
36. CAN ANYONE HELP?

I was standing in a trendy little downtown bar with a group of people sipping chardonnay and speaking with local government officials about the state of homelessness in our city. I was describing our Street Wise work and spouting off my limited wisdom of what I had been learning over the last several years. There were fifty to sixty people that evening and the whole place had been reserved for a private party. A non-profit agency from the other side of our state which works in political advocacy for the homeless was hosting the party. It was a post-election gathering and two state representatives, a state senator, several city officials, business owners, and numerous other leaders from non-profit charities working with the poor, were gathered.

The group sipped wine, ate brie cheese and crackers and glad-handed each other on all that had been accomplished over the last year to preserve funding for the poor among the states tough budget decisions. This was a room full of powerbrokers who spoke in terms of millions of dollars as they discussed homelessness and hunger. These were the movers and the shakers who created and sustained programs all over the state. I was invited because of my connections in working with Spokane's homeless population. But I was in a room full of powerful people who cared about our work.

There were several speeches given about all the hard work we had accomplished together and more speeches about what was in store in the foreseeable future. Promises were made to work diligently and tirelessly on behalf of the poor and though everyone knew the next year would be harder, everyone was going to pull their weight and not let the poor suffer unduly if anyone could help it.

While the speeches were being made my phone kept vibrating in my pocket and I kept hitting the ignore button. As soon as the speech making was done and we were standing about making those crucial connections and introductions that can happen in such a gathering, my phone buzzed again. It was an urgent text from my wife to call her right away. She hates these social gatherings and wouldn't go with me so instead she was a few blocks away hanging out at the church getting some work done at 7:30 on a Friday night – waiting for me to quit schmoozing. I called.

"There is a homeless family who just pulled up to the church," she said; "Another charity sent them here. There is a young mom and dad in their twenties, with four little grade school and preschool children living in a van. They have been kicked out of her mom's house where they have been staying, because they got in a big argument about her mom's drug use and concerning her druggie-boyfriends coming and going at all hours in the home, with the kiddoes present."

It was late November and starting to snow. They had no cash and nowhere to go; hardly any of the shelters take families and when they do it's not so late in the evening. "Can we help them?" My wife pleaded.

"Hold on," I replied, thinking the timing couldn't be more perfect. Here I was standing in a room with some of the most powerful people in the state who really care about this kind of issue. They were all much smarter than I and much more familiar with what could and should be done. Some of the people in the room worked full time in non-profit charities doing nothing but help families just like this one. They would know what to do. So, in my typical, bold, and reckless style, I raised my voice to get everyone's attention.

"Excuse me! Most of you local people know that I pastor that big brick church on Second and Division, just three blocks away. I know this is odd, but my wife is calling right now, informing me that a young family with four little children just pulled up and they have no food, and nowhere to stay." I glanced out the big front windows looking at the giant snowflakes coming down and after a small pause added, "Can anyone help?" Cricket . . . Cricket . . . not a cough, not a shuffle. "OK, thanks anyway." I sheepishly finished and slinked off.

I grabbed my coat and headed for the door. One guy slipped me a twenty to help and one lady handed me a hotline phone number scribbled on a piece of paper, which had just been set up by the city for such emergencies. I couldn't help but think of the total irony of that moment.

I rushed to the church, met the family, and then dialed the hotline number - a machine answered. I left a message detailing the situation and the emergency. I then dialed another agency I knew that helps families and left a message there too.

Eventually our church put them up in the hotel across the street for the next three nights, using our special pre-arranged discount that has since been canceled. We supplied them with some food and gas coupons and

gave them a list of everywhere they could get meals each day. I made sure they went to Salvation Army on Saturday, because they help families and that's where the hotline number led. The place I left the second message called me back the next day saying they couldn't help directly, because according to the new rules, I had to call the new hotline number and route everything through them.

The family came to church Sunday telling me Salvation Army had an eight-week waiting list. The hotline folks would finally call me back, four days later. They told me to get in touch with Salvation Army. "The system is broken," I thought to myself.

I spent weeks, even months, thinking about that moment. It was so pathetically sad and tragic and laughable and revealing, all at the same time. Talk about lifting back the curtain to see what the great and powerful Oz really looks like! Here was a room full of people who congratulated themselves on really making a difference among the homeless but in reality, were totally powerless, helpless, and ignorant of how to actually do a thing when it was right there only a few blocks away.

But I also couldn't help but think about how much of my experience with ministries in church has been like this. How many times have we celebrated church growth, but it really didn't grow by any of our friends. How many times have we cheered for a new believer coming to faith, or new baptisms, but it wasn't anyone we personally knew, and it wasn't anyone we led to Christ. Have we ever applauded ourselves for all we had done in missions or compassion ministries having success in our church, but we didn't make a donation? It often meant a collection given by someone else, sent to somewhere else with still some other person, actually doing the work. How many of us even now celebrate the work our own church does in feeding the poor, but we personally have never worked in the kitchen, donated a dime to buy food, or come down to eat with our neighbors and make friends?

Often, we think that if the church we attend does it, we somehow get to ride in the wake of other people's works and gain some credibility for ourselves. But when confronted with the personal reality one on one – when it's our turn to confront poverty or brokenness or meet a need or share the truth of Jesus, or even pray with someone - we don't know what to do—so we usually don't do anything. "The church will help," we think, which means someone else, somewhere else, will take action and responsibility for *actually doing* something. We just celebrate it later, as the church holds a party.

We will sip our chardonnay and eat our brie cheese and crackers (figuratively speaking) and pat ourselves on the back. But, if we take an honest look, if some darn fool holding a cell phone says, "Hey, you, longtime expert Christian – I got a person here on the line right now who needs what you say you are giving to the world – can you help?" We sputter and cough and hope someone else will respond to the need.

We are far removed from the realities of what we think we are doing and other people are way more important because they are actually getting the work done. Perhaps Jesus means it for each of us *individually* when he said, "*Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*" (Matt 25:40). Perhaps when the sheep and the goat judgment comes we won't be able to blend in with the right flock, but we will have to be called out individually to stand on our own and hold our heads up to what we have contributed to the cause of Christ. Perhaps, every now and then, Jesus wants us to look long and hard at what we think we're doing, and ask ourselves - *am I really doing it?*

Several years after this incident, the city of Spokane united with Family Promise to create the Open Doors Emergency Day Shelter. This, in partnership with their Bridges Program, now operates 24/7. The program offers shelter, aid, and help transitioning to permanent housing and jobs. We are all proud to say we now have the right place to call for emergency situations like this one.