to tell men in prison that the solution to their suffering is an improved attitude. It keeps its own building spotless while the underpass four blocks away gets bulldozed. It talks about the poor but treats the poor as a fundraising category rather than a liturgical congregation. This is not a small problem. It is a crisis of whether the American church is still the church. The prophets were almost never gentle about this kind of thing, and neither was Jesus, and there is no reason for us to be gentler than they were. We have to name it.

But naming it is not the end. Naming it is the beginning of the invitation. The invitation — and it is always an invitation before it is an indictment — is to walk out the doors of the building we have been calling the church, and to walk four blocks over, and to enter the cathedral we have been walking past. To sit down there. To listen. To stay. To resist, with our bodies and our voices and our votes and our wallets and our prayers, the machinery that is trying to clear that cathedral of its congregation. That is worship. That is, as nearly

as we can tell, what Jesus did with his body when he was on the earth. That is the work we are asked to do now. The cathedral of the poor is open. Services are continuous. All are welcome. And the homily, always, is the same: as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

This is the harder worship, the one that costs us things the Sunday service never does. It is also the worship that, over time, puts the worshipper back into contact with a God many of us have stopped expecting to meet. You cannot encounter Christ regularly at the sweep of an encampment without being changed. You cannot stand between a cop and a tent without something in you — some longstanding American arrangement between Christianity and comfort — breaking and being rebuilt differently. This is not a program for spiritual growth. It is a side effect of going where Christ is. The cathedral of the poor will do its work on you if you keep showing up there. The prophets warned their contemporaries that worship had consequences. They meant it then. It is still true.

At the end of our century, after the statistics are filed and the denominational reports are written and the building funds are allocated, the

one question the gospel puts to each of us will be a simple one, and it is the question Matthew 25 has been putting to every Christian for two thousand years: when I was hungry, where were you? When I was naked, where were you? When I was a stranger, where were you? When I was ill, where were you? When I was imprisoned, where were you? And when they came to clear my encampment, when they came to take my bedroll, when they came to tell me I could not sit on this bench — where were you? This is not a trick question. It is the simplest question the New Testament asks. The answer we give will depend almost entirely on whether we were willing to go to the cathedral of the poor and worship there. Everything else is commentary.

Conclusion

We set out, at the start of this book, to work on six words. Along the way something has happened that is a little bigger than six words. A pattern has emerged, and it is the same pattern in every essay, and if we squint at it we think it amounts to something that looks like a small, provisional theology of homelessness.

The pattern is this: every word we have taken up has turned out, on inspection, to be carrying a freight of American assumptions that the gospel itself rejects. Home has been smuggling in capitalism; we have had to replace it with God. Hunger has been smuggling in physical-only categories; we have had to restore the spiritual fact. Charity has been smuggling in paternalism; we have had to reach back past three centuries of American usage and find caritas again. Isolation has been smuggling in the idea that those who have been cast out were deserving of being cast out; we have had to relocate God to precisely that place. Enough has been smuggling in scarcity; we have had to receive, from the prophets of enough at the park, the gift of the other meaning. And resistance has been smuggling in the idea that politics and

worship belong in separate rooms of the Christian life; we have had to insist they do not, and that the cathedral where Christ actually dwells is the one the state keeps trying to bulldoze.

What these recoveries share is a single theological move — the move we have called, in several of the essays, flipping the script. The script we inherit from our culture is a ladder, with the worthy at the top and the unworthy at the bottom, and with Christians typically somewhere in the upper middle, reaching down to help those at the bottom climb up. The script the gospel hands us is almost the opposite shape. The bottom of the ladder is where Christ is. The people who have been told they are least are where Jesus dwells. The work of the Christian is therefore not to reach down from a superior rung but to descend to where God already is, and to do so not as an act of condescension but as an act of finally going home. Every essay in this book has been trying, in its own way, to perform that one inversion on one word.

Once the inversion has been made, certain practical habits start to fall out of it. These are worth naming as the essays end, because they are where the theology lives. They are the things we have learned to stop saying, and the

things we have learned to start saying, and the things we have learned to do instead of the things we used to do.

We have learned to stop calling the work a charity. Charity is not the wrong word if you mean caritas, but almost nobody hears it that way anymore, and the word more often insults the people it describes than loves them. We have learned instead to call the work communion. The word communion already carries what we need — the mutual feeding, the equal dignity, the presence of Christ in the gathering, the sacramental density of the ordinary act. When someone asks what Neal Park is, we have learned to say it is a weekly communion, with food.

We have learned to stop speaking of ministry to the homeless and to speak instead of life with the people we have been keeping outside. The preposition matters. Ministry to is a one-directional arrow. Life with is a shared room. One produces case files. The other produces friends.

We have learned to stop using the word enough as a fear-word and to begin using it as a gift-word. Every time a ministry or a person asks, before beginning, is there going to be enough, it has almost always been a question that would stop the gospel from happening. Enough is not what we are

supposed to ensure before we act. Enough is what shows up when we act. We act, and God, somehow, provides enough. That is the miracle the potluck has been performing once a week for nearly twenty years, and we commend the pattern without reservation.

We have learned to stop describing people as impoverished and to describe them, if we describe them economically at all, as poor. Poor is a condition. Impoverished is a verdict on the soul. Only one of those words belongs in a Christian sentence.

We have learned to stop arriving with sexy outcomes in mind. The fundraising culture of American religion wants narratives of transformation that can be photographed. Those narratives almost always require someone to be dressed up as the hero and someone else to be dressed up as the rescued. Neither role is compatible with the gospel. We have learned to arrive, instead, with an empty chair. We have learned to sit in it and see who shows up.

We have learned to stop telling people who come to the table that they have to sit through the sermon before they eat. We have learned to put the meal and the preaching in different parts of the park, with an interval between

them, so that nobody is coerced and everybody is respected. We have learned that in the long run this produces more, not less, of what the preaching was aimed at in the first place.

We have learned to treat the meal itself as a sacrament. Not a metaphor for a sacrament. Not a symbol pointing to a sacrament. A sacrament — a means by which the presence of God is actually, ordinarily, weekly delivered to the people of God. The bread is actual bread. The fellowship is actual fellowship. Christ is actually at the table. That is the good news we came for.

We have learned, finally, to expect surprise. We have learned that any framework we build is going to be tested by an encounter we did not plan for. Dan was going to minister to the man walking down the road with all his bags; the man ended up ministering back and then framing Dan's doorway. We were going to bring food to the park; the park fed us in ways no planning committee could have delivered. We were going to write a book about six words; the words turned into a conversation with the whole of American Christianity. That keeps happening. That is, we suspect, what happens whenever a person goes in the direction of the least of these in good

faith. The least of these are waiting, and what they are waiting to give us is much bigger than what we brought to give them.

If there is one sentence we want readers to carry out of this book, it is the one we think Jesus has been saying, over and over, from the beginning: come and see. The home of God is not where you were told it was. The hospitality of heaven is not on the schedule the church handed you. There is a park. There is a potluck. There is a man on the side of the road with his bags. There is a woman at a well. There is a meal that is happening right now, somewhere, where someone who has been told they are nobody is being received as somebody, and bread is being broken, and enough is arriving, and the kingdom of God is quietly turning over in the grass like the seed Jesus said it was. It has been turning over there all along. You are invited. There has always been room.