

## **Habitation Agitation – Numbers 14:1-10a**

A sermon by the Rev. Ken Pennings, Associate Pastor at Orchard Ridge United Church of Christ, Madison, WI.

A DVD clip from *The Blind Side*, Warner Bros. 2009 (on a rainy cold night in November, a well-to-do Southern family takes a homeless boy into their home).

The homeless may be as close to us as a student who goes to school with our own children.

And homelessness is just one part of a larger problem of housing insecurity. Many in this country are just one or two paychecks away from homelessness.

For decades there has been a critical and continual need for a sufficient supply of safe, decent, affordable and fully-accessible housing. Unfortunately, the situation appears to be getting worse. The U.S. housing market remains in considerable flux and we all know the unemployment rate has reached 10%. With more and more Americans facing poverty in 2010 it seems likely the United States will continue to see a rise in homelessness.

- Housing costs in Wisconsin have forced many people to make tough decisions about basic needs. Local assistance programs, including the Section 8 Voucher program and transitional housing programs, have long waiting lists, and are not able to meet the growing need. Here in Madison, in 2008, 3,894 individuals were served in homeless shelters, but 3,636 individuals who were homeless were turned away from shelter because of insufficient room.
- According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition,<sup>1</sup> as of 2010 there is no county in the entire country where a full-time worker earning the minimum wage can afford even a one bedroom apartment at the Fair Market Rent (FMR).
- Some are forced to live in substandard housing that jeopardizes the health of household members, especially the youngest members. Children's HealthWatch found that youngsters who live in crowded units or have moved twice or more in the last year are more likely to be food insecure, at-risk for developmental delays, and in relatively poor health.

Imagine what it's like to be homeless or to struggle with housing insecurity. Our text from Numbers gives us a small clue into what it's like. The Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for forty years in search of a place to call home, and they were weary, frustrated and angry with their leaders. When they come to the land of Canaan, they are terrified of the unknown – "Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder." So they plot to kill Joshua and Caleb who are fully confident that Canaan will be a place they can call home. Hear the tension? Angry and frustrated by where they've been. Terrified about where they may end up...never a place to call home. This anxiety, anger, frustration and fear, I call "Habitation Agitation."

There are homeless people at our doorstep. Most of them are poor. Many of them struggle with mental illness. Some are threatened with violence. We know the agitation in their lives when they have no place

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<sup>1</sup> See their annual publication, *Out of Reach*, 2010.

to call home or when they are one paycheck away from homelessness. In small ways, one dollar at a time, one person at a time, we attempt to address this need right here in our own community.

Many of our folks here at ORUCC have teamed up with volunteers from Madison Mennonite and Madison Christian as part of the *Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN)* to host families overnight right here in this building.

Our volunteer work and financial contributions to The Road Home, Porchlight, and Habitat for Humanity are critically important. We're doing our best to reduce "habitation agitation."

My friend, Jim, volunteers at a homeless shelter in Columbia County, Wisconsin. He explained that in 2007, the Columbia County in-patient drug and alcohol treatment center was no longer funded and sat empty while there were literally no services for homeless people. The social service folks and folks from the church community began discussing ways they might address the need together. With the grant writing expertise of social services and volunteers from the churches, a shelter for women and families opened in the county. But federal funds for the homeless cover only a percentage of a program; so two shifts are staffed by volunteers from the churches.

IHN volunteers here at Orchard Ridge and volunteers in Columbia County are far more than a cost benefit. Motivated by their sense of justice, they offer a compassionate ear to the tragic stories of unemployment, illness or domestic abuse that have led many guests to homelessness. Like the Hebrews at the threshold of Canaan, these guests are sometimes stressed out, frustrated, angry at where they have been and how they have been treated. They are terrified about where they might end up. When offered a temporary home, these guests express deep gratitude and relief to be treated with dignity and respect.

In turn, the volunteers receive from the homeless important reality checks and honest testimony that break through the ignorance of stereotypes.

When we get to know the homeless and those who are one or two paychecks away from homelessness, we discover that we're just like them and they're just like us. We are connected to them in the web of life. And we realize the truth Dr. King preached, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality." Homelessness and unaffordable housing ARE our *issues* because the homeless and those burdened by unaffordable housing ARE our *people*.

Central Presbyterian Church is located in downtown Atlanta across the street from the state Capitol. For years, members of the congregation wanted to do something tangible to address the needs of the many homeless people on their doorstep. They'd learned that most homeless people are quite skittish about entering their building for worship or any other function. But last year, the young female associate pastor decided to take her guitar and lead worship among the homeless just outside the doors of the church. After one such worship service, the pastor said to the folks, "I know that being in our sanctuary can be a bit intimidating, but this Wednesday evening, we're holding a special service where we burn the palm branches from last year's Palm Sunday celebration, mix the ashes with oil, dip our finger in the ashes and oil, and make the sign of the cross on each person's forehead. After you receive the sign of the cross on your forehead, you'll turn to the next person and make the sign of the cross on her forehead. I really think you're going to like this service. Please come."

It was time for the Ash Wednesday service, and forty homeless people who had never crossed the threshold into Central Presbyterian Church entered the sanctuary. The associate pastor was thrilled!

Now at the state Capitol, earlier in the day, one legislator said to the other legislators, "I hear there's going to be a unique Ash Wednesday service this evening across the street at Central Pres. Anyone interested in attending with me?" At the start of the service, forty state legislators entered the sanctuary of Central Presbyterian Church for the very first time.

There wasn't a dry eye in the house as homeless people made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of state legislators and in turn, state legislators made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of homeless people.

I believe it always a good thing when those of us who have enough are face to face with people who don't have enough. It reminds us how important it is for us to agitate for the redistribution of wealth so that everyone has enough.

Church ministries are making a difference, but some who advocate for the homeless—including many wise people in this congregation--believe that the way out of the housing crisis includes public subsidies for housing for low income people. Why shouldn't people with wealth--for instance, anyone whose income is above \$100,000 a year-- be agitating to have their own taxes raised to fund redistributive programs so the basic needs of all are met?

In a nation that claims to believe in "equality" and "justice for all," members of faith-based organizations and communities should not be the only ones responsible for meeting the basic needs of all our citizens. No one in American society should get a pass from social responsibility for the common good. In a just society, peoples' basic survival should not be dependent on voluntary charity. In a truly just society, wealth must be re-distributed so that no one is in need.

From 2002-2004, I was program coordinator for an affordable housing project with the Wisconsin Council of Churches. I learned a great deal from this experience, including how complex this issue really is. We started out by inviting a handful of community partners to the table with us; then it became apparent that we needed to broaden our invitation to many others: To reduce "habitation agitation" in Wisconsin, we gathered legislators, lending agencies, government agencies, housing authorities, for-profit developers, not-for-profit developers, advocacy agencies, landlords, tenants, providers of temporary housing, transitional housing and permanent housing for low-income people and of course, members of the faith community. IT TAKES A NATION TO ELIMINATE "HABITATION AGITATION."

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