

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-20 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 5/23)

Earlier in November, when there was snow on the ground and the nighttime temperature dipped to minus 11, Saskatoon author Yann Martel did a prophetic thing. He participated in Sanctum Care Group's Winter Challenge, which means that for 36 hours he lived as if he were homeless. He said, I wore donated clothes and walked around 20th Street with no ID and no money in my pockets, experiencing for a short time the difficulties that homeless people experience every day, for days and weeks on end.

Martel continues, It went well. I was one of the lucky ones: I spent the night in the Brief Detox Unit, on a comfy bed in a warm dorm room (please note: if a homeless person had come in from the cold, I would have been kicked out of that bed). Three of my fellow participants had to spend the night outside. Look out the window now; can you imagine that, spending the night outside in this weather, using cardboard and whatever blankets and sleeping bags you've managed to scrounge?

Otherwise, I spent the two days walking around, trying to address the innumerable challenges facing our marginalized populations. There are services out there, for sure, but if you are suffering from addiction or mental health issues, if you have literacy issues, those services are very hard to access.

To give you one example, I went to the Mental Health & Addiction Services offices in the Sturdy Stone Building. I told the receptionist I was homeless and needed help with my issues. She directed me to a small room with a table, a chair and a phone. On the table were instructions to call one of two numbers to start the intake process.

Well, no matter how many times I called those numbers, I got the same message, telling me to leave a message with my name, phone number and the service I was requesting. How many homeless people have phone numbers? Should I have left the number of that phone there, in that small room? How long would I have had to wait? Otherwise, the message listed five other services I could access and their phone numbers. The experience left me entirely stymied and un-helped.

Another example of frustrating lack of access to services: you don't have ID, lost it long ago while battling in the streets, and need it now, to access the Food Bank, for example, or to sign up for SAID, the Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability, or SIS, the Saskatchewan Income Support? Well, good luck with that. You need \$35 for a birth certificate, you need an email address (which means you need a phone, because where else are they going to send that pesky validation code), you need good literacy skills, and you need an address where you can receive mail. Each of those is an obstacle that can be overcome, but imagine you're barely keeping it together because the misery of your life has exacerbated your addiction issues.

In this Epiphany season of growing light in the northern hemisphere, the gospel readings have called us to baptism and explore what it means to follow Jesus. In our gospel reading from Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount calls us to be salt and light. The saying is evocative and has multiple layers of meaning, since salt had many connotations in Matthew's tradition and context—including sacrifice (Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24), loyalty and covenant fidelity (Ezra 4:14; Num 18:19; eating together was called "sharing salt" and expressed a binding relationship, purification (2 Kgs 2:19-22), seasoning (Job 6:6; Col 4:5), and preservative.

The disciples' mission in the world is further illustrated by the light metaphor as illumination for the world. The primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are. The metaphor of the city on a hill presents the disciples as inevitably and unavoidably being seen.

The salt and light sayings picture engagement in community as inherent to discipleship, as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is to light. For salt, being salty is not optional. With these three metaphors of salt, light, and city, the Matthean Jesus strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private. The sermon is heard not only by the disciples but also by the "crowds" (7:28-29). The community that lives by the power of unostentatious prayer in the inner room (6:6) is not an introverted secret society shielding itself from the world, but is a city set on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed. What does it mean to be salt and light with regard to homelessness in the city of Saskatoon?

Pastor Robert Pearce from Fairmont Baptist Church on radio 650 CKOM, following of the arrival of an emergency wellness centre operated by the Saskatoon Tribal Council, detailed the rise in vandalism, incidents of aggressive behaviour and people using church property as a bathroom. The story prompted Chief Mark Arcand to hold a news conference Tuesday touting his organization's successes in preventing freezing deaths, getting people into permanent housing and providing ongoing supports. Chief Arcand took exception to comments Pastor Pearce made and questioned the church leader's commitment to helping the less fortunate.

Pastor Pearce said the church has made the heartbreaking decision to lock its doors for safety during the day. "None of us are mental health experts. We're not able

to gage who is volatile and violent when they're high on drugs and is going to be a danger to us." Locked doors gives him and other church members time to assess safety before they engage with someone who may need help. The church didn't feel prepared to deal with this and didn't feel the city or Tribal Council prepared them or the rest of the neighbourhood to deal with the challenges of homelessness and addiction. My guess is that every neighbourhood in Saskatoon would say "not in our backyard." Wisely Pastor Pearce said he didn't want to get into mudslinging in the press but it's a tough public relations image for the pastor and church. What does it mean for a church to be salt and light in this situation? What we would do at OMC? I'd like us to discuss this over coffee hour and in Sunday school and get your ideas back to me for a future sermon. (Star Phoenix Jan. 27/23)

Yann Martel continues with his learning experience on the streets of Saskatoon...There were moments of grace on the street. While waiting to get into The Bridge, where I had a good hot lunch and could have taken a shower, I met Jay and his girlfriend, whose name I didn't catch. They didn't know where they were sleeping that night (read that again and let it sink in), but they were smiling and laughing. They had each other. They looked like a happy couple. When you've got nothing, you're left with the greatest wealth of all: people.

During those 36 hours, I was touched by the extraordinary kindness of the many people who are trying to help the homeless. I salute everyone who works at Sanctum Care Group, the Food Bank, the Westside Clinic, the Saskatoon Tribal Council's Health Centre, the Bridge, OUTSaskatoon/Sexual Health Clinic, HART (the HIV and AIDS Response Team), the Friendship Inn, and the Saskatoon Public libraries. I asked

everyone I interacted with if they liked their job, and every single one had the same response: they loved it.

Martel continues, Over and over, I met people who showed me the respect and dignity that poverty and homelessness so quickly strip you of. That's how we begin to deal with homelessness in our city, by re-humanizing people from whom so much has been taken. Homelessness is not a cancer. It's the suffering of fellow citizens, and if we don't help them, we're all brought down, the homeless and everyone around them, residents, business owners, the city, everyone. There, but for the grace of God or your parents or your systemic privilege or your luck, go you, go any of us. (Star Phoenix Nov. 16/22)

May we keep learning, connecting, engaging people who are different from us and be brave to tackle the difficult social/spiritual issues around us in saltiness and light. Let us pray...God of light, your rising reveals all things in their true proportion. Illumine our lives, that we may see rightly, love deeply and act justly. In the example of Jesus, we pray. Amen.