

## Proper 25A 2017 Sermon

October 29, 2017

*Matthew 22:34-40*

*When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

Early on Ash Wednesday morning, 2016, my dog Serena ran away. As some of you know, she was gone for 5 days. So many posters with her picture were placed on telephone poles around town that to many people in Canon City today I am known only as "Serena's dad."

What a professional dog tracker taught me during that time was that when a runaway dog has been gone for an extended period of time, its brain goes into "survival mode," and the dog becomes almost feral. The dog avoids all human beings, even its owner. This is exactly what happened with Serena. I was driving my car in a neighborhood where Serena had been spotted, and I saw her trotting down the road. I rolled down the window and called out to her, but she ran away from me. In the DNA of a wild animal there is a built-in fear of any large animals – and we humans are large animals! All that the runaway dog can think of is survival: where to get food and water and shelter, and how to avoid any perceived threat, such as human beings. Gone is any sense of trust the dog may have developed with humans in the past, even with its owner. Gone is any sense of playfulness. All the dog's mind can focus on is survival.

Over the past few years, and especially since getting involved with Laundry Love, I have discovered that such a mechanism exists in our *human* DNA, also. I have seen it in people who have been without a home for extended periods of time, uncertain where their next meal is coming from, or whether they will have shelter for the night. They go into survival mode. The brain doesn't have the luxury of planning for the future, for there is no future; everything is today, right now, where do I get food, where do I sleep tonight.

A 19<sup>th</sup>-Century English clergyman discovered this dynamic as he walked the streets of London in the early 1860's. Like many evangelicals today, William Booth felt called to preach the Gospel and to save souls; but Booth felt a *particular* call to save the souls of those experiencing poverty or homelessness on the streets of London. What he soon discovered was that people who are hungry and without a home cannot hear the message of the Gospel; they are in survival mode, and all they can focus on is where to find food and shelter. So William Booth, his wife Catherine, and a band of volunteers decided to provide food and

shelter to these people, so that they could then hear the Gospel. And the Salvation Army was born.

This human dynamic – that one can only proceed forward with their life once survival needs have been stabilized and secured – has been demonstrated by controlled studies over the past dozen years or so. Studies such as those reported in a 2009 article of the Journal of the American Medical Association have shown that a very effective method for reducing societal costs of homelessness is a model called “Housing First,” wherein individuals experiencing homelessness are **first** offered housing, *without* preconditions. The AMA Journal article reported a study done in Seattle between 2005 and 2007. 95 persons experiencing homelessness were given housing, and that group was then compared to a group without housing. The cost of services for the two groups was then compared after a year – costs such as those incurred by jail bookings, days incarcerated, shelter and sobering center use, hospital-based medical services, publicly funded alcohol and drug detoxification and treatment, emergency medical services [such as emergency rooms], and Medicaid-funded services. In the year prior to the study, the median cost of these services for those experiencing homelessness was \$4,066 per person per month. After one year of housing, the median cost per person had dropped to \$958 per person per month. After accounting for housing program costs, there was still a savings of almost \$30,000 per person per year, or almost \$2,500 per person per month.<sup>1</sup> The Housing First model has proven so successful that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “HUD,” has supported this approach. This is the model for the apartment building called “Journey Home” which is being built across the street from Loaves and Fishes, and it is the model for the Saint Francis Apartments being built across the street from our Episcopal Cathedral in Denver – about which a presentation was given to us at our recent Diocesan Convention in Grand Junction.

But “Housing First” is not simply about saving taxpayers’ money! Stable, permanent housing gets people out of the “survival mode” in which they can only think and plan for today and allows them to realize their God-given potential and gifts – to truly live into the image of God in which they were created, as I mentioned in my sermon last week. Housing First goes beyond giving people a handout, which is charity, and gives them instead a “hand up,” which goes beyond charity into advocacy. As Nobel Peace Prize-winning Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the River. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.” As we have just seen, one of the reasons that people are falling into the river is a lack of permanent, affordable housing. A person working full time on minimum wage in Canon City cannot afford to rent a home.

Most of you know that last Spring, after paying for motel rooms, night after night for a family of two adults and three children who had no home and who could not be accommodated in our local shelter, I invited the family to house-sit for me for 10 days while I was at a church conference in Indiana. When I returned, Terry

and Shirley Squier were going on vacation, and *they* invited this family to house-sit at *their* home, telling the family that they would have to leave when they returned from vacation. Well, the Squiers returned, the family still had no place to stay, and so they returned to my house for several more weeks. It had been my hope that once the mom of the family had some stability, she could look further ahead than just today or tomorrow, and could apply for other housing options and get out of homelessness. As it turns out, the 6 weeks or so that they were at my house or the Squier's house was not enough to get "mom" out of survival mode. She had been homeless for four years, and the transformation of a 4-year-long mindset was going to take longer than 6 weeks. And I realized that they needed some more pro-active support than the passive support I was giving, just supplying them a place to live. I didn't have the knowledge, training, or time to provide the kind of supportive counseling they needed. The youngest child in the family had been diagnosed the past year with Type 1 diabetes, and the mom couldn't handle it, on top of everything else. I also didn't have the time to help with job-searching. I went with "mom" to interview at Loaves and Fishes for their "Restoring Hope" rapid re-housing program, but after the family left my home, they didn't follow through. Mom couldn't get out of survival mode.

As I learned at Diocesan Convention, there is a difference between charity, giving people a handout, and advocacy, which is giving people a hand up, addressing the root causes of homelessness. One of those causes, as I have already mentioned, is a lack of affordable housing. Another cause, as I also mentioned, is this very real dynamic that I experienced with Serena, with the family that stayed with me, and with many other folk whom I have met who are experiencing homelessness: the brain shifts into survival mode and can literally not see past the needs of today, and therefore cannot plan or even envision a different future. They need someone to **help** them see a different future, to help them set practical, attainable goals and to keep moving forward.

Many of you know that I have been working for about a year with Doctor Randy Ruggles, a physician who has been experiencing homelessness for quite some time. The ramifications and consequences of an illness he has, caused him to spiral downward and lose everything. This intelligent, hard-working physician (you *cannot* get through Medical School if you are dumb and lazy) cannot find his way out of this hole he's been in for so long. Although causes are multi-layered, I'm convinced that a big part of the problem lies in the fact that his brain has been in survival mode for so long. When our church video was made back in August, Randy was one of the people interviewed. I'd like to play that 30-second video clip for you.

None of us who were interviewed on that video had any idea what questions the interviewer was going to ask; our responses were therefore not scripted. What I want to bring to your attention is one word Randy used in his unscripted response: he said, "Christ Church has been instrumental in my *survival*." Doctor Randy Ruggles is in survival mode. And he cannot dig himself out; he needs help from

others. Permanent, stable housing. Medical help, which he is getting. Counseling. Someone to help him set goals for the future, as well as steps to accomplish those goals. He needs a modest amount of money for food and other needs.

I first met Randy when the Nicole Hanson, manager of Villa Carina, called me about a year ago and asked if I could help him get into Villa Carina. Nicole had done the required background checks and had accepted Randy's application. I was able to help Randy with rent for a couple of months. He stayed in the shelter for a couple of months. This past summer, he stayed outside for 63 days. When it got cold, he tried to get into the shelter, but it's been full for months, and there is little hope of that changing in the foreseeable future. I helped him with cheap motel rooms until I ran out of money. His anxiety was red-lining. I finally told him he could sleep on the back porch of the parish office, to get out of the cold.

Wise parishioners have helped me see the problems with this arrangement, and it cannot continue. Yet I had promised Randy I wouldn't leave him out in the cold.

So I have made the decision to invite Randy to stay in my home until he can find housing – maybe the new “Journey Home” apartments. But here's the thing: I cannot do it without your help. Many years ago, this parish rallied around a stroke victim named Denise, the single mother of two of our youth group members. Parishioners provided rides for the kids, provided meals and dog food, took Denise to appointments, worked with her to regain her speech, walked with her through the legal process of appointing a temporary guardian (which happened to be me). If enough of you are willing to be part of a similar team to work alongside Randy, encourage him to step beyond survival mode, drive him places at times, donate to my discretionary fund or buy him some food, help him set achievable goals, encourage him in the steps to achieve those goals, and help him be accountable – if we can put together a team that is willing to give of our time and skills and caring, like we did with Denise, I think there is a good chance that Randy can climb out of survival mode and live more into his significant potential, enjoy a happier, richer life, and give of himself and his gifts to others. Such work, my friends, is what I believe “saving souls” is all about.

If any of you is willing to be part of such a team, please see me after Eucharist today. Randy does not know any of this, so please don't tell him until I have the chance to talk with him.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is asked what the greatest of the Jewish religious laws is. He responds, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Those of you who have heard me preach and teach over the past 19 years know that there is another way to interpret this last part: “Love your neighbor who is as yourself,” or even “Love your neighbor who is yourself.” There, but by the grace of God,

goes any one of us. I know full well that in the depths of my struggles with anorexia or depression, if I hadn't had the steadfast support of family and friends and parishioners, God only knows what would have happened to me. I could very well be homeless, or worse.

The Mission Statement that our Vestry adopted for Christ Church comes straight from today's Gospel. It is simply: "Love God. Love your neighbor. Change the world." My friends, I believe we are indeed called to do just that, and we **can** do that – one act of kindness at a time.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/183666>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Housing-First-Permanent-Supportive-Housing-Brief.pdf>