

Letters to a Young Episcopalian

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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What Problem are we Trying to Solve?

Dear Anna,

Last week I went to the Homeless Requiem at the Cathedral. Held each year around All Saints' Day, it gathers people living in shelters or on the streets for an evening offering of winter clothing, foot care, a southern dinner, and a Requiem for those in the homeless community who died in the past year.

Beforehand, I thought of Timothy Schmalz's bronze sculpture "The Homeless Jesus" — a man sleeping on a park bench, face hidden, feet scarred by crucifixion. But when I arrived, I didn't see a lone, shrouded figure. I saw the body of Christ. The Cathedral was alive with people of every shape, size, color, and age. Men whose bodies bore the marks of life on the streets mingled with women and children bursting with youthful energy. The foot clinic near the front door was hushed, but the parish hall was buzzing. Volunteers were easy to spot — they were the ones listening. I watched a friend's teenage daughter, absorbed in conversation, roll her eyes when her mother hinted she might let the man she was talking to speak with someone else. She wasn't finished listening.

When the service began, new companions joined voices in hymns and prayers. The unseen were remembered. As each of the 150 names was read, a bell tolled and a white wooden cross was placed in a basket before the altar.

The evening made me realize how easily we treat homelessness as a problem — like that sculpted Jesus under a blanket — something to be solved. We ask, "How much money would it take to give everyone a home?" But what if homelessness is a problem without an answer?

Sam Wells, in "A Nazareth Manifesto," reminds us that human life is bounded by limitations — illness, poverty, weather, death — that can't be eliminated. Rather than trying to erase them, we might learn to live faithfully within them. Perhaps our deepest problem isn't limitation, or even death, but isolation.

If isolation is the real problem, then the goal is not merely to survive but to live — truly and together. Eternal life without communion sounds less like heaven than hell. Heaven is reunion: being present to one another without erasing our differences or resorting to violence. We call this communion — learning to be with each other, not merely doing things for each other.

That's what I witnessed at the Homeless Requiem. It's not that we shouldn't do things for others; it's just that we should learn how to be with them first. This Thanksgiving, I hope to remember this learning — to spend less time serving dinner and more time simply being together. Maybe preparing the meal can be something we all do as one body.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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