I Hear hope BANGING

AT MY BACK DOOR

Writings from *Hospitality*

ED LORING

The Open Door Community, Atlanta

WITH A FOREWORD BY
REV. TIMOTHY McDONALD III

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Calvin Kimbrough

Ed Loring
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To the Open Door Community Partners

Thank you, my partners! Through you I have heard hope banging upon the door of my life. In you I have been discovered by the Christ of the homeless wanderer and the Jesus in jail and prison. With you I have been empowered to say the YES to Yahweh-Elohim's unconditional grace, and, thus, we wash one another's feet. Beside you I serve and am served by the poor and oppressed. Behind you I walk the road of solidarity toward justice and the Beloved Community. Thank you, my partners.

Ed Loring, Hannah Loring-Davis, Murphy Davis

To the Open Door Community Partners

Adolphus Victrum

Gladys Rustay

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Foreword

It seems that in every city, in every time and for every situation, God has individuals and institutions who are committed to the cause of justice and the poor, no matter the cost. These individuals and institutions often are in conflict with the status quo, and find themselves doing strange and unusual acts to cause those who set public policy to hear the cries of the poor. In the city of Atlanta, Rev. Ed Loring and Rev. Murphy Davis, and members of the Open Door Community, have always found themselves carrying the banner for justice for the homeless and the locked-out.

It was in 1980, while serving as the assistant pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, that I met Ed and Murphy. We were then working on prison and death-penalty issues. I recall on one occasion a group of us taking over the governor's office and being offered fried chicken and Coca-Cola. We prayed and we sang all night long, and I got to know the depth of commitment of Rev. Ed Loring and Rev. Murphy Davis. I was convinced that they were for real; it was at that point that our ministries locked.

When the Open Door Community was founded, I was interested in how it was going to be received in inner-city Atlanta. Homelessness was not the most popular issue on the agenda of a city that was growing and turning more anti-homeless. Numerous attempts were being made by the powers that be, particularly members of the downtown business community, to make being poor and homeless in Atlanta illegal. Then the phrase was "vagrant-free zone."

It was clear to many of us in inner-city ministries that a large number of those who were homeless were Black, and Black men in particular. It was also interesting to discover that the people we were visiting in jails and prisons were the same people on the streets. So it seemed to us that racism was a key factor in understanding what was happen-

ing to the poor. The Open Door Community connected with the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, and a partnership has now existed for more than fifteen years. We have waged numerous battles together on behalf of the homeless and the poor. The times demanded that we challenge not only the business community, but even Black elected officials, who demonstrated more allegiance to the "profit" interest than to justice for the poor.

The activities of the Open Door range from worshiping together to sitting on toilets in Woodruff Park—demanding public access to restrooms—to acts of civil disobedience, fighting for medicine and affordable health care for all of God's children. Working with Ed and Murphy over the years has created a strong and lasting bond. I am known by many as the preacher with the bullhorn; Ed is known as the preacher who is a bullhorn. Ed takes the prophetic tradition of "crying out" seriously. His courageous leadership in the Open Door Community has endeared him to freedom-loving people throughout the city.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Open Door Community is its diversity and its communal lifestyle. Its openness to the poorest of the poor and its inclusion of Black males are major oddities in Atlanta. The Open Door, unlike many well-meaning organizations, is not afraid to raise the issue of racism and then to confront it head-on. Over the years, we have tried all the nice ways of saying that racism is wrong and that racism contributes to homelessness, joblessness, exploitation, and oppression. The Open Door Community takes this battle very seriously, and it embodies what it preaches.

Some would be quick to criticize the Open Door because it often uses such unorthodox tactics. But in a world gone mad with greed and power, we desperately need people who are peculiar, strange, eclectic, and Christian to the core—people who understand that there must be a connection between our proclamation and our practice, Christians who take the body of Christ seriously. The Open Door Community is all this and more. What attracts me to the Open Door is that they, more than many others, understand what it means to bring in the kingdom of God on earth. They reflect a Christ who meets people where they are, and are not afraid of getting involved in the complex lives of people who are hurting.

Another thing I like about the Open Door Community is that it embodies the distinction between social services and social change.

Too many religious institutions do not adequately grasp this relationship. Social services involve the feeding, sheltering, and counseling that the Open Door is good at. They go a step further, however, and are not afraid to engage and confront those who set public policy. The Open Door has a holistic approach to ministry. They take the practice of ministry, epitomized by Jesus, seriously. Members of the Open Door are concerned about mind, body, and spirit, and understand that one cannot adequately address one without involving oneself in the others.

There are several features that separate the Open Door from other churches and religious institutions. The one feature that stands out is their ability to identify with the poor. We have spent many cold, bone-shaking nights with members of the Open Door who did not have to be outdoors, feeling in their bodies what it means to be homeless. Members feel that in working with the poor it is important to experience what they experience, even to the point of knowing what it means to be incarcerated, mistreated, forsaken, and abandoned.

Remembering in a requiem mass those who die on our streets is now an Atlanta tradition thanks to the Task Force for the Homeless and the Open Door Community. The mass gives name and presence to the men, women, and children who die on our streets every year. For the Open Door, the "Beloved Community" is more than a nice phrase used by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The Beloved Community is where Christ, through each of us, makes himself present in the dying, burial, and ultimate resurrection of a poor, homeless person.

Everyday, the First Iconium Baptist Church, where I have the privilege of pastoring, honors the members of the Open Door by sharing with the homeless in our daily walk. The bond between my church and the Open Door is strong, enduring, and spiritual. We have often engaged in study, preaching, teaching, political actions, protest, and bringing in the kingdom of God together. In fact, Ed and I have become known as "ebony and ivory." Just like on the piano, both black and white keys must be played together if you want real music; otherwise, all you have is sounding brass or clanging cymbals. The Open Door Community plays beautiful music for the kingdom of God as it

works to build the Beloved Community. I am glad to be a part of the journey.

Rev. Timothy McDonald III
First Iconium Baptist Church, Atlanta
March 29, 2000

Preview: A Poem

I hear hope BANGING at my back door.
Torn Towels
Blank Blankets
Shake
in molehill mountains
As men move momentarily.
Hannah hits the handle
and zoom is a gone gal.

Lumps languish on the basketball court.
Heads hop in the hedge.
Gabriel swings his lunch box
Luke sings his way to Decatur Presbyterian
Church preschool.
Dawn. (before congress saved the daylight
time)

pants pulled pee poop plop
behind dumpsters
before trees
beside cars.
coffee hot
cig butts
Ah, at last it is time to wait again.

I hear hope
BaNgInG
At my back door
Voices
like sirens screaming
like Bluejays bickering
like mamas moaning
like men mad;
"Goddamn I'd like to
sleep in a bed tonight."

Foxes have holes
Birds have nests
The Son of Humanity
Has no place to lay his head.
Neither does John, Henry,
Blue, Rock, Willy, Beth, Jane, Kahil, Pete,
Malcolm, Kathy, 102340, EF 124884, Harold.

1.

Who Is That Knocking on My Door?

Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if any hear my voice and open the door, I will come into their house and eat with them, and they will eat with me.

—Revelation 3:20

The Open Door Community is a residential Christian community in downtown Atlanta, at 910 Ponce de Leon Avenue, about a mile and a quarter from the Fox Theatre on Peachtree. A group of some thirty of us lives together in an old apartment building that is owned by the Open Door Community and by the Greater Atlanta Presbytery, which consists of all its supporting churches. In those rooms, within those walls, we struggle together to live a life of obedience and servanthood to the call and gift of Jesus Christ in our lives.

We are a community of diversity—a lot of different kind of folk coming to live together: joyful and grumpy, short and tall, mainline and marginalized, black and white and brown, formally educated and street- or prison-educated, artists, poets, singers, crossbearers, brothers and sisters. Even our grumpy ones laugh a lot. We've all been mighty hungry, and we are learning how to eat together. Recently we were honored to open our door to a knock, a knock to which we have listened several times over the last years, and in came a man named Amos Jones. He is also an embodiment of Jesus Christ. When we listen and open the door, Jesus comes in and lives with us; he eats with us, and we eat with him. Amos has cancer in both of his legs, and it is spreading. Amos has AIDS, and it is full-blown. Amos has just come to us from one of the holy places in this city—Grady Memorial Hospital—one of the most important institutions for those who are poor and marginalized. I plead for your support and help for Grady Memorial Hospital. It is a place under attack.

We are a community that lives with Amos, and Amos lives with us. We live with Jesus, and Jesus lives with us. We're a community that is Black and white; we are strong and weak; some of us are highly educated, and some of us are unable to read. We have women and we have men. Sometimes we have children—not all the time. We have a number of us who are aging. And we are young people. We have people whose hope and energy is fierce and feisty and ready. And we have people who are despairing, who think America doesn't give a damn about the poor, who think the church has turned its back, who think that Jesus doesn't knock on the door, but that Jesus is busy, off doing something else—like playing golf—and has forgotten about the cry of the prisoner, or the hunger of the hungry. So we are shaped by the goodness of God, by the cross of Jesus Christ, to live a life in community with diversity.

We are a community of worship. Each morning at 5:50 those journeying to the wonderful Butler Street CME Church to feed two hundred men and women and a few children gather in a circle to hear the Word. After serving the awesome breakfast of coffee, cheese grits, a boiled egg, three-quarters of an orange, and a multivitamin we sweep and mop the floors. We clean the toilets and lavatories. We pick up trash and sweep the sidewalk in front of the church and along the sidewalk on Coca Cola Place. Then we sit for our own breakfast. "The grits have God in them," Leo promises us! We reread the scripture lesson and then reflect on the morning's activities. Did you see Jesus today? How was our hospitality and welcome? What public policies must be changed to harness the devil and roll away the stone from the tomb of Christ? Who are the leaders and what are the values that create and sustain hunger in the midst of plenty? Then we beg Yahweh to get us going toward the wilderness, and head home to 910.

Every day we feed hundreds of people, and after our soup kitchen at 910 we clean up. Then we gather, before we eat, for a time of listening and remembering those who have knocked on our door. We read the word of God, reflect, and pray. On Sunday afternoon at 5:00 P.M. we have a worship service with the Eucharist followed by a *yummy* meal prepared by Adolphus or Leo. Four times each year while on retreat at Dayspring—a farm near Ellijay, Georgia, several hours north of Atlanta—we celebrate the sacrament of foot washing. We are

Calvin Kimbrough

Butler Street CME Church

"fools for Christ and wish we were more so," Dorothy Day teaches us as she sits amid the clouds as a witness.

We speak, sometimes softly, sometimes shouting out (Isa. 58:1), of our life together. Out of the hunger, desire, and the need to build a Christian life in the center of the city, out of a call to be witnesses and to give testimony, out of the thirst to say "Yes, yes!" we proclaim to those who are hungry, "There's plenty of food!" We stand in jails and prisons promising "Yes, yes!" to those who are in prison: "There is a promise of liberty to captives!" "Yes, yes!" to those who work and cannot earn enough to pay both room and board: "There is an abundance at this table! Enough for all. Our God is a God who keeps promises! Yes, yes!" Out of this vocation we move into a mission—a love in action—for we have been taught by Jesus and Martin and Willie Dee Wimberly: "The only solution is love." That is what we're all about!

Most of us in the community would not be here if we didn't need the community. The difference between a church and a business cor-

poration, the difference between a Christian community and a university, is that we are shaped, sustained, and made deep and powerful through our brokenness and sin. So many other organizations are sustained through success, power, and strength. It is our weakness that God uses for God's glory.

There is no one who lives at the Open Door who doesn't have to be here. We are addicted and yearning for sobriety. We are broken and yearning for healing. We have learned that the way to get to the foot of the cross and to touch the hem of the garment, to move into the empty tomb and to see the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is through our knowledge of death in our lives. So it is that we move to love in action. We have learned from the long loneliness that the only solution is love, and love is found in community, as Dorothy Day teaches us.

We go into prisons to put our love in action. Recently the *Atlanta Constitution* had an article on Billy Neal Moore, a former death-row inmate who is now in ministry in Rome, Georgia. We were in ministry with Billy on death row for a number of years. In the hellhole of prison, Billy was able to organize Bible studies, and to bring peace into one of the most heated furnaces in our culture. If there's any place where the Christian life is difficult, it's prison. People like Warren McCleskey, Billy Neal Moore, Jack Alderman, and other people of faith live and shape a Christian life on death row, and they witness time and time again that no one is outside the purview of God's love and redemptive purposes. We're opposed to the death penalty because we believe that no one is beyond God's grace, that God can save Adolf Hitler or Ed Loring.

Listen!

"I," said Jesus, "I stand and knock. Will you open your door? Will you open your door? Will you open your door?" Jesus is knocking. Can you hear him? "If you open that door," said Jesus, "I'll come in and eat with you, and you will eat with me."

We do a lot of eating and feeding at the Open Door and downtown at the Butler Street CME Church. We understand that every meal we eat is related to the Eucharist, to the eschatological banquet—that promise by which we live that there is enough for everybody, and that when we obey God's Spirit who is moving across the earth there will be no hunger.

Sometimes children, hungry children, knock on our door. We've

had a couple of six- and seven-year-olds coming to eat breakfast with us recently. They go to Cook Elementary School near Interstate 20 in Capitol Homes. They eat with us at 7:00 A.M. They are clean, dressed, and with their daddy. After they eat grits, an egg, and some oranges, they go to school. Part of the heartbreak of our lives is that people come and people go. We decided to send them to school in a taxi on the days when the weather was bad, and they haven't been back since. Did the rain run them away? Was the cold too much? Is it easier just to bypass the breakfast? Did we not listen while they were knocking on our door? God, forgive us. Forgive us when we claim your call in our lives to feed the hungry, and then we don't do it.

Another person who knocks on our door is a man I deeply love. I have known this man for ten years. His name, mysteriously enough, is Isaiah. In Hebrew, one of God's favorite languages, Yeshua or Isaiah means "God is salvation." He is exceedingly lame. He is crippled. He walks with a thump and a thud, with his right shoulder bobbing up and down like an Olympic swimmer doing a slow-motion crawl. He comes into our house and he mystifies me and loves me. I can see Jesus healing me in him because he is always joyful. He is hungry, and he gets to eat, and I become joyful. Isaiah comes day after day, rain, snow, or heat, to eat with us. It is so wonderful to have an Isaiah in your life. The poet-prophet Isaiah, as you may remember, is always promising that God is going to heal the halt, that God is going to take the weak limbs and make them strong. How wonderful it is to share breakfast with Isaiah.

There is also a man named Joseph at our door—Joseph, the panhandler. The biblical Joseph was Jacob and Rachel's son. Joseph was sold into slavery by his envious brothers, demonstrating again the profound and uncomfortable answer to Cain's guilt-ridden question of his Creator: Am I my brother or sister's keeper? My wife, Murphy Davis, has had a big bout with Burkitt's lymphoma. We thought we were going to lose her, and we found out recently that the doctor feels like she's made it up the rough side of the mountain. Joseph didn't know Murphy when she started going to Grady Hospital to the oncology clinic. He would come down and eat breakfast with us, and he would see Murphy and shout, "Hey, don't you have a dollar for me?" And we built a loving relationship with him. "Thank you, Joseph, you ragged beggar, for untying the bag of grain and feeding us with companion-

ship as frightened disciples we walked into the stormy sea. Your gift of the silver cup rattling before us was a sign that five loaves equals five thousand, that Jesus is ever near."

Another person who comes to our door hungry is Deborah. Her name means "bee," and she has a mean sting. Deborah is demented; she is insane; she is mentally ill. Her anger is beyond what we can endure. We let her come in, but we refuse to feed her. She curses us. I look at her, and I see Jesus or the great woman prophet of the days of Israel's confederacy in the strangest of guises—a Black woman, who on one level is an enemy. We do not feed her. We can't handle her rage. We can hear her knocking on our door, and we don't open the door.

That is the hardest part of our lives. We can't always say, "Yes." We distinguish, discriminate, and make decisions. We say, "Yes," and we say, "No." We say, "Come in," and we say, "Go out." We say, "You are welcome," and we say, "If you don't move and stop what you're doing we'll call the police." It is harsh and dreadful. It is cross and finitude. The decision is filled with forgiveness, grace, and love. We become urgent in our patience. We want justice and we want it now!

We believe that something keeps bringing Deborah back; God is working in Deborah's life, maybe even through our "no." We pray for Deborah. We cry for Deborah. We tell Deborah's story. And we hope someday we can open the door and invite her in, and we can be more faithful as people of the cross.

Believe me. Jesus the Christ is knocking on our door. He asks us to listen. He asks us to step into hospitality, to welcome, to answer the door and invite people in, to eat together and discover in the breaking of bread the presence of Jesus Christ. Through eating, through visitation in the prison, through volunteering at the Open Door, through honoring our Lord, we can hear in the cry of the poor the cry of Jesus Christ. He leads us into a life of solidarity with our God and the poor and marginalized. And what a glorious life! Full of energy and friendship and community and all you want of everything you need! The road is hard; the gate is narrow. But the journey toward justice is the journey to life, to salvation and healing.

In the movie *Amistad* there is a moment when Cinque, chained and shackled as a slave, stands up like a Black Jesus, like Amos, like Isaiah, like Deborah, like Joseph, like the little children, and says, "Give us free! Give us free! Give us free!"

Who is that knocking on my door?
Who is that knocking on your door?

2.

Thanksgiving as Introduction

Murphy Brinkley lives in my backyard. His feet are twisted because, during much of his adult life, he has not possessed shoes that fit. He is sixty years old. When it rains, he gets wet. When the temperature falls, he does too. He is waiting for Jesus or Moses or Matubu, the African king of yore, to come and set him free from the horror of homelessness. In Murphy Brinkley I hear hope banging at my back door. He hasn't given up. He has not quit. Passion for life has not been taken from him. He loves my daughter, Hannah, and sends her off to school each morning with kindness and admonitions to "pay attention and study hard." He welcomes me in the midnight hour after I've listened to Luther "Houserocker" Johnson pick his wild red guitar with his teeth. He laughs and teases, plays and prays in my backyard. Mr. Brinkley was not meant to live this way. No one is. Even our ancestors found caves or hollows in the giant trees. He is dying. Homelessness is death, a quiet nonjudicial death penalty that even Bill Clinton would not fly home to Arkansas to watch. I love Murphy Brinkley and he loves me. Someday we shall dance.

⌖

I was conceived on June 15, 1939, on Buster and Mary's third wedding anniversary. Wednesday, 7:47 A.M. Already sultry in the cypress-studded Low Country around Bamberg, South Carolina. The first shift was fast at work in the nearby cotton mills. Lovers lounging could hear the purr of electric looms. The ubiquitous crows cawed continuously over the cotton fields beside and in front of the house on Carlisle Street. After two dawn-breaking sets of tennis and a short jazz piece on the trumpet those folk, strangers to me really at the time, who were to be my mom and dad, embraced.

Because my mom was in Bamberg at the time, I was born there, March 18, 1940, while Hitler and Mussolini munched cookies in a train car in the Brenner Pass. Outside our front door, cotton-mill workers trudged to and from their shanties. By the end of World War II, I would know these people by the moniker "Lintheads." African Americans, too, moved across that stretch of street, unpaved and white-sanded, which lay before my little white home. People were always tramping to and from their work which, for the most part, was bondage. I grew to realize, though, that some white mill workers had ancient automobiles with synthetic rubber tires, filled with womenfolk and hungry children. Likewise, several Black families had wagons and mules and they rode to town, filled with family, every Saturday for purchase and play. This was the beginning of class analysis for me, but it took twenty-five years for me to realize the central role of class in history.

Paradoxically, or so it seems to me now some fifty years later, in that little town filled with exploitation and oppression, there was space for strength, peculiarity, idiosyncrasy. I have been nurtured by one such Bamberg anomaly. She was Black as the waters of the Edisto River, five feet tall. Old as the ancient oaks dressed in gray Spanish moss, which lined the long drives to the ruined plantations along Highway 301. Wildly she babbled without ceasing and walked the streets and highways selling straw brooms. When she came into our backyard and banged on my back door I was terrified. If I was in the yard I would hide, cringing with fear. If inside I would grab both my mother's legs and refuse to let go. She was witch, Hecate, fear, death. My mom would always buy a broom. And then, to my horror, she would insist that the little old woman, whose voice echoed the suffering of slaves and the lamentations of love gone awry, stay for breakfast. Mom always fixed her a big breakfast, no matter the time of day: eggs, coffee, grits, toast, bacon, and three slices of orange. Mumbling between mouthfuls she would sit on my back porch banging her fork against the plate and eyeing her treasure of straw brooms. Plate cleaned, she would nod. Cackling and gabbing, her little Black body would slowly disappear across the white cotton fields, her arms loaded with straw.

But did she disappear? Years later in the middle of a wintry night I went and walked those dying cotton fields. I then heard,

as I do today, the voice of that little old woman, groaning, grieving, moaning for her lost life. I hear her banging on my back porch. Her desire runs deep as the Mississippi River. An egg or the sale of a broom won't satisfy her today. She is demanding freedom and respect. Ah, I hear hope banging at my back door. Someday Murphy Brinkley and I shall dance. Therefore . . .

⌖

I want to say to you who hear voices and who listen to the cry of the poor, to those of you who act because you must: *thank you.* Dorothy Day, Mitch Snyder, Carlyle Marney, Carol Fennelly, Michael Stoops, Murphy Davis, Joyce Hollyday, Dick and Gladys Rustay, Moses and Miriam, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Carl Mazza, Tim McDonald, Tom Francis, Rob and Carolyn Johnson, Tonnie King, Adolphus Victrum, Eric Debode, Jim Wallis, David Hayden, Elizabeth Dede, Jim and Anita Beaty, Bill Bolling, C. M. Sherman, Ched Myers, William Stringfellow, Jesus, Jerry Robinett, Nibs Stroupe, Houston and Anne Wheeler, Thomas Merton, Phillip Williams, Clarence Jordan, Warren McCleskey, Chuck Campbell, Mark Harper, Jeanie and Bill Wylie-Kellerman, Mike Harank, Al Gypsy Smith, Thony Green, 102340, John and Dee Cole-Vodicka, Jim and Barb Tamailis, Joe Beasley, Carl Barker, Harriet Tubman, Stan Saunders and Brenda Smith, Jeff Graham, Brian and Ellen Spears, Ralph Dukes, Moriba Karamoko, Peggy Scherer, Art and Ruth Field, Ed Potts, David and Trudy Bessada, Billy Mitchell, Jubilee Partners, Robert Hayes, Bishop Joseph Coles, Ira Terrell, Rosa Parks, EF1271104, Jeff Dietrich and Catherine Morris, Tom Brown, Cassie Temple, Curt and Priscilla Treska, Ed and Mary Ruth Weir, Hannah Loring-Davis, Dan Berrigan, Roosevelt Greene, Frances Pauley, Tommy Davis, Nelia and Calvin Kimbrough, Fannie Lou Hamer, Jane Sammon, Billy Neal Moore, Chuck Reed, Neely McCarter, Albert Love, Willie London, Tyrone Brooks, Sarah Humphrey, Frederick Douglass, Frederick Douglass Taylor, Bruce Bishop, Leo McGuire, Charlie Young, Miles Horton, Horace Tribble, Community for Creative Non-violence, Mary and Lewis Sinclair, Barbara Majors, Inez Giles, Phil Berrigan, Elizabeth McAlister, John Bateman, Will Coleman, Pete Gathje, Robbie Bullar and Chou Ly, Gino Williams, Bob Dylan, Don Beisswenger, Johann Sebastian Bach, John Pickens, Harold Wind, Will Campbell, Colleen Brady, William Lloyd Garri-

son, John Brown, Barry and Esther Burnside, Willie Dee Wimberly, "an' for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe . . ."

From my back porch where hope is a-bangin', from my backyard where courageous men and women live their forgotten lives, from my long hall just beyond the clothes closet and slightly to the right of Malcolm X's picture, I want to simply say thank you. Thank you for who you are (and have been) and for what you do (and have done) with your lives. You are those who carry in that frail and raggedy box the most precious of gifts given gladly to girls and boys, women and men. You tote:

Hope
Care
Compassion
Frontline living
Mercy
Faith
Love
Ah, yes, and the greatest of these is love!

YES

Honored are you
Among
Shelters and soup kitchens
And hidden doorways
and behind the putrid places
where people put their dumpsters
under bridges and
on top of buildings
where men hide
where women huddle.

Most often in silence
sometimes in the ice of hate
often in the pain, passion and
heat of human hurt

You

Are loved, remembered, honored
Among those who have no honor
whose dignity is dead
whose rights are wronged, For

You

Have listened to the voices
Heard stomachs rumble
Watched and felt the violent
murderous injustice and death
so benignly
so professionally
so coolly called

HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA

in this corpulent
greedy
fast lane
quick buck
society of ours.

So I thank you on this very day.

Through you and the god-awful cries of the crucified poor I hear hope banging at my back door. I thank my beloved friend, Jesus, who has called us to the high and holy privilege of serving the poor on this jagged journey toward justice within the household of hope, the family of faith—the battle for freedom and equality. Thank you!

Ah, I hear hope banging at my back door!

3.

Comfort

I have to admit I love to be waited on. . . .

—Blanche DuBois
A Streetcar Named Desire

There is a mystery in our flesh and spirits. We want to be at ease in Zion and rest on beds of ivory even as we drink our wine from crystal chalices. We need comfort. Our bodies and spirits are never satisfied. One of the root causes of slavery and poverty is the power of the few to accrue comforts at the expense of the many. Shortly after European Americans discovered how well rice grows along the South Carolina and Georgia coastlines, our forebears found out how miserable mosquitoes make the white worker. Quickly the philosophical doctrine flowed across the land that Africans were not bothered by mosquitoes, heat, swamps, and poverty. African slavery, in addition to being destiny and God's will, simply positioned the simple sambos in the environment where they were happiest. The desire for comfort can make us liars and cheats.

In this era of technological progress and moral entropy, we stand and watch the sky grow dim and the ozone layer crack as we condition the air in our cars, homes, the mall, and office. Alcohol, sex, and suburbia titillate our innate hungers for comfort and the need to dull our pain. TV, the primary drug of North American culture, promises life in the comfort zone if we only obey the word of advertisers. But dullness, numbness, and moral death are the foul fruits of a comfortable life purchased by the blood of the poor, the choked skies, and filthy rivers.

Though dangerous, comfort is a blessing to enjoy when shared among all God's children and not purchased at the sale price of pollution. After a few nights of stepping over the men who live on our back

porch and of sleeping in an almost unheated room, visitor Greg Goering said, "Hell must be the inability to find a comfortable place to sleep." Discomfort is often the result of oppression and is a synonym for suffering. Compassionate love for each other demands that we each have our daily bread and everything else we need (Acts 4:34). We must also establish just laws to govern ourselves. For in each of us is the desire to have another person stoop or fetch the needed bowl for us. Jesus calls us not to rule as the Gentiles—as masters over servants—but to be a people whose comfort ethic is rooted in serving one another. Let us not be comfortable until everyone is comfortable!

DAN BERRIGAN: HOPE AND INSIGHT

One morning in 1984 Murphy and I sped to the airport in our love-given jalopy. We waited anxiously at the gate for Dan Berrigan to arrive. Before long he breezed in, and we were off to death row in Jackson, Georgia. Dan has been a consistent witness to the foul-fanged folly of execution. A lover of God and life is he. He knows death and its extravagant gluttony. Caged in the steely visiting room as sad-eyed guards picked their noses, we talked with Billy Mitchell (executed August 1987), Billy Neal Moore (set free November 1991), and Mike Berryhill (now serving a life sentence). Time bounced against the walls like a ping-pong ball in the wind. At 3:30 P.M. we were told to leave while Billy, Billy, and Berryhill were forced to stay.

Our little red Toyota made us look like a fire ant as we busily threaded our way among the eighteen-wheeler giants toward one of God's favorite places: Koinonia. On this farm filled with love and peanuts Dan Berrigan led us into a deep study of God's word. In the Book of Revelation, he taught us, is a profound word we must put into practice: *comfort.* Our *comfort* comes from the Latin *confortare.* It is a word often used in the Vulgate Bible, and it means to strengthen much. *Con-* is an intensifier, meaning "very," "much." *Fortis* means "strong." To comfort is to strengthen those in misery or who need consolation. To be comforted is to gain the power for the long-haul journey toward justice. Comfort is a primary fruit of life together and of shared work with the poor and oppressed, as Jesus joins us in word, sacrament, and deed.

Dan comforted us greatly that day in Bible study as he led a small group of Christians into the art of strengthening one another. In our

lives among the homeless and with prisoners we find a curious comfort for the living of these days.

Calvin Kimbrough

THE PRACTICE OF COMFORT

We are called to be *comforters.* This is a pastoral vocation, and one of friendship. There are four ways to encounter, or to create, comfort in a concrete fashion.

We give strength to those who are in prison, on the streets, or caught unawares by corporate success when we simply are with them. To be with is to visit. To be with is to sit or stand and to listen quietly to the pain and grief of our friends, or the strangers who seem to stalk neighborhood alleys. Visitation reduces distance and breaks walls of separation between us. We are comforters when we stand in solidarity with the homeless poor or stand outside prison gates protesting the sexual abuse of our incarcerated sisters.

A second encounter with comfort is God. "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost . . . shall teach you all things" (John 14:26, KJV). Through God's presence and teaching we meet our divine sister the Comforter, who is the Spirit of God. God strengthens us very deeply. We live by the power and strength of the Holy Ghost—the Comforter. When we pray for the coming of God's Spirit we are praying for power and strength, so that we may visit others and fight for freedom together in God's name.

A comforter is also a quilted bed covering. Often when I come home at night I see comforters piled high on the basketball court or bunched on the back porch. Under these comforters sleep people who have nowhere to go and almost no place to turn. The comforters are the only shelter they have. Looking across my lawn and seeing the comforters I am called to struggle more faithfully to make housing a human right and to clothe the naked in a better fashion than this. Yet these brothers and sisters sleeping under comforters demonstrate the power of comfort, for they are strong, and bring magic gifts to those who listen.

A fourth significance of this word *comfort* is in the phrase "comfort station." Oh, how we need free public and private toilets for the homeless. Can you imagine the life of so many in our cities who rise in the mornings and have no hot water or toilet paper, or even a toilet? In Atlanta we arrest and incarcerate hundreds of folk each year for public urination. Yet we have no public toilets.

All of Atlanta's rapid-rail stations have toilets. Only three of them are unlocked. Not long ago a woman disgusted by the smell of urine in MARTA elevators suggested the system purchase alarms to ring when the elevators' floors become wet. The suggestion illustrates the poverty of our public imagination and of our compassion in responding to the basic needs of our citizens. Why not unlock the already existing bathroom doors at each station?

We must find ways to "pee for free with dignity." *Comfort*—to strengthen much—comes in the form of comfort stations, houses, good jobs, and friends.

⌖

I hear hope banging at my back door. Some nights the windows rattle and the sills shake. I go out the door and look at the comforters piled

on the ground. Someone gropes toward our comfort station while another sits and listens to the anguish of his sister. Suddenly I hear The Comforter sing of a mighty battle brewing for all God's chosen ones. I am strengthened. I hear hope banging at my back door. Won't you join me?

4.

The Hell of Homelessness

We are gifted because we comfort one another, which is to be strengthened. We are gifted because the servanthood power of Jesus and the prophetic empowerment of Moses comfort us, strengthen us for the journey toward justice and the Beloved Community. We present our bodies in the streets and prison corridors so that we may be comforted, give and share comfort, pass out comforters to the cold and forsaken ones, and open and provide comfort stations. . . . Little acts, no longer noteworthy, of kindness and love. Simple moments and endeavors that redeem life and fill our cups to the brim of love and hope.

But where do these endeavors take place? In the furnace and lion's den; along the alley that is shadowed by the cross of Christ. Where else? In the bowels of hell itself. If grace has pierced your sinister armor and calm comfort has cuddled you in her courageous arms, then you understand that homelessness is hell.

Jerry King is dead. He was beaten to death in early March not far from our home. He had no house to go to, but he often made his home on our back porch. He was one among many who bang on our back door. He was a source of hope, but he could not last long enough for justice to arrive. Sometimes for the Kingdom of God to be at hand is not close enough. Sometimes homelessness is hell. Jerry was murdered near the lot which used to house the pulpit of Peter Marshall, a famous Presbyterian preacher. When the members of the old Westminster Presbyterian Church heard the African drumbeat of changing housing rhythms they fled to the sterile jungles of suburbia.

In a dream, Westminster Church is still there. They have not posted their property, nor built iron fences to ward off the poor from the house of God. Jerry, attacked, runs into the church and is greeted

warmly by several members, who give him succor. Later, Jerry—another King who has joined Martin, although beaten like Rodney—is playing basketball at 910 Ponce. He hits a long outside shot and everyone dances with glee. I awake. Faye, his lover, lies on the floor of our public toilet, gurgling booze and weeping for her man. His head was crushed. This week I pray: Oh, God, please let me hear hope banging at my back door.

We comforted comforters know the lies and stereotypes that attempt to hide the hell of homelessness from public imagination and personal compassion. We know that the deepest social analysis that can penetrate the souls of selfish golems is Blame the Victim. Homelessness is not hell; it is a place of choice, we are instructed. People desire to suffer the elements and to be despised by the majority of hard-working Americans. Yet these same fornicators of truth travel with police and politicians to fence out any wanderer who might cross the threshold of their neighborhood.

Or again, "The poor are lazy," say some who sip nectar from golden goblets after shooting four above par. Yet there is no more demanding way to live and die than stripped of dignity and rejected in the poverty of North America. Why do we separate out and fear, then hate the homeless? What is it in the mainline American way of life that causes hunger when there is no food shortage? Homelessness when there are plenty of homes? Fear of strangers while we are so . . . ?

Jerry calls to us from the county morgue. He invites us, once again, to reduce the distance between us and among us, even the distance between the quick and the dead. When we have buried our friends at Jubilee, Murphy reminds us that we are standing on hallowed ground, as God, our Beloved Friend, is having the last word. Far away from electric chairs and the Ku Klux Klan, miles from the mean streets and cat holes, we lay a body down. Scripture, song, cornbread sacraments, proclamation, and silence have the last word. So we stand in a graveyard and hear hope banging on our back door.

What is the last word? It is a word of love and truth and hope that will overcome the hell of homelessness someday. Therefore, we must stand with the homeless and prisoner as comforters, and to be comforted—to be strengthened much. For love, truth, and hope issue politically and spiritually in solidarity. "Here by your grave I stand for I can do no other." We understand something of the hell of homeless-

ness. Yet even beside the cold gray caskets down in the Jubilee woods we hear hope banging on our back doors. Do you?

5.

Why Homelessness Exists in America: Space and Time

SPACE

I LOVE THE NAME "The Open Door Community." God gave us that name just as she gave names in biblical times. Early one morning an angel of the Lord appeared to me and said: "When the Lord God gives birth to a new community, for the sake of Atlanta, you are to name it 'The Open Door Community.' " "Yes, sir!" I responded. I ran and told Murphy. She believed me immediately. Later when I saw Rob and Carolyn they danced for joy when they heard of the new gift breaking and banging forth into our lives.

Friends and family bang on our doors because they are often locked. The name Open Door points to a reality for two hundred or so people each day as we eat, shower, dress, talk, use the phone, counsel, plan, worship, pick up mail, receive donations, label newspapers, rest, and wait on God's word to melt us and mold us into more faithful forms of the Beloved Community: a space and time—like a slow train coming—when housing will be a human right and locks will be melted into fishhooks. The thrust and magnetic power of our name—The Open Door Community—is eschatological, a vision of and belief in things to come by the will of God, the dance of Jesus, and the fire of the Holy Ghost. The name points to a reality breaking into our lives and pulling us into the future where the crucified God, enfleshed and hidden in the homeless poor and steel-caged prisoner, meets us with hope and empowers us for daily struggle with death and its authorities of hunger, homelessness, violence, the death penalty, hardness of heart, rape, greed, and the exploitation of the earth.

So we are only partially the Open Door, only partially inside the Beloved Community. Our vision is little better than 20/200. Our ears often hear the cry of Christ in the cry of the poor as a murmur, al-

though, like the schizophrenic in the insightful movie *City of Hope,* Jesus is screaming all over the city, "Help! Help! Help!" As we pray at 910, in a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer:

> Thy Beloved Community come
> Your way be done
> Inside the system as it is
> Outside the system.

As we pray for the Beloved Community—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s articulation of Jesus' Kingdom of God—we acknowledge the cry of the poor and the cry of all of God's children for God to open the Open Door. An open door is a central symbol of the Beloved Community's entrance into this tired old world in which we are waiting and working for renewal.

Elizabeth Dede is a courageous, eschatological woman. She is one who hears hope banging on our back door. During the blizzard in March 1993 she wedged a piece of wood in our doorway so that the Open Door would, of necessity, remain open. For three days people came into our home through the snow and wind. The dining room kept meals going all day long, and at 10:00 P.M. became a shelter for men. Women filled the front living room and men spilled out, filling our long main hallway. Wayne White, a friend who welcomed us to Ponce de Leon in 1981, froze to death three blocks from us. "Oh why? why? why?" we lament. If just one police person, one friendly eater at the Majestic Restaurant, if just one had brought him to the Open Door . . . Elizabeth and other community members were there to open the door while most of the leadership team was snowbound in Koinonia in Americus, Georgia.

God keeps banging at our back door. Elizabeth (which means "God is my oath") keeps listening, keeps hearing, keeps believing, keeps opening the door. At 5:00 A.M. on May 19, a terrible storm stumbled and tore into our backyard. Lightning danced across the blackberry sky and thunder roared like a god, outraged at hunger and homelessness. Ponce de Leon was filled with troubled waters racing for gutter holes already overflowing their brims, as is the women and children's shelter each night. Our brothers and sisters who live and wait in our backyard were washed from their cardboard beds and sleeping-bag bungalows. Some

made it to our public bathroom, others to the front stoop, where they stood under our elongated roof. I did not get to our dining room until 8:00 A.M., when I returned from taking Hannah to school. I turned into the room where we eat, worship, meet, serve the soup kitchen, party, watch movies, and funeralize our dead, and it was full of wet homeless friends filling themselves on grits and steaming coffee. More people were coming in as I spoke to our friends. How good! How right! Elizabeth was on house duty. In response to the flood she simply opened the Open Door, and in the early morn our home filled up. The lightning shrieked; the thunder crashed; homeless friends were awash; and Elizabeth heard hope banging on our back door. She opened the Open Door! And for several hours our old and needy building became "Elizabeth's Ark."

A basic reason for the continuing existence of the dirty, diabolical, dumb demon designated Homelessness in America is that our doors are locked. Noah's Ark is available only for the very rich, and in certain dormitories of our god-awful prison system, which is nothing more than the basement of Babylon. Elizabeth's Ark—The Open Door Community—is open only a few hours per day. "Time," sings Bob Dylan, "is a jet plane: it moves too fast," but for those under the nonjudicial death sentence who are homeless and sleepily nodding, without even the grace of the mark of Cain to protect them from predatory police or policies of pusillanimous politicians, "Time is the fire in which we all burn" (Delmore Schwartz). Time experienced from the streets moves so fast that it loses its relationship to the reckoning of life and commerce among those who (though often homeless) live in the houses with windows and doors that lock and dogs that bark when a stranger like Abel appears.

> Where is your brother Abel? I
> don't know! Am I my brother's
> keeper? My sister's helper? Who
> are you anyway to question me,
> God? Call the police. Lock the
> door. Let Abel rot, the lazy,
> no-good, food-stamp-cheating
> drunkard.

TIME

The clock without hands stands still, for there is nothing when the door is locked. Time rushes forward and flows like an angry, tumid river, flooding the tiny, crammed-tight cat holes beneath buildings that scrape the sky, or the wards at Grady Hospital where at last, in a bed with clean sheets and Emory University students shouting, an oc-

Calvin Kimbrough

Urban campsite

casional death occurs undisturbed by open doors locked tight at the final unwinding of God's clock. This is, from the shelters, streets, and labor pools, synchronicity.

Late one afternoon, our living room was piled high with folk afraid, questioning, praying, and discerning. The question on the floor bouncing against the walls of our hearts was: given the three months that the vagrant-free-zone "No Trespassing" sign has been posted on the chain-link fence at a nearby church, what should we do? One said let's wait for another month and give their session more time to discuss the problem. Another suggested that we all join the

church and influence the policies and choice of another pastor by the power of the ballot. Finally, our new partner Marcus spoke. Marcus is formerly homeless and knowledgeable of the distinction between a clock with white hands and a calendar of street and prison time, and, once reflecting on his prison life, said, "I know what it is like to be prey among predators and have absolutely no one to turn to." (That turned the corkscrew in my heart.) Marcus said, "For street people, three hours are three days. Three days are three weeks. Three weeks are three months, and three months are three years." We were silent as time paused and nodded his bony head. The signs had already been posted for three years of street time. "Let's rip the evil, prejudicial, malevolent signs down!" we sang, most of us, not all of us. And we did.

A basic reason for homelessness in America is that the time is not yet here—neither in white time nor street time—for the housing of the homeless, for the homing of the houseless, nor for the building of homes for the overhoused. So like the slaves of old and the suffragettes of yesterday we must resist daily, we must work constantly, we must, as Mother Jones teaches us, "Pray for the dead and work like hell for the living." But we must also wait for the conjunction of white time and street time. Our God (who is on the side of the homeless)

> gives power to the faint,
> and strengthens the powerless.
> Even youths will faint and
> be weary,
> and the young will fall
> exhausted;
> but those who wait for the Lord
> shall renew their strength,
> they shall mount up with wings
> like eagles,
> they shall run and not be weary,
> they shall walk and not faint.
>
> (Isa. 40:29–31)

Our aim is a constitutional amendment that will guarantee safe, decent housing in a hospitable setting for every citizen of the United States. Perhaps if he had known women's history, Mitch Snyder would not have hung his courageous body from the chandelier; and perhaps

if white men preachers knew women's history they would spend more time in the streets and less on the golf course. The suffragette story and its victory—though not conclusive—is a gift and resource for all of us who hope to house the homeless. The struggle for voting rights is never concluded in a world shadowed by the stalking moneyed moguls of church and state—neither Caiaphas nor Pilate voted for the Nineteenth Amendment or the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and today on the sixteenth hole they make plans to thwart motor-voter registration. And we all know why.

The Nineteenth Amendment states: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." The amendment was first introduced into Congress in 1878. Every year after that, for forty years, the amendment was reintroduced and failed. Only a few men wanted women to vote, just as today only a minority want to house the homeless. Because women were very supportive and surprisingly useful for the war machine during World War I (1914–18), which made the world safe for democracy, Congress decided to reward women with the vote. This is one reason the civil rights leaders turned on Martin Luther King for his antiwar stance on Vietnam. The military is the arena for the advancement of social justice for the marginalized. Women now can bomb cities, and homosexuals are historically accurate in believing that their acceptance in the military precedes their acceptance in society at large. After the U.S. Senate wavered for a year, the women's right to vote passed in 1919. By 1920, enough states had ratified the amendment that our Constitution was most significantly altered to include women in the electorate.

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For most of the hours of each day our doors are locked. The time does not yet appear to be at hand for unlocking them. Yet we hear hope banging at our back door. Shall it take a war, as it did for women to get the vote? Will women now fiercely advocate for a human right to housing for all women and children? For all of us? A male-led Congress and Senate finally passed the Nineteenth Amendment. A Congress of well-housed folk—male and female, African American, European American, Hawaiian, Mexican, Chinese, and others—will someday vote to make housing a human right guaranteed by the U.S.

Constitution. What will it take? What will it take? When will street time and white time become God's time?

6.

Why Homelessness Exists in America: Public Policy, Cheap Labor

NOT ALWAYS, but sometimes, many times, it is despair, not hope, that knocks. Sometimes the push on the door is to get out, not in. The Open Door is often closed, too-much locked. But from the inside going out, all one need do is gently push the panic bar and—whew!—you are on the other side of the wall. Recently we discarded the back-door alarm, and in the summer months the side door stands open.

Talbot disappeared one morning after two years of homemaking with us, his family. We were stunned, still are in fact. I keep skipping into the living room, expecting to see Talbot coaxing the copying machine, getting the dismal weekly financial report ready for Gladys. But he is not there. AIDS is nibbling his body; fear bites his bowels. He started getting a check which included a heavy-duty back-pay installment. He walked out. Phyllis, who serves soup with us, saw him in early summer, lumbering down the city streets. "He looked bad, very bad," she reported to us one morning. Some say he is in jail.

Elizabeth and Pamela learned how to dance together in the central office. The administrative load at our home is as heavy as wind is light. Pamela was building life and love with us for the third time, and for several months worked in tandem with Elizabeth writing thank-you notes, posting packages, filling out money orders for prisoners, making phone calls. She was a delight and a friend for Elizabeth, and joy flooded our central office. Pamela recently returned home from Grady Hospital pleased and proud that her medication had been reduced by five milligrams. Her doctor saw progress, stability, and health singing in Pamela's eyes. Another great gift—Pamela's charismata—were her constant prayer concerns. We have community prayer twice daily, and

twice daily Pamela would lift her hand and speak her heart. While Carl was in the hospital having his lower leg amputated, Pamela never failed to "lift up her good friend" in prayer, as we call it in Jay Frasier's words. Always concerned for the homeless and prisoner, for our house and the hungry, Pamela kept teaching us that prayer and its concerns are the center in a family of faith and a household of hope.

Recently, unexpectedly, with few words and no explanation, Pamela leaned against the panic bar, stumbled slightly on the second step, and *bang* was gone. Now there is a hole in our hearts. Elizabeth has wept in the black night. Sorrow stamps where once, with Pamela, we danced.

Later, tomorrow maybe, when I take the lunchtime garbage to the dumpster, Pony will be banging around the backyard. She will greet me, tease me—"Oh, they finally got you to do a little work around 910, huh?!"—wink, and move back to her spot under the southern hackberry tree. She blesses me. I grasp the blessing, and I would do what Jacob did to get it. Hope is there darting around the backyard, banging on the back door. Jesus didn't lead us this far for nothing!

⌖

Homelessness is Hell. There is absolutely no excuse for its existence in America. Like DDT, we must outlaw it, remove it from our land, and punish people who cause it. Homelessness is a deadly poison, a malignant cancer. In the United States we have unhoused citizens and guests lost within our borders because we will it so. The well-to-do are responsible, for we have the means to end homelessness and outlaw it. In fourteen years of living with people condemned to the streets, I have never yet met a single, solitary soul who wanted to be poor, homeless, abused, and despised. Yet the homeless, too, are responsible for this terrible social sin now woven into the very fabric of our national life. The unhoused must raise their voices and present their bodies in a life of protest and resistance to homelessness. This is very difficult but a necessary ingredient to bring us to repentance and a new life of love and reconciliation in the Beloved Community—God's will for us all.

We comforted comforters know why homelessness exists in the United States. In the first place, *homelessness is public policy.* It is the will of the American people. There is no housing shortage in Atlanta

or in our nation. *Homelessness is not a housing issue.* Houston Wheeler in his excellent book, *Organizing in the Other Atlanta,* reprints an amazing but poignant article by newspaperman Mark Sherman. Its title: "Housing's Cruel Irony: Despite 30,000 Vacant Apartments Metro Atlanta Has 15,000 Homeless" (5 June 1991). For every homeless man and woman and boy and girl there are two vacant apartments in Atlanta. Public policy—the will of the majority—as expressed and instituted in law, economic policy, social values, and our sin-sick souls is the cause of homelessness. This is the reason that neither Ross Perot, George Bush, nor Bill Clinton had to speak to homelessness in the 1992 presidential elections, nor Clinton or Dole in 1996. Thus far, election campaigning for 2000 has been silent on homelessness.

In the same manner, there is no food shortage in America. *Hunger is not a food issue.* Hunger is not an agricultural problem. Recently my good friend Bill Bolling told me that the Atlanta Community Food Bank needs more warehouse space for the harvest increases year after year. Why then does the number of hungry children and adults grow month after month? Our unemployment rate has fallen in this city; the Olympic boom is touted worldwide. Our downtown churches have the best preachers in a decade. Why hunger? As with homelessness, we who eat three meals a day from our own kitchens and in restaurants want it. *Hunger is public policy.* Hunger is good for the economy and stabilizes our privileges. But why? How?

Rooted beneath our public policies, which institutionalize and guarantee homelessness and hunger, is the need for an abundant supply of cheap labor which can claim no benefits. The minimum wage is a death wage. To pay it is to kill. To support it is to support slavery and death. Housing, food, clothing, and medical care on the paltry penance is impossible. However, with 15,000 homeless and 25,000 hungry and tens of thousands more on the verge of destitution, people will do anything for $6.00 per hour. In June, I sat in a labor pool not far from my home. Over a three-hour period, three hundred men went to work at minimum wage while another 150 were jostled and pushed to the back of the room. A primary reason Atlanta was awarded the 1996 Olympics was Andrew Young's continual promise that Atlanta had a tremendous pool of cheap and nondemanding labor (and, of course, weak labor unions). Out of the hell of homelessness men and women become grateful for the nasty jobs at $6.00 which

come through the labor pools. This is slavery!

A docile, dying labor force at death-wage levels is not the only reason for our public policies which produce our privileges. We also need the bodies and the blood of our poor sisters and brothers. From plasma banks which suck the blood from broken black, brown, and white bloodstreams flow benefits for us in medicine and research. Often when a person does not find a day-labor job they turn to the plasma bank and shed their blood—not for remission of sin—but for our benefit. Emory University Medical School and the Morehouse School of Medicine are dependent on the homeless and poor to flood into the clinics and emergency room all day, every day. On these homeless and poor folk middle- and upper-class students, at astronomical tuition fees and while falling deep into debt, can "practice" medicine before they perform on us. Likewise, at Georgia Medical College in Augusta, prisoners are brought from all over the state for young students to learn the skill but not the art of their trade.

The system demands that we keep 10 percent of our brothers and sisters in bondage to the powers of hunger, homelessness, prison, and disease. Disempowered and filled with despair, as sheep without a shepherd, the wolves and lions are devouring them—for our benefit. To change this system we must fight like heaven for the homeless poor and prisoner to receive justice, and most important, we must love one another with a particular love for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger within our gates.

7.

Why Homelessness Exists in America: Racism and Classism

Calvin Kimbrough is an artist, an advocate for justice, and a partner at Patchwork Central, a sister community. Calvin is a great friend and when he comes for a visit, entering by the back door, hope and joy are always flowing out of his camera cases.

Last October, Calvin and I rode to Dayspring together. Somewhere along the highway leading us into beautiful mountains and past the ghosts of the Cherokees who were not rounded up for the Trail of Tears, Calvin asked, "Ed, do you think the city will ever house the homeless?" He continued, saying that he had recently read of a group who could rehab old buildings at much lower costs than building new structures. Did I believe, Calvin wanted to know, that with lower costs the cities, or the nation, would address homelessness? I responded, "No."

Houston Wheeler in *Organizing the Other Atlanta* has demonstrated that enough government money to house all the homeless in Atlanta has been given to the city over the last decade.

The reason we will not build houses for the homeless is the same reason we do spend millions and millions on prisons and have the highest incarceration rate in the Western world: racism. The lack of affordable houses is compensated for by the availability of prison cells. You see the African American man hanging out on the corner of Edgewood Avenue and Butler Street after the grits line? Well, you see a man not on his way home. He is on the way to prison where a newly constructed little hellhole of a cell waits to devour what is left of his princely soul. Damn, that is stupid, tacky, and rotten to the core! Why can't we white folks stop this rampant racism? Is our racism out of control? Is it chewing us up, too? Just who is the boss man, anyway?

Calvin turned his head slightly, dreamed of wolves and lambs loping together upon mountain pastures, and then pressed ever so slightly

on the accelerator. Simply put: white folk do not want Black people around them. So we have suburbia, north Atlanta, and gated communities. But even more sadly, white people want Black folk to suffer and live on the streets, in dilapidated housing and prisons. U.S. public policy is to keep the majority of African Americans down and out so that the possibility of social equality does not arise. Housing the homeless is not fundamentally a housing issue. Please recall that there is no housing shortage in this nation.

Racism is not the whole story. If every poor and homeless person in America woke up white in the morning, there would be little change in public policy. Classism has, since World War II especially, been redefining the American Dream. A primary mark today of suc-

CALVIN KIMBROUGH

Three Vietnam vets live here.

cess and fulfillment is to be rich, and that is expressed by the capacity to increase the distance from the poor, the city, and all manner of human suffering. To justify this selfish and inhuman vision of life, the ideology of "blame the victim" supplies the deepest and most heartfelt social analysis for most Americans. So as our racist system seeks to punish African Americans for being Black (Black is beautiful, isn't it?), stinginess and judgmentalism toward the poor punish the victims for their homelessness and poverty. All poor people are bad, failures, dangerous, lazy criminals, and they bring it on themselves. Thus, if every poor person in the United States were white, we still would not have a public mandate to house the homeless.

"So," said Calvin, who had rolled down the sleeves of his shirt even as he turned into a county where no African Americans live and Jews are told not to purchase homes. Then Calvin trailed off. We must continue to wait, pray, and work for federal mandates. Someday a leader, a new party, a rebirth of hope and wonder will come to the American people. Someday the heart of stone will become a heart of flesh. A mighty voice will arise, crying and singing, demanding and rocking: "House my people now! House my people now!" As we wait, watch, and work for that day (or will it come like a thief in the night?), let us live out cultural values of community and cooperation instead of competition and individualism. Let us practice random acts of kindness, deeds of love, and secret gestures of compassion in our neighbor's backyard. Instead of racism and classism we can bring charity and equality into our lives today, even as we await the structural shifts favoring justice which are on the way, in the wind, and at the bottom of the sinkholes.

"Ed."

"Yes, Calvin."

"We're home."

"Thanks for driving."

"I love you."

"Yeah, man. I love you, too."

8.

Housing Precedes Life

VISITATION

Not long ago I was making a number of pastoral visits on the streets of Atlanta. I walked up to a vacant lot near Spring and Fourteenth Streets and saw a friend. George was sitting on a wall that was, years earlier, the foundation of a wonderful old house. Drinking beer with friends, George and his companions were grieving like gray ghosts in a moon-drenched dawn (Jack Kerouac). "What's up, man?" I asked in my best predestined Presbyterian pastor's tongue. "Bad, Rev, bad," mourned George as he put the quart bottle behind his bent back.

George had, on Monday, gotten a decent job at a local factory. He was joyful and thanked God for the luck. (I, of course, translated luck into providence; I did not interrupt.) With renewed hope banging in his heart he worked diligently all day long. Blessed are those with good work to perform; they shall rest well.

At dusk George walked out to Jefferson Street, past the food bank, to the old city jail which now is the largest men's shelter in Atlanta. Tired, but happy in his heart, he ate his sandwiches and lay down for the night. On his mat he was greeted by restlessness, snoring, coughing, the terrible moans from men who dream of getting near their children only to wake up from a hard push and a directive, "Shut up! I can't sleep with all your bellyaching!" George slept little. At 5:00 A.M. all the lights flashed on. "Get up and get out," bellowed the city's shelter worker. George pulled himself off the floor, dressed, and with hope banged his way onto Jefferson Street again. Rainwater waited above his head as he pounded the pavement for two blocks. Then—*wham*—the sky fell. Drenched, soaked, overwhelmed, George ran for cover under the eaves of an old warehouse. He waited

while the heavens got hold of themselves, and then set out again for the factory.

"Hello, George. Why are you late?"

"I got caught in the rain."

"God, you can't work like that."

"Please."

"No way, José. Go on in and get a uniform and put it on."

That afternoon, George, who had not slept in a bed for two months, began nodding. "George! What the hell, man? Did you party 'em up last night? Now, wake up before someone gets hurt." "Yes, sir," George limply replied.

On Wednesday, George fell asleep and was fired. On Thursday, with his heart filled with desperation and his belly filling with beer, I chanced upon him.

"If I had only had a place to live," he cried, "I could have had dry clothes and sleep. F--- it. I don't give a damn! And now they won't pay me for my two days for two weeks."

I sat and talked with George for half an hour. What I learned that day has shaped my political understanding as much as any street encounter, except for the glorious thirteen days of the occupation of the Imperial Hotel in the summer of 1990. What I was taught by George and the three hundred homeless inhabitants at the Imperial—*that housing precedes life*—is the most radical insight with which I have been gifted since Dr. Shirley Guthrie told me in 1963 that Jesus loves everyone. Put those two concepts together and you have a foundation for the Beloved Community for which Dr. King caught a bullet in his head while standing on the balcony of a future civil rights museum. Isn't it odd? When you understand the needed ingredients for life, someone wants to put nails in your hands or bullets in your head.

⌖

Housing precedes employment. George teaches us the most disturbing formulation of our aphorism. It is a contradiction of the American way of life, whereby one does not live in a house until one has the rent money. Job training, literacy action, and self-esteem programs all assume that housing will follow employment. But George's experience happens 2,712 times every day in Atlanta: a man or woman cannot hold a job or build a life until they have housing. Employment before

housing fits directly into a society forever turning toward labor pools and temporary work. To solve the economic and social issues of homelessness we must realize and make public policy that recognizes that housing precedes employment.

Housing precedes sobriety. Various and loving are the many approaches to detox, drug programs, plans to help folk fight addictions. But the resources to get and remain sober or clean are almost nonexistent without housing. The streets run with drink and drugs. The despair and physical suffering of homelessness devour the muscles of self-discipline and the desire to remain sober. If I were homeless, I would stay drunk. Homelessness is hell! Most folk must deal with degradation and pain with drugs and alcohol.

To go through a thirty-day or 180-day program can be helpful. But to send a woman back into shelters filled with booze or a man into a labor pool where liquor helps him say "yes" to eight hours of work at $25 only to be dumped on the street again is like spitting in the wind.

To stop drugs in America, to reduce drunkenness and the horrors of addiction, we must grasp the excruciating truth that housing precedes sobriety.

Calvin Kimbrough

Will there be room in the end?

Housing precedes education. For children who come to the shelters in the evening there is little space, and no quiet, where they may study and concentrate. Adults, too, need quiet to perform work related to literacy programs, job training, or special education for the homeless. But without a house there is no learning environment, no place to think and dream as one studies a text and listens to the beauty and wisdom of our ancestors.

Do you think education is expensive? Try ignorance! Since we require homeless children to attend school, we must give them housing for education to occur. Men and women on the streets cannot carry books and papers between soup-kitchen lines. They must have a house to be educated.

Housing precedes health. Housing precedes mental health and family life. This is certainly an interesting issue for Republicans and the religious right, who might ask how we can hold onto and nurture traditional family values on the streets. By just saying "no"?—hardly. Housing precedes physical health, for who can maintain health and sleep on the concrete in rain, sleet, and snow?

Housing precedes evangelization, for religious life presupposes place and community and stability. Even wanderers in the desert or a hermit in a cave have a place to come home to, making the wilderness struggle or solitude valuable and, in turn, nurturing for the Beloved Community. No church should call one to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior until ready to bring that person into a house and to begin the more arduous task of making that house a home.

Housing precedes the justice struggle. This is a personally painful point for me. So many people and groups blame and criticize homeless people for their lack of political initiative. But even the basic act of voting in a democratic society is difficult when you have nowhere to live. Sometimes the radical ideology of grassroots organizers will roar that only the homeless can help themselves. Everyone else is a poverty pimp.

But the shaping of political power to harness economic and social forces toward justice, equality, and housing requires organization, telephones, money, rest, contacts, basic security, continuity, and an address where people can be hosted.

The slow development of street actions and political influence

among our homeless friends and ourselves, the advocates, comes in large measure because of our failure to assess and strategize in light of the hard, hard truth that housing precedes the justice struggle.

THE CONSEQUENCES

When housing does not precede life itself, there develops fear in the land. The homeless brother or sister becomes a criminal and an enemy. People who will not help build and maintain affordable housing become vociferous advocates for prisons. This has happened in America. We must turn our lives and hearts around. We must build a social policy and culture that is rooted in housing for everyone. If we don't, our hearts will continue to harden, our political analysis will fail to have meaning, our lives will be eaten by fear and devoured by hate.

So, let us love one another. Let us house the homeless. For life's sake.

9.

The American Dream: A Prolegomena

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

—Bob Dylan

Like Hell.

—Ed Loring

"Howdy. My name is Lazarus. Excuse me while I remove this gauze and shroud from my body. He said for me to come out of this cat hole filled to the brim with death. I said, 'Who me?' and he said, 'Yes, you.' I know I stink and cannot, until the Greyhound bus guard turns his back on me, wash and wipe. My sisters went astray with grief, not believing death comes to those he called his own. But it does. So I ask you, simply, to help me find my home again. The house was destroyed for the freeway, which is hardly free to me. And as you can plainly see I am too dead to earn an income—even in Mexico. Here, take my hand, oops! Did a finger fall? Never mind. I only want a single room with just a little lavatory. Can you show me the way?"

In this way I sometimes see and hear and smell the men and women who live on and under our porch and whose parlor is our public bathroom. It hurts, if you know what I mean.

"Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam . . . where the skies are not cloudy all day," hummed the blue cowgirl volunteer as she locked her bicycle beside Stephanie, who was too damn tired to get her

weary flesh out of her green sleeping bag. But we who are connected to E-mail and live in computer land and travel, while the moon moans over the meadow, Albert Gore's electronic superhighway, we know "Buffalo Bill's defunct . . . and what I want to know is how do you like your blue-eyed boy Mister Death."

So we dream. We dream a dream rooted in a primordial human dream, informed by Moses on Mount Nebo who saw the Promised Land: the end of slavery and the birth of a new nation, a land for God's people where milk and honey flowed for all people. Moses saw his children's children's children dancing in the streets under Jesse Jackson's rainbow. So on he dreamed and, passing his dream to us, he lay his worn and weary body down on the top of the mountain where he sleeps and waits and dreams for us.

And our gifted dream comes to us through Isaiah's poetic eyes and husbandly hand which petted the lambs while feeding the lions as his daughter played with a rattlesnake. Ah, dreamed the old man, people "shall build houses and inherit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their own wine." Any day we fight for housing, any time we open the night shelter door or fill the soup ladle, we dream with Isaiah who waits and dreams and prays for us. Jesus, the most maligned outlaw in history, told tall tales which are, presently, not notably informing the American Dream. Therefore, we have baptized sisters and confirmed brothers on the streets with no direction home. Yet Jesus dreams salvation songs, and he sings at God's right hand for us. He waits like John on Patmos, too, for the new heavens and the new earth to roar into reality.

But that, of course and unfortunately, is not the whole story. For we out of Eden cast follow the thread of woe and greed that tints our dreams with punk wood in the forest and cold ash on the hearth. East of Eden we wander nodding homeless doomed alone waiting dreaming hoping praying singing for Cain's conversion, for Abel's blood to be satisfied. For a place to come home to. For direction home.

Did I choose my ancestors? Though I walk upon cotton fields I did not plant, am I responsible for slavery and its dire consequences? Did I ever make anybody homeless? Am I my sister's keeper? So I, too, dream and listen to the panhandlers beg, ever more aggressively, for a one-way bus ticket home.

10.

The American Dream Revisited

I

Dante's Hell offers place and stability and, given the coherence between crime and punishment, an interpretive order to one's eternal agony. Unthinkable was it to the medieval imagination that a person has no place or that life is absurd. But on my back porch life often sways that way. Homelessness is another rung in the ladder of descent. Homelessness is Hell. Not so many months ago, Johnny disappeared from my back porch. He had lived there for 167 nights. Poof! Gone. C. M. told me later that he thought he had seen Johnny on Boulevard as the van lumbered home with grits bowls empty and egg pots vacant. Like the black of night, Johnny wasn't there one morning when I bounded out the back door, taking Hannah to Grady High School. Life hurts.

Michael lives there now. Doesn't take long for an empty place to fill again. Like a sinkhole filled with flesh instead of water. Michael has a gentle and loving spirit. He welcomes us home and always charges Hannah to study hard as she prances off to school. He works: cleans gutters, mows and rakes lawns, and last month had five days with a roofing crew. Michael dreams his American Dream. Plops down a dollar for Zell's Lotto card. Scratches out the number and knows, again, he is a loser. But he dreams and plays. "Some day," he sings, "I'll have my own place, a huge lawn to care for, and my own lady. Who knows, Ed, I may even have a little Hannah!" Michael lights his last generic cigarette for the night, turns on his cardboard bed, and prays to Yahweh: "Please, oh please, dear loving Lord—give me a lawn to mow tomorrow and a winner on the lottery. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen."

⌖

We are bound for the promised land. We shall taste the milk of freedom and the honey of equality.

—Martin Luther King
Chicago, August 5, 1966

When Jonathan Winthrop, a Puritan founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, spoke of the (white male) American Experiment as "a city on a hill for the eyes of all the world to see," there were no homeless people in America. Lacking the courage to stay in their own lands and fight for political and religious freedoms, our European ancestors fled to America where, because of technological advance and, perhaps, a stunted moral growth as becomes those who flee social problems rather than resolve them, they stole land and housing from Native Americans. That they did not remain in Europe and fight for their human rights and religious freedom remains a portion of our heritage that continues to wound and cripple American culture. Before they arrived, however, there was a moment of dignity and glory across our land: no homelessness! Native Americans lived in houses that befitted their lives and cultures: huts, adobes, hogans, igloos, tupeks, lean-tos, tents, teepees, wickiups, wigwams, and cliff dwellings.

What Winthrop wanted was for America to be a righteous nation where the norms of Puritan Christianity (housing as a human right?) could be actualized without the troubling waters of social sin and history's oppressions. Puritans got us running, but we fumbled the ball. Walt Whitman, dreaming the American Dream, helped us immensely by bringing women, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, and African Americans into his fleshly celebration, and by dreaming of rich and poor folk coming together. Abraham Lincoln reached back into our Puritan roots, seeing America as the city on a hill while (like all of us who care for the American vision) stumbling toward a wider definition of equality and freedom. Like the Civil War, Lincoln's murder is characteristic of a diseased system, and symbolic of the terrifying cost, social and personal, that must be paid when the dreamer comes along with visions of inclusiveness, equality, human rights, and justice for the poor and oppressed in this land of powerful white Pu-

ritan fathers and multinational moguls mixing mammon with blood. In our day, shorter, shadowed, and sinking, Bob Dylan, whom Allen Ginsberg has called America's greatest poet of the last fifty years, is an important singer (and protester) in the city on a hill where righteousness and freedom chime.[1] But Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has given us the most powerful witness in both word and deed of anyone in American history. If we hope, and some do, to redeem the soul of America, we must listen to and live with the poor and oppressed. Dr. King reaches not only into the roots of European and African dreams and visions but also into the biblical witness of Hebrews leaving Egypt land; in Egypt, slavery as the Angel of Death slays the elder male of every family who has not smeared blood on the doorpost of his home. There is no redemptive freedom without struggle and sacrifice. The homeless will not be housed without organized resistance and a change in the reins of power. From the New Testament scriptures, Dr. King combined Jesus' agenda of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven with Luke's and Paul's gift of the church. This new Jerusalem, this city on a hill, Dr. King christened the Beloved Community.

Following the interpretive insights of one of America's great historians, Vincent Harding, many students now agree that the "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963 is representative of neither the depth of thought nor the radical relationship to capitalistic, imperialistic, and materialistic America that King held when he was murdered at 6:00 P.M. on Thursday, April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. But as our society is unraveling and resegregation spreads its festering rot throughout our culture, we need to listen again to a call to a common life, a shared life—a call to unity in the midst of a vital and respected multicultural diversity. That way our moral ledger may (for the first time) be in the black. As biblical charity is, ultimately, more radical than flawed civil justice, so is multicultural diversity in pursuit of a life together—the Beloved Community—more radical than separatism. This vision of people speaking their own language but being understood (Acts 2) is the shape of community for which Jesus, Lincoln, Martin, and, yes, Malcolm, along with thousands of others, died.

The maturing King and his American Dream, shaped ever increasingly by Malcolm X's analysis of white racism and the intransi-

gence of capitalistic economic structures, moved King to dream profoundly of equality rather than liberty, of desegregation and voting rights, as the needed norm for American redemption.[2] In this pursuit, like Lincoln and the radical Republicans' program after the Civil War, King was soundly defeated. At the time of his murder his vision of multicultural inclusiveness in pursuit of economic justice had blossomed like kudzu in a red-clay Georgia ditch. In a closed society the struggle against oppression is for freedom. In an open society the struggle is for equality. Dr. King learned from the SNCC students that if Woolworth's had served them at the lunch counter they had no money for meals. Not only do we need the right to buy a house in any neighborhood (freedom), we need a guaranteed right to housing for all people (equality). We have the freedom to talk all day about hunger, but we have almost no rights to food. Give us this day our daily bread! We thirst for the milk of freedom. We hunger for the honey of equality.

So let us picture a vision of the vision from my back porch. Let us dream with Michael from the cardboard canopy thrust against the wind and water of a wet night as Martin, in imaginatively altered language, moans from his grave for those who are homeless, horrified, and hungry:

> *I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.*
>
> *This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with.*
>
> *With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and sisterhood.*
>
> *With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for equality together, knowing that we will be equal one day. This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning—"my country 'tis of thee; sweet land of equality; of thee I sing; land where my parents died, land of the*

pilgrim's pride; from every mountainside, let equality ring"—and if America is to be a great nation, which it is not in these days, this must become true.

So let equality ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let equality ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let equality ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let equality ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado.

Let equality ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that.

Let equality ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let equality ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let equality ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside, let equality ring.

And when we allow equality to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children—Black men and women and white men and women, homeless and housed, free and incarcerated—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Housed at last
Housed at last
Thank God Almighty
We are housed at last.

If you are a person of faith, if you are a person of conscience, how can you be anything other than outraged at the hell of homelessness? What if our dream is their nightmare?

II

During the summer of 1990, members of the Open Door Community, three hundred homeless friends, and supporters who joined in the jagged journey toward justice lived in the Imperial Hotel for sixteen days. Many others brought food, blankets, songs, legal advice, prayers, and sermons. Others, to be honest, brought trouble. We left on July 3, the day before Atlanta, with parade and party, celebrated the revolutionary heritage of the United States of America. Some of us went to the Welcome House Shelter filled with hope for

housing and trust in Mayor Maynard Jackson and his surrogate Shirley Franklin. Others of us, refusing the carrots, took the stick. We were arrested.

Two weeks later I made my first pastoral visit to the Welcome House Shelter. Shortly after entering the front door and eyeing the men on mats stretched across the floor, I saw a close friend from the Imperial days. His head was bandaged from left to right, covering his right eye. I was horrified.

"What in the world happened to you?" I asked.

"Oh, some guys jumped me at the park and robbed me," he responded in a manner more sprightly than I deemed appropriate.

"Man, I am really sorry. What happened to your head?"

"I got knifed in the eye. It's gone; just got a hole in my head now."

"Oh, no," I cried. "Lord, have mercy; I am so sorry."

"No, man!" he said. "You don't understand. I'm getting a check now. I'll have an apartment in two weeks and my own kitchen. Just like you preached at the Imperial. I got the American Dream!"

I wanted to run, to fly away, to weep. I didn't. I shook his hand, looked into his one beautiful black eye, turned and left. I have argued earlier in this series that housing precedes health. The costs for housing among the homeless are astronomical. My friend had to pay a body part before the system had anything to offer. For him, the loss of his eye was the ticket to the America of his dreams.

⌖

In our first section on the American Dream dreamed by the homeless and their friends, we spoke of Dr. Martin Luther King and the vision of freedom and equality—a vision that will lead us to liberty and justice for all, but not a day before we are all well-fed, housed, and secure.

In the midst of the culture wars which are ravaging the soul of our nation, as men and women of ill will fly the Confederate flag and politicians frighten us with fear of each other, as our society seems to be coming unhinged, I want to reflect on an ancient vision in modern form: our motto (can it become our credo?) *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

The United States of America is the great experiment of human

history. Georg W. F. Hegel was correct when he understood that the future of history is the future of the United States. Some of us got here by walking across the Bering Strait before the lashing waters and knives of ice tore the lands apart. Some of us came chained in the holds of slave ships, stripped from our homes and land. And for every one of us who made it to this shore, several more died along the way. Long before Hitler's nightmare of the Final Solution, ships sailed the seas with African cargo—men, women, boys and girls—millions of whom died in the ovenlike bowels of the boats. Many Europeans came for gold and land and freedom from the old and wicked ways of the tired lives they knew. Prisoners and servants, rich and poor, frightened and on the lam they came. And today there is knocking on the door from Haiti, Latin America, and Russia. Millions of us now share the land and shape the time.

Many have attempted to articulate the meaning of America, as moral model of all (Puritans), the last best hope for humankind (Lincoln), a moral police force for the world, God's chosen people. But there is another dimension to our great experiment which rings with greater importance each day. Can we, all of us who are attempting to find home in this land, can we learn how to live together? The great diversity among us is clear. We are *pluribus.* Can we be *unum?* The uniqueness of America in human history is our diversity: diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, traditions, histories, hopes, and dreams. The gift will be our ability to form a common life based upon justice for all. The curse will be our failure, which will drag all of us to the bottom of the sea.

How can we live together? How can all peoples live together in one place with freedom and equality? How can we have diversity together, *e pluribus unum?*

The Bible is a resource for us. The scriptures speak to us as people of faith in our personal lives and faith communities, and to our secular state and multiculturally diverse social lives and values. In the first place biblical insights provide a norm with which to interpret the efficacy of our life together. Jewish and Christian scriptures tell us that justice for the poor and powerless is the key. Are the lowly lifted up by the economic system? Are the hungry fed and those without shelter housed? Are the courts free of corruption? Does the poor woman receive the same justice as the rich man? Are liberty and reconciliation

the aim of the prison system? Are wages fair and enough for a family to live on, to tithe with, to enjoy sabbath rest? Are the rulers of the government friends and protectors of the oppressed? Are orphans protected?

The answer to these questions tells the truth about our nation. When the answer is yes, then we have found a system and a culture that may well enhance diversity and that is united through the structures of justice and the experience of mercy. Justice is the biblical norm and social vision for America. When there are people hungry and homeless, forgotten in prison, unemployed or working at jobs at too low a wage, when children roam the streets unattended, then the nation is at risk. Then the people are filled with injustice and there is no unity, but hate, fear, and distrust. Corrupt leaders bring death to the nation.

The biblical call is for justice. Those who proclaim a Christian America based on a particular morality—for example, based on prayer in the schools, or opposition to gay rights—are using the Bible and faith to divert and to bring disunity. The Bible is not about private morality in the public arena. It is not about freeing anyone to worship any god. It is about justice, and the road to justice is known by the lives of the poor.

The Bible and biblical religion are thus sources for both multicultural diversity and unity. Joyfully the scriptures sing *e pluribus unum* in the United States.

A second contribution that the Hebrew and Christian texts provide is a deeper and more profound understanding of equality than was on the table during the Enlightenment and the forming of the American republic.

Equality is a problem—a good problem, perhaps, but a deeply serious problem in our society. We have yet to discover a way to protect such freedoms as speech and press on the one hand, while on the other hand protecting our shared values as a people in pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. The hate of the Ku Klux Klan and gangsta rap is given protection equal to the public poetry of Maya Angelou when she calls us to be one people in the midst of our splendid diversity. Recently, Germany amended its constitution regarding freedom of speech. Now hate-mongering is against the law there. We need to further our public discussions around these issues.

Equality, per se, can be a demon, a wolf in sheep's clothing. The biblical view of protection of rights is unlike the American vision. In America we symbolize the system with a blindfolded goddess, arms outstretched, scales balanced. The blindfold represents objectivity, neutrality to the lives of the people and their issues. Biblical images paint a picture of an involved and helping judge. The biblical leaders favor helping the poor, orphan, stranger, widow, oppressed, and criminal. The biblical system favors life over death, kindness over hatred, health over sickness, the community over individuals, the land over speculators. There is nothing neutral or impartial when the Bible speaks of equality. The poor must be empowered; the rich and powerful must be contained, taxed, and limited.

This biblical approach thus leads us to one of the most helpful contributions that the Judeo-Christian heritage can make to American life, and to its grappling with the problematic but wonderfully revolutionary norm of equality. As we have sought over the past 225 years of national life to resolve the questions of how to live together, of how to enflesh our motto *e pluribus unum,* we have defined equality as equal opportunity. This is not, like justice which sides with the poor and oppressed, the biblical view. Equality, in the Old and New Testaments, is based on sharing and on everyone having enough for a joyful and fruitful life. As we are learning from women, African Americans, the poor, the physically challenged, Native Americans, and other important voices, there can be no equality of opportunity until the foundations for life are built upon the rock of access to power and the stone of sharing the harvests. For the homeless that translates into the truth that housing precedes life.

Give us this day our daily bread—or "give us this day our daily bed," as we often pray during the Festival of Shelters—is the basic petition among Christians for the pursuit of social equality. The prayer harkens back to the hungry Hebrews in the desert who cried each day to God for their daily bread. God responded, but the catch was that each person should have enough, not that the people would have an opportunity to compete or grab, or to gamble for the allotment.

> The Lord has commanded that each of you is to gather as much food as you need, two quarts for each member of your household.

> The Israelites did this, some gathering more, others less. When they measured it, those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little. Each had gathered just what they needed. (Exod. 16:16–18, TEV, adapted for inclusive language)

Biblical equality is based on need, not on opportunity to meet a need. We are equal when everyone has enough, not when everyone has a chance, or when everyone has the same, which is uniformity, not unity. The Twenty-third Psalm says it succinctly: "I shall not want" (KJV), or "I have everything I need" (TEV).

In response to the second most important issue of human life—How shall we live together?—there are two marks of the church in the New Testament. Both are clearly revealed in the early chapters of the Book of Acts. The first mark is diversity. When the gifts of wind and fire are given to the people of God, the newness in history is a people of the deepest diversity. No longer do family ties, state citizenship, economic systems, and cultural heritage define our values. We discover equality only in diversity, and in that cauldron learn to understand each other.

The second mark of community is that "there was no one in the group who was in need. . . . Money was distributed to each one according to their need" (Acts 4:32–37). Equality is based on need for daily bread and daily bed. It is not equal opportunity, nor the result of diagnosing who can best be rehabilitated. Biblical equality is expressed when the one in need has enough.

Equality then becomes an expression of community and its wholeness, not simply groups of competing individuals whose fear of scarcity turns them into greed-driven consumers.

For us to come through the cultural wars and death of our nation, justice in America must find ways to appropriate the biblical understanding of justice in the multicultural secular state in which we strive to live together, *e pluribus unum.* We do not need an opportunity to compete for housing, education, employment, medical care, transportation, food, rest, celebration, recreation, and justice, but a guarantee by the community of citizens that no one shall be homeless, unschooled, without work, sick and unable to find care, needing transportation but unable to go, hungry and without food, without

rest or justice. We must find ways to love one another. How? Like we love ourselves. *E pluribus unum:* out of many, one.

11.

The American Nightmare: Fear and Hate

I

When Homelessness is hell
When Homelessness and poverty are public policy
When Housing does not precede life
When liberty is a cracked bell
And equality is propaganda
then
Fear is planted
Hate is harvested
The American Dream becomes
The American Nightmare.

So let us listen to the classic question sung from the haunts of Harlem:[3]

What happens to a dream deferred?

does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
or crust and sugar over—
like syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
or does it explode?

And Malcolm X, speaking in 1962, can teach us from the point of view of the labor pool and shelter floor:

> What is looked upon as an American dream for white people has long been an American Nightmare for black people.

A year later, speaking to his sisters and brothers, Malcolm X said:

> Unemployment and poverty have forced many of our people into this life of crime; but . . . the real criminal is in City Hall downtown. The real criminal is in the State House in Albany. The real criminal is in the White House in Washington, D.C. The real criminal is the white man who poses as a liberal—the political hypocrite. And it is these legal crooks, posing as our friends, [who are] forcing us into a life of crime and then using us to spread the white man's evil vices among our own people. Our people are scientifically maneuvered by the white man into a life of poverty. You are not poor accidentally. He maneuvers you into poverty. You are not a drug addict accidentally. Why, the white man maneuvers you into drug addiction. You are not a prostitute accidentally. You have been maneuvered into prostitution by the American white man. There is nothing about your condition here in America that is an accident.

Reaching backward one hundred years we can hear the cry of our sisters and brothers who are American Indians. Like Yahweh and Noah, their dreams of freedom and a spacious land of welcome and community were spoiled by greed and lust. Not long before the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 the Paiute Messiah, Wovoka, spoke:

> All Indians must dance, everywhere, keep on dancing. Pretty soon in next spring Great Spirit come. He bring back all game of every kind. The game be thick everywhere. All dead Indians come back and live again. They all be strong just like young men, be young again. Old blind Indian see again and get young and have fine time. When Great Spirit comes this way, then all the Indians go to mountains, high up away from whites. Whites can't hurt Indians then. Then while Indians way up high, big flood comes like water and all white people die, get drowned. After that, water go away and then nobody but Indians everywhere and game all kinds

> thick. Then medicine man tell Indians to send word to all Indians to keep up dancing and the good time will come. Indians who don't dance, who don't believe in this word, will grow little, just about a foot high, and stay that way. Some of them will be turned into wood and be burned in fire.

II

The particularity of the American Nightmare for most of us is fear and hate, rooted in the single superiority of white people—technological superiority. This white superiority, and its concomitant fear and hate, is most easily symbolized by our use of the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, but just as profoundly reckoned by the four Hotchkiss guns used against disarmed American Indian children, women, and men fifty-five years earlier at Wounded Knee. Until now, Europeans and European Americans have had the guns on their side, although we must admit that all the firepower in the world did not win in Vietnam.

So those dreamers in power whose nightmare remains denied have created ugly terms and nasty visions of God's best friends. Often when we "work the door" for our soup kitchen we hear these epithets screamed through car windows by people angry because the last traffic light was red.

Let us listen to ourselves as we name those for whom Jesus came and died:

Bum
Hobo
Drifter
Indigent
Vagrant
Lazy
Son of a bitch
Ni--er
Wino
Migrant
Jailbird
Loiterer

Street person
Homeless
People of the air
Derelict
Drunk
Loafer
Unfortunate
Pig
Dog
Vagabond
Tramp
Whore
Welfare cheat
Shiftless
Trash
Beggar
Panhandler
Criminal
Poor
Convict
Underclass
Losers
Mentally ill
Deinstitutionalized
Handicapped
No-goods
Those people

III

A few weeks ago I, with my son Neely, stood on the hill at Wounded Knee where the four Hotchkiss guns blew to bits the almost-frozen Sioux. I cried. Suddenly a terrible hailstorm hit us like pellets from a shotgun. We dashed to our car in amazement. We don't have hail like that in the South! About twenty minutes later a bright, beautiful, and fully arced rainbow suddenly appeared. I remembered the mass grave at the hilltop, and I thought of Butler Street breakfast and all the people who sleep in our backyard. And then I remembered Noah and God

and how with all the hate and misery and suffering we put on each other, even in the midst of the nightmare, there are promises and hope for justice and peace, for freedom and reconciliation, for housing and good work. But why? Why is there such violence and hate among so many white and well-to-do people? Among people of faith? Inside you and me?

12.

Vision and Solidarity, Community and Justice

Justice is important, but supper is essential.

—The Open Door

On a clear, cold, and crisp December night in 1956, Hal Beaver hunkered over the Myers Park High School twenty-yard line. On the command "uagahee," Paul Anderson snapped the pigskin to Hal. I darted from the right end of the line for twenty yards, faked right, angled left, loped fifteen yards, and caught the baby in my ever-loving arms. Eight seconds later, I stood in the end zone. Home free. Home at last. Hal and I were all-American boys! The all-white crowd either cheered or groaned. Hal and I returned to Charlotte that night and dreamed of glory.

On the cloudy, cool, and confused December afternoon of Christmas past, thirty-eight years later, Hal and I sat in the Open Door dining room with an assortment of family, visitors, homeless folk, volunteers, community members, and friends. We had hosted several hundred homeless, first for breakfast, followed by a festive feast, as Murphy and Elizabeth led us through this most holy of occasions. In the late afternoon, as the Atlanta sky flamed with dying embers, we began our cleanup. Hal started for the kitchen when I asked him to play his guitar and sing for us while we scrubbed the pots and mopped the floors.

His first song was blues master Robert Johnson's "Come On in My Kitchen." Hal lobbed the ball: "This is the answer to hunger and homelessness in America."

Mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm
mmm mmm mmm mmm
You better come on

in my kitchen
babe, it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.

Oh, can't you hear that wind howl?
Oh-y, can't you hear that wind would howl?
You better come on
in my kitchen
baby, it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.
Winter time's comin'
hit's gon' be slow.
You can't make the winter, babe
that's dry long so
you better come on
in my kitchen
'cause it's gon' to be rainin' outdoors.

Hal Beaver is correct. Robert Johnson is right. Dorothy Day lived it profoundly even as Peter Maurin essayed it easily:

> People with Homes should have a room of hospitality so as to give shelter to the needy members of the parish [read "neighborhood"?].

Paul laid it on the line (Rom. 12:13). Jesus identified with it (Matt. 25:31–46). Isaiah envisioned it and even heard Yahweh demand it in his prophetic imaginations (58:7). Yes, "you better come on in my kitchen" because, important though justice be, *supper is essential.* Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: love is both the fulfillment and the negation of justice, for love fulfills the demand of the law, but goes beyond the law into unmerited care and covenantal solidarity.

Today, the temperature has fallen to 35 degrees, and Mike Bucky promises us the low 20s tonight. Our public bathroom is filled with men, flesh shaking and cold. Our back porch is cluttered with women and men motionless under waves of love-donated blankets. What have we heard and learned in the hope that raps on our back door? We have learned again what Jesus teaches us daily, for Jesus has chosen the cry of the poor as the primary vehicle of his Word. Love of the other is the rock on which we must stand. Love of fellow believers forms the Church. Love of the enemy builds peace and social stability. Love of the stranger shapes our communities into the Beloved Community,

the Kingdom of God on earth. In our society, in these waning days of the bloodiest century in human history, the homeless poor and death-row prisoner teach us that agape-love, the love of servanthood and solidarity, the power of liberation and the hunger for justice, the "yes" to Cain's continuing question, "Am I my sister's (or brother's) keeper?" is most faithfully, most essentially, put into practice as hospitality: hospitality toward the homeless poor, convicts, people of color, teenage mothers on welfare, the stranger and enemy, the one of whom we are afraid. The drawing of the African American man whose image flooded our screens and papers, who was to have abducted, and with little doubt, murdered, Susan Smith's two baby boys—white Southern boys in a state that prides itself in the Confederate battle flag that soars over the Capitol dome—oh, he is the Christ image for us today. He is the test of our hospitality and the verification of our Christian doctrine and life.

Love as hospitality is described well by John Cogley. He wrote in the *Catholic Worker* in October 1947:

> This is the ideal of hospitality: Being sister to sister, brother to brother, children of the same Parent. Not scientific social work—hospitality. Not haughty superior dealing with "problem cases"—hospitality. Not condescending judge dealing with errant accused—hospitality. No, hospitality is derived from the Latin word for "guest." It expresses a relationship between equal people: host and guest. It is bound by the rules of courtesy and human companionship, and ruled by the law of charity.
>
> There are always men and women who need hospitality, for one reason or another. There are, in an imperfect world of imperfect men and women, always those who need a calling back to life, a restoration of personality. There are always those lonely people, in all times, in all places, who need the knowledge of being respected as men and women, of living with other men and women with dignity, of sharing their own burdens with others and bearing some of the burdens for others.
>
> Hospitality reminds people that they are sisters and brothers, children of God, dependent on others and capable of being depended on by others. It is not a specialized work, requiring scientific training. It is something for everyone to practice according to the measure they are able to do so.
>
> The charm of hospitality, because it is peculiarly human, ap-

peals to all people. . . . [I]t is not surprising that often God should use the hospitality people give each other as an instrument of God's grace.

I

Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor.

—Isaiah 58:7a

Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers.

—Romans 12:13

Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into their house and eat with them, and they will eat with me.

—Revelation 3:20

There is much ambiguity, complexity, and layers of confusion in the world today surrounding the response of the Judeo-Christian life and ethics. Nonetheless, one thing is perfectly clear: God loves and is on the side of the dispossessed and disinherited. Jesus came not for the well, but for the sick. He did not come for the righteous but for the unrighteous. Jesus yearns for equality: love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Therefore, biblical hospitality is the love of God, channeled through our lives and laws, our homes and institutions for these particular people: the undeserving poor, the wounded and broken, prostitutes and johns, lepers, insane folk (especially those who do not take their medication), the crippled and lame, white males, alcoholics and drug addicts, deadbeat dads and mothers who have aborted or forsaken their children (Susan Smith?), the marginalized, labor-pool laborers, migrant workers, you, me, and "every hung-up person in the whole wide universe" (Bob Dylan).

Into our homes, churches, synagogues, and mosques we love the other as we welcome the stranger to supper. We provide lodging as we build community and convenantal solidarity in the celebration of life and the struggle for justice. Last month a Methodist church in the

Inman Park neighborhood of Atlanta announced that nearby residents could move into the church, along with their beds and belongings, during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. In this way, these folks could rent their bedrooms for $250 to $500, or more, per night. What a fine gesture of hospitality inside a dwelling place for God and God's good friends. But ultimately what good is it to host those who are able to host you (Luke 6:27–36)? How lovely it would be if this congregation would choose, after the rich return to their homes, to invite the homeless, the ex-convict, the jobless, or the parentless child to reside in these same places. Ah, what love! What hospitality! What joy in the very heart of God! "Remember," states the writer of Hebrews, "to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it" (13:2).

Two images of opening homes and churches are gifts from the recent past. First, in the Underground Railroad, people of faith broke state and federal laws, took slaves into their homes, fed, clothed, and provided for them on their freedom journey. Often, they ate supper together. The cost was higher than the most expensive bed on an Olympic night. The currency used for housing the homeless slaves and for breaking the fetters of those in chains and bondage was faith, courage, trust, and commitment to freedom and equality.

A second image is bestowed by that faithful minority who hid and transported Jews during the regime of Adolf Hitler. In contrast were the majority of local Christians who supported Hitler's pogrom, as was the case with slavery in America. Yet faithful people opened their homes to strangers and enemies of the state, who were labeled problems by the business community and bad for the economy. Great deeds of love and hospitality, of sacrifice and hope, were rendered by these faithful folk and their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Neither the Underground Railroad nor the Nazi resistance movement is a model for us today. But they are important and vital images. The poor, and most especially the African American male, who are homeless, unemployed, and invisible to the majority of Americans, are the enemy, the ones we fear. With the end of the Cold War and subsequent friendship trips to Russia, and with Eastern Europe thriving, the poor are now our targets of hate, and they serve as the cause of our social malaise. Only 1 percent of our national budget is spent on welfare; nonetheless, 90 percent of the blame for social problems is di-

rected toward the weakest and most vulnerable citizens. The response of the Old and New Testaments is clear—condemn the oppression and propaganda, and welcome the stranger, the widow, and the orphan into our homes and lives.

Love is the fulfillment of our lives. The inward journey toward depths of spirituality in an intimate relationship with Yahweh and Jesus teaches us to incarnate love as hospitality of the heart. We make room for Jesus in our lives, for the one for whom there was no room in the inn. But Jesus does not travel alone. He brings into the center of our lives, and into our homes and to our supper table, the ragged and motley crew of outsiders.

Prophetic hospitality is an aim of our outward journey. It is life together with the poor and disinherited that gifts us with covenantal solidarity. We join the justice struggle for daily bread, housing, liberty, and equality for all the children of this loving God who calls us. The first step is the most difficult, but it is the step needed today more than at any moment in our history: "Open your homes to the homeless poor."

II

What have we heard and learned in the hope that raps upon our back door? We have learned, we confess, that Jesus speaks to us in the cry of the poor, and that his word to us is love. Love one another. Using supper as the central symbol of a hospitable love which reaches out concretely to the homeless and prisoner, we proclaimed: Justice is important, but supper is essential. What good does it do us if we have a just society but there is no love? We may have the church filled with the halt and blind and bankers and advocates, but if we have no love, the church is nothing. We may have thousands of members and a pipe organ to boot, but if we are not black and white and brown and yellow and red and rich and poor, we are little more than a country club.

How do we love each other? How do we live together? We share supper. Among the most telling questions of our lives and faith are: with whom do we eat? where do we eat? what do we eat? how much do we eat? Even the starving in our midst eat something, sometime. By both prophetic faith and ethical living in the world of politics, commerce, and culture, we are invited to formulate and practice an answer

to the fundamental question of the scriptures: How do we live together?

We share bread. We share table. The Lord's Supper is the center of our life together.

III

When we come to table and eat together we are given the best gift of all: a common life of love and sharing. We are given community! I want to reflect on two dimensions of the common life in the midst of our eating and sharing with the poor and prisoners.

Mike Galovic is a resident volunteer at the Open Door Community. Shortly after his arrival last summer, we spent a day on the streets together visiting and listening to our homeless and hungry friends. While slouching on the no longer existent benches at Woodruff Park, Mike told me about a friend of his in Florida.

Mike's friend owns a very fine sailing boat that he keeps anchored at a marina. One day the friend discovered that a homeless man was sleeping in his boat. The owner initially let the event pass, but soon realized the man with nowhere to go was now living in his boat. Mike's friend responded with gifts of food and blankets and then visited the man. Not long afterward, he gave the man a bucket and long-handled window washer, and asked him to wash windows at his business in return for a room at a hotel. If you give a man a fish he gets hungry at the next supper; if you teach him how to fish he can eat forever. The act was loving and kind, generous and caring. The homeless man took his new tools, thanked the boat owner, and began work. Shortly thereafter, Mike's friend checked on the man's progress, but the man had disappeared, never to be seen again.

This story illustrates vividly and with pathos the consequences of not listening to the poor and hungry in our midst. Love, the harsh and dreadful love in action, teaches us to listen rather than to speak. We need to receive a description of the hell of homelessness and the poison of prison rather than prescribe programs and desires for the lives of powerless people. We must repent from the arrogance of power and walk humbly with our God in loving servanthood.

Neither Mike, his friend, nor I knows why the homeless man, who stowed away each night in the bottom of a boat, disappeared. But let us use our imagination a moment. Perhaps he was acrophobic and

could not work washing windows. Maybe his eyes were dim or his teeth pained him. As is true with most homeless people, his feet perhaps were raw and toes twisted from frostbite years before. He may have been a lazy no-good bum who loved being hungry, sleeping in a damp boat, and having no friends. He could have been an alcoholic or drug addict who sold the bucket and blade for a few hours of relief from poverty, racism, disgust, and bodily pain. We do not know. But we do know this: He was a human being, a homeless man, created in the image of God and loved by Jesus.

When we listen to the poor we drop the ideology that what one

Calvin Kimbrough

Kudzu City

needs is a job. Rather we reduce the distance and stand and listen with "ears trained by scripture" (Murphy Davis) and respond with the simple and hospitable question, "How may I be helpful?" That question rooted in love and openness re-creates the poor and makes them a subject of their own lives rather than an object of our programs. "How may I be helpful?" gives respect but demands engagement. The question of love and relationship gives empowerment and demands servanthood. The question is gospel; it is good news to the poor!

Mike's friend was loving and did more than most of us. But he

failed to meet the homeless one in his humanity and personhood. Perhaps the man would have said, "I need a bus ticket to Chicago where my brother lives." We do not know. We must change our agenda with the homeless poor. We must listen, for most want to work but are far from ready for employment. We have commercialized our relationships, and we see the unemployed as people for whom a job will solve their personal and social problems. My friends, the issues are far deeper and wider than that, and it is time for you and me to recognize these truths as well. We need love and home, family and friends, sacraments and song, living wages ($10.00 per hour), and medicine when sick. We need each other. "How may I be helpful?" is a question that incarnates the love of God and that will change our lives, as well as bring to an end homelessness, hunger, and prisons as we know them in this land.

There are biblical and theological reasons for listening to the poor with ears trained by the scriptures. As we learn from the cry of the poor—respecting the pain, anguish, hell, and hearing the truths of racism, sexism, and class violence as well as the faith, courage, hope, and majesty of the suffering endurance—we hear the voice of God. In the cry of the poor we hear the cry of Jesus Christ himself. We are called to conversion, to a new life in solidarity and love with those same folk who followed Jesus and sat at table and ate with him, to the disgust of the Pharisees. In the cry of the homeless and prisoners, in the midst of despair and hope and love, we may, with scripture and the cloud of witnesses, discern the cry of the suffering servant who hangs on the cross for us all.

"How may I be helpful?" is not only the key to new life and a door to a shared struggle for peace and justice, the question is also the distinguishing mark of public discourse among prophetic people of faith. The difference between social work—programs for the poor designed by professionals for clients—and biblical servanthood for liberation and justice is sacrificial love, a love that is accepting and that even welcomes suffering. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. teaches us well and often that sacrificial love is the resource for redemption in our personal lives and social struggles for justice. The suffering that accompanies the "listening question" to the homeless and prisoner is the suffering of solidarity. God does it every night and day for you and me! The suffering is part of the grace of "standing with." There is a suffering sacrificial love in accepting the consequences of life with, among, and on behalf

of the oppressed and prisoner. Together, hand holding hand, we confess that we will not hide in comfort zones. We will not avoid the pain and suffering. We will not allow suburbia and segregation to shape our loves and lives, nor our idea of justice. We shall reduce the distance, pick up our cross, and ask, "How may I be helpful?"

IV

Since 1989, and my horrendous failures and sins around the labor-pool reform movement, I have learned two important truths. First, although I cannot leave or arrive at the Open Door without stepping over people or stepping into their living rooms, I hear hope banging at my back door. Those who live in our yard are neighbors to me, my brothers and sisters, and they have given me the gift of staying here. Second, justice is important—I am spending my life on the justice journey—but supper is essential. I also know as an affluent, white, male, church-raised, debutant-marshal Christian that supper is not enough.

Our vision is a gift from the grand old prophet and poet Isaiah.

> The Lord says, "I am making a new earth and new heavens. . . . People will build houses and get to live in them—they will not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine—it will not be drunk by others. . . . Wolves and lambs will eat together; lions will eat straw, as cattle do, and snakes will no longer be dangerous. On Zion, my sacred hill, there will be nothing harmful or evil." (65:17–25)

"There is," writes Reinhold Niebuhr, "no ultimate fulfillment in the political realm, yet there is no salvation apart from it."[4] When we listen to the homeless and the convict on the basis of what we discern with ears trained by scripture and guided by the prophetic voices of our ancestors, we learn they want justice. Retributive justice precedes reconciliation, the Reverend Joseph Roberts of Ebenezer Baptist Church taught recently to a group from the Billy Graham Crusade. "Forty acres and a mule is what we want," says Joe Beasley of Concerned Black Clergy.

There is poverty because some folk have more than their share of money. There is racism because white people have unfair social power.

There is hunger and homelessness because food and housing are commodities bought and sold on a market controlled by large corporations and the rich. No group gives up its power voluntarily so we must fight, struggle, push, compromise, vote, yell, march, and educate for liberation. We must demand: no justice, no peace. Into the fray of corrupted politics we come following the one who rode into Jerusalem on a jackass and who hung on a cross between two thieves.

The coming of a new earth and new heavens with houses for all, and vineyards filled with grapes for harvest, will bring the end of soup-kitchen lines, lives lived under bridges, the death penalty, and forsaken children. Supper is essential, but we dare to fight for justice for all in this land where equality and liberty are our dreams and hopes. Can you hear hope banging at your back door? Do you taste the Beloved Community in your supper meal?

> Listen! I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into their house and eat with them, and they will eat with me. (Rev. 3:20)

. . . and then . . .

> Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

V

How hard it is to live near Jesus Christ. How difficult to have hope keep banging on the back door. How humbling to have to throw ourselves into God's arms and know that it is grace alone, not our soup kitchen or street actions, that saves us. The white-hot coals that burned the sin and guilt from young Isaiah's lips crush on our mouths even as we hope to sing a new song in this strange land of homelessness and hunger in the midst of more than enough.

On one level, I do not blame or judge those who build fences around their yards and fill their mostly vacant houses with dogs and alarm systems. We have big bolt locks at 910 Ponce de Leon even on the back door, where hope keeps banging against the shattered window pane. As a culture we seem bent on locking Jesus out (in the streets) or locking him in (in the prison). There is no health in us.

So we hope against our experience. We hope against history. The Holy Spirit tells us in Hebrews 11 that "to have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see" (v. 1). Each partner at the Open Door Community is betting their life on the victory of the cross, on the ultimate justice on earth. There will be a time when those who build houses shall inhabit them; those who plant vineyards shall drink their own wine.

Yet we fight not only for ourselves or for those in the Butler Street grits line or for M. M. now asleep on our basketball court. We pour out our lives for our granddaughters and their children. Not in my lifetime . . .

Moses, at the time of his dying, climbed high up on Mount Nebo. Yahweh had decided that he could not go into the Promised Land. But he could see with eyes of flesh and faith the place toward which his people and his children would journey for centuries to come. For Moses that was enough. He was thankful, joyful, fulfilled as his old and tired body crumbled under the cost and commitment of the journey toward justice.

When I stand on my back porch and speak with those who live there, I often look across the yard, over the wooden fence forced on us by lawyers and neighbors filled with fear and disgust, my eyes flitting above the hackberry trees onto the horizon of Atlanta, Georgia. There I see everyone housed and happy. People sharing food and singing and dancing. Yards and homes where everyone is welcome and all children are safe and well. Even the old folk have renewed strength in their knees and laughter on their lips. Christ climbs down from his bare tree and labor pools shut down. I can see it; I'll never touch it.

Years ago Murphy and I went through our first execution. He was a beloved friend. We were afraid, confused, and angry at our God for the evil and death spewed out in the prisons and across this land. Joe Hendricks of the Committee of Southern Churchfolk sat us down and read to us from Habakkuk:

> Even though the fig trees have
> no fruit
> and no grapes grow on the
> vines

even though the olive crop
fails
and the fields produce no
grain
even though the sheep die
and the cattle stalls are
empty
I will still be joyful and glad,
because the Lord God is my
Savior
the Sovereign Lord gives me
strength.
Yahweh makes me sure-footed
as a deer
and keeps me safe on the
mountains.
(3:17–19)

Yes, I hear hope banging on my back door. Thank you.

Notes

1. See Bert Cartwright, "Bob Dylan and the American Dream," *Hospitality* 12 (June 1993).

2. See Gibson (Nibs) Stroupe, *While We Run This Race: Encountering the Power of Racism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995). Nibs opens our wound of white racism and the battle for equality in an incisive and profound way.

3. Langston Hughes, "Harlem," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes,* ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 426.

4. Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the thousands of homeless brothers and sisters who have welcomed me to the streets over the years. Thanks to the hundreds of homeless folks and prisoners who have lived at 910 and helped me discover home here. Thanks to the disciples of Jesus across this land who choose the cross and a life that resists the powers of death and homelessness. Thanks to Calvin Kimbrough, whose gifts as a photographer are given freely to the Open Door Community. Thanks to Julie Martin, who proofread the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions. Thanks to the volunteers and residents, to the supporters and contributors who make it possible for us to have a front door and a back door. Thanks to Hannah Loring-Davis, who believes every explanation for homelessness is a lie. She thinks we ought to open our doors to the homeless and invite them to come inside. Thanks to Murphy Davis, my sweetheart. She directed me to the key.

This work would not have borne fruit without the guidance, encouragement, patience, and love of John Turnbull, a gifted editor indeed. Thank you, John.

To every homeless person who is in a shelter or outside tonight and to every child, woman, and man who sits this day on death row, I ask your forgiveness. It won't be long now! The end of Imperial America is at hand. The Beloved Community cometh.

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THE OPEN DOOR COMMUNITY is a residential Christian community in downtown Atlanta, at 910 Ponce de Leon Avenue, about a mile and a quarter from the Fox Theatre on Peachtree. A group of some thirty of us lives together in an old apartment building that is owned by the Open Door Community and by the Greater Atlanta Presbytery. . . . In those rooms, within those walls, we struggle together to live a life of obedience and servanthood to the call and gift of Jesus Christ in our lives. . . .

—From chapter 1

BETTY JANE CRANDALL

ED LORING is a partner at the Open Door Community and a cofounder of the Grady Coalition, which conducts nonviolent protests to help ensure affordable health care for the homeless and poor in the Atlanta area. He holds a Ph.D. in church history from Vanderbilt University, where he specialized in American religious history, particularly churches and slavery. He and his wife, Murphy Davis, live at the Open Door.

$10.00 DONATION