

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING



The concern for the homeless is rooted in desert traditions that were codified into the Old Testament laws regarding hospitality to strangers. The extending of hospitality-food and shelter-is an extension of life. Without hospitality, there is no life. The Bedouin culture is nomadic; there is no established home.

These desert-dwellers moved from place to place wherever they could find pasturage. Wherever they would pitch their tents, there was home - often an Island of security in the midst of wilderness and desolation. For those who traveled these waste-lands, an encampment of nomads was welcome. It sometimes meant the difference between life and death. To refuse food, shelter, and protection was to consign the wanderer to possible death. Thus, the ancient laws of the desert required one to offer fire, water, food, and shelter to the desert traveler. It was the giving of life.

Old Testament Examples

Abraham's hospitality to the strangers beneath the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18: 1-8) reflects these laws. Abraham offers food and water, washes their feet, and provides shelter and protection. The appearance of the three men (angels) is seen as the appearance of God. What one does for the stranger, one does for God.

Yahweh reminds Israel to be concerned for the stranger, providing food and clothing. "You shall . . . love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10: 18). Yahweh is often depicted as the model host, who welcomes the stranger and provides rest for the cosmic traveler. The familiar words of Psalm 23 outline the courtesies and protection that need to be extended: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

God's promise to Abraham, which was renewed in the Exodus, was for land. The "promised land," the "land of milk and honey," was to be a homeland for the Hebrew people - a place where they would have rootage, a sense of belonging. To be homeless is to be disconnected. This theme was extremely important to the Hebrew culture. The major events in the history of the Jewish people have to do with the covenantal promise of new land, a return from slavery in Egypt, the exile to and return from Babylon, the destruction of the temple, and the subsequent dispersion among the nations.

When the prophet Elijah announces that God will bring a drought upon the land of Israel, he becomes a fugitive. He is led to Zarephath where he encounters a widow at the gate of the city. The widow has so little in the way of food or water that she cannot meet Elijah's request for

hospitality. So desperate is her situation that she is preparing for her own death and that of her son. When Elijah declares that God will provide the means of extending courtesy, the widow complies, and Elijah remains at her home for many days. Thus when the widow's son dies, she attributes this to Elijah's actions. She accuses him of a breach of etiquette. Elijah calls upon God to restore the soul of the child, and it is done. The widow acknowledges God's presence with Elijah. The Old Testament makes it clear that the way we treat the stranger is the way we treat God (1 Kings 17:8-24).

New Testament Considerations

The birth narratives of Jesus the Christ also describe a quest for rootage and shelter. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem and are turned away at the inn. Mysterious strangers travel from the east to bring gifts to the homeless child. Within days of his birth, the enfleshed God becomes a refugee from Herod's wrath and must flee to Egypt. When he returns to his own home, his own people reject him (John 1: 11). Jesus is a homeless wanderer who tells a would-be follower: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Jesus reminds us in the parable of the last judgment that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome the Christ (Matthew 24: 31-46). Judgment will come, not on the basis of what we believe, but on how we treat our neighbor. An honest faith allows us to see the Christ in others and to be the Christ to others.

Much of the theology of the New Testament is based upon recognizing God among us. "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1: 14). The word for "lived" (EOKLVWQEV) means literally "to pitch one's tent." "God, in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, is temporarily among us, "He came to what was his own [home], and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). It may seem to be a strong statement, but the failure to care for the homeless may be seen as a rejection of God. The writer of Hebrews reminds us: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13: 2). To care for those in need is to give witness to the love of God!

The theological basis for all our actions as Christians is in recognizing the Christ in those who are in need.

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Affirming our Faith Series No. 17
Reformed-Evangelical-Catholic
Published by the Committee on Theology
Pennsylvania Southeast Conference
United Church of Christ

