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Solidarity with the Homeless

A goal of my teaching, writing, mentoring, and advocacy work has been, as Christian ethicist Traci West so aptly puts it, to build "just and compassionate relationships within and across our differing communities."[1] Discerning how to address adequately the problem of homelessness requires more than simply applying the Christian norms of hospitality or love of neighbor. Too often our charity functions to make us feel good about ourselves, masking the need to see and respond to societal oppression. We can also become so caught up in our own understanding of what is liberating for others that we do not critically assess whether our assumptions and strategies truly lead to empowerment. We rarely give those who are recipients of our charity a defining voice in the process. Instead, we often blame the victims of societal oppression and poverty for causing the problems and further compound their victimization with our attitudes toward them and our solutions for solving "their" problems.

Such disempowering attitudes and actions led West to develop what she calls Christian "resistance" or "disruptive" ethics. *Resistance* and *disruption* refer to our Christian calling to confront, just as Jesus did, that which denies human well-being and community. For as long as humans have been around, domination and oppression have been used to gain power and privilege, and Scripture and theological rationales have been used to justify the status quo of inequality. Her method is similar to other liberationist ethics that refuse to appropriate Scripture,

theology, and the Christian tradition in support of domination, but instead interpret Christian resources in liberating ways that support justice and compassion.

The concepts of resistance and disruption are especially useful for a study on homelessness because so many of our Christian responses, while hospitable in intent, do not challenge institutional inequality and oppression. While Jesus exhibited compassion on an individual level, he also challenged oppressive structures and practices. For example, he defied cultural and religious purity rules that defined who was clean and unclean by associating with lepers, tax collectors, and women, all of whom were considered impure. He challenged the Roman Empire's charitable system that served to keep the poor in place by multiplying the five fish and two loaves of bread, opening God's banquet for all. And Jesus confronted the exploitative behavior of the moneychangers in front of the Temple, a system that religious and political authorities systemically supported. All of these examples have in common a picture of Jesus who promoted compassion for the downtrodden by disrupting the structural and ideological systems that create and justify poverty and oppression.

The end goal is not disruption for disruption's sake, but communities that foster spiritual wholeness. Embracing a liberationist method will entail participating in a process of building just and compassionate societies while simultaneously resisting entrenched and reemerging sources of injustice. Satisfaction of spiritual needs is an entitlement of human personhood, as much so for persons who are homeless as for persons who are housed. Such needs include connection with community, meaning and purpose in life, affirmation of personhood, and appreciation of the intangible mystical wonders of being in nature and humanity.[2] A truly Christian response to homelessness, then, must affirm the needs of those who are homeless for community, connection, and meaning. A Christian response must also celebrate the agency and spiritual vitality that people exhibit in their embodied responses of resistance in the face of oppression. Finally, a Christian response to homelessness entails building just and compassionate societies in *solidarity with* the homeless and poor, not *on behalf of* the poor.

Although West does not address homelessness and housing in her work, her ethical method provides guidelines both for critically analyzing various approaches to social issues and for constructing a positive Christian response. First, placing subjugated lives and voices at the moral center helps keep us accountable to create ideologies, practices, and institutions that uplift those who are most marginalized and exploited. Second, her ethical method insists that critical analysis always include (1) deconstructing social ideologies that are created to justify oppression and violence; (2) examining intersecting forms of social domination and oppression; (3) identifying complex individual and institutional power relationships; and (4) paying attention to the ways in which people are both victimized and have agency.

Paying attention both to the victimization that people on the margins face as well as to their ability to resist injustice avoids two problematic responses to homelessness. One is a "blame the victim" response that sees individual irresponsibility as the sole cause for homelessness, and the other is a "patronizing compassion" response that views people on the margins as simply subjects of sympathy who need a saintly rescuer. Using a liberationist method allows us to examine critically dominant views on homelessness and housing, and will help us to envision how we might continually resist and disrupt injustice while we simultaneously support the creation of compassionate and just structures and policies.

Placing Subjugated Lives and Voices at the Moral Center

We cannot be in solidarity with people who are marginalized and/or oppressed unless we recognize their reality as occupying the moral center. In analyzing ethical issues, we must *start* with the reality of "everyday people" who are from "areas commonly identified as problem communities."[3] The beginning point for many ethicists is moral theory and the testimony of "experts" on an issue. Christian ethicists might look to Scripture, theology, and/or the Christian tradition first. If ethicists include the experiences of everyday people they are often white people, usually men (and increasingly white women). The experience of

people of color, especially women of color, is always seen as an "addi-tion." The goal is not to "assign specific valorized moral qualities" to the subjugated, but to gain knowledge of what is needed to resist the con-ditions of marginalization and dehumanization that the homeless and poor face.[4] The voices of people who are homeless may reflect internal-ized oppression and should be critically assessed, but clearly a process of empowerment will not occur unless their experiences inform the solutions.

The goal is not to denigrate information that experts and profes-sionals can provide but, rather, to gain knowledge that only those who have had these embodied experiences can impart. Such knowledge gives crucial insights for more adequate responses, often correcting stereotypes and mistaken assumptions of sources deemed authorita-tive. The voices of the subjugated are usually not heard. Even when their voices are heard, if their stories contradict public understandings and "authoritative evidence," then often their perspectives and contribu-tions are dismissed. More often than not, the homeless are not permit-ted to speak, or they lose their sense of self, and consequently their voice, through internalization of negative definitions of self projected onto them from external sources.[5]

In examining the issue of homelessness, the starting point and moral center would not be experiences of middle-class, white home-owners, but the numerous people of low or no income who are with-out homes and cannot secure affordable rental housing. To get a fuller picture we would want to listen not only to the stories and struggles of people who are repeatedly on the streets, but also to the stories of individuals and families who are episodically homeless, as well as all the people who scrape by to stay housed and are increasingly losing their homes or rentals to mortgage foreclosure and eviction. Without knowledge of how the experience of each of these groups is different we will be likely to lump all people who are homeless or poor into one cat-egory and label them. Furthermore, citing broad universal norms like "self-sufficiency" and "hard work" or utilizing theories on the causes of homelessness without knowledge from those who experience home-lessness will be more likely to exacerbate than to solve the problem. If we are serious about addressing the problems of homelessness and

inadequate housing, we must start by listening to people who experience the problems we are trying to address. Being aware of the actual conditions that entrap socially marginalized people would allow us to craft social policy that has a chance of ensuring people are housed and actually promotes individual and community well-being.

While we should begin with particular stories of subjugation, simply reciting narratives is not sufficient. We must join practical realities with theory that can offer critical analyses of social policies and practices. While theory is important, simply relying on broad universal values and understandings apart from particular stories can mask realities of oppression and ignore questions about whose interests are served.[6] For example, a common solution to homelessness and poverty is the promotion of classes that teach particular job skills and work etiquette. However, telling women who are homeless with children under six years of age that they simply need to have a better work ethic ignores realities such as low wages for "unskilled" labor and the high cost of child care and does not get at the issue of who benefits from low wages.

Examining particular public "practices" can be a test for what "universal values" we actually promote in society. Ethicists often emphasize the value of agency—that people have the freedom to make rational decisions based on a variety of choices—but fail to examine whether our societal practices support agency. For example, our society's lack of public investment in providing affordable and safe childcare for families shows we do not give much value to the agency of poor single mothers. If we really valued their agency we would make sure that they have access to child care, health care, and a number of other basic goods. The validity of solutions to homelessness and poverty must be assessed by whether they actually support liberation in the lives of the people the solutions are meant to help.[7]

Unraveling Social Ideologies

An important first step in the process of envisioning prophetic Christian responses to homelessness and housing is to assess critically our social ideologies about who is homeless and housed and how these

ideologies have influenced our societal responses. Looking at historical responses to homelessness in the United States, we can see the connection. For example, when the homeless person was the feared male hobo, response was punitive. When the image shifted to white families during the Depression (despite the existence of many homeless families of color and single people), more supports were put in place, including public housing. As public housing became equated with black gangs in the 1970s and 1980s, funding dried up. Clearly, our dominant ideological social constructions guide our institutional responses.

We must be especially attentive to the ways in which our constructed ideologies can justify oppression and violence. Thus, a key aspect of ethical method is to identify and critique social ideologies and cultural myths that serve to support oppressive and discriminatory practices. After gaining an understanding of the ways in which we have responded to homelessness and housing as a society based on dominant cultural ideologies, we must step back and examine the moral focus presented. In West's work on domestic abuse, she argues that researchers have spent enormous amounts of time asking the question, "Why do women stay?," when they should be asking, "Why don't men let them go?"[8] Similarly, we should ask why our society has allowed, and in many ways structurally supported, poverty and homelessness, instead of asking what people do to cause their homelessness. We should not become entrapped by the perspective we are trying to oppose, however. That is, we should not expend all our energy disproving assumptions about who is homeless, thus diverting our attention from the root causes of homelessness.

We must not simply identify cultural myths and stereotypes, but also show how these ideological constructions are actualized through institutional responses and particular practices. Doing so requires paying special attention to the intersection of the ideological constructions of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, and how they are repeatedly used to deny human well-being and to break bonds of solidarity. Our practices are the real test of our ethical commitments.[9] Thus, in examining Christian approaches to homelessness, attention to theoretical constructs as well as to actual practices will be important. Christian communities can often, consciously and unconsciously, uplift norms of

human dignity, love, and solidarity, while simultaneously supporting discrimination and oppression.

Examining Power, Privilege, and Social Domination

Even if we are committed to placing socially marginalized lives at the center of our moral deliberation, our efforts can fail if we deny "the significance of how social domination confers entitlement, power, and status and identifies certain people as undeserving of equal treatment."[10] It is too easy for those of us with entitlement, power, and status to fail to see the privileges we have and to assume others have similar choices and agency. We rarely give thought to how we have benefited from historically oppressive policies and practices, nor do we ask many questions about whose interests are being served in current policies and practices. Many theological and philosophical ethicists do not make power analysis central to ethical method. Addressing the "role of racism or the historical biases and exclusions within European cultural systems" is optional in such approaches.[11] For an ethic to be liberating, it must include in-depth analysis of power relationships, both individual and institutional, with attention to historical foundations for current relationships of inequality and oppression.

Our racial, gender, and class identities shape how we are perceived and treated in society, yet many people believe that denying the significance of such identity factors, especially race, brings neutrality and therefore justice. For example, most institutions claim racial neutrality, while simultaneously supporting practices that reinforce white privilege.[12] Institutions also assume that most individuals will behave neutrally and not treat people based on race or class stereotypes. All of us are socialized into ways of thinking about the world that we believe to be neutral but are in fact influenced by dominant social ideologies that privilege white, male, heterosexual, and middle-class perspectives on the world. Thus, analysis of our individual and societal identities and worldviews for their oppressive elements is crucial if we are serious about justice. The mantra of neutrality is a convenient crutch for keeping unjust power relationships in place. Differences matter in a

country and world with vast inequalities. We do not have a level playing field, and until we uplift those who are routinely disadvantaged by "neutral" attitudes and systems, we cannot equate neutrality with justice.

White churches have a history of paternalism founded on race-based understandings. To support liberation, individual Christians and church communities must first be cognizant of the varying degrees of power and privilege that particular individuals or groups of people have in any social situation; and, second, recognize individual and institutional practices of social domination based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In short, we should assume that inequalities of power are central to any issue, and always be ready to identify and resist the many ways that such inequalities are enacted and justified.

Even when we consistently recognize the interrelationship of all types of oppression and make analyses of relationships of domination and subjugation central, race routinely gets ignored or bracketed in ethical analysis. We do this either by ignoring the racial aspects of the story and focusing on the universal aspects, or by seeing the story as only relevant to a particular racial group and not relevant to larger conversations in ethics. For example, in analyzing homelessness, we could argue that class oppression alone is a factor in who is homeless and simply ignore race oppression despite higher percentages of people of color in the ranks of the homeless. Or we could particularize the problem and chalk up the higher percentages to problems primarily within communities of color. Neither option identifies racism in our society as a problem.

One way we act in denial of power inequities is to assume that social problems like violence or homelessness are simply inevitable features of human society. Violence and injustice are not random or inexplicable phenomena. Any social repression can be historically traced, and for such repression to continue, it must be sanctioned and reinforced by humans, both individually and institutionally. For example, criminalizing and/or reforming those who are homeless are not new practices. We allow such practice because we can; people who are homeless have little political power.

Focusing on the moral failings of the victims of any social problem benefits those with power and privilege as it diverts attention from the inequitable institutions that are at the root of the problem. The way we justify repressive social policy that serves to buttress the status quo is to focus on the culture of the poor, that is, to show how poor people do not have middle-class values, and then offer the paternalistic solution of teaching them to be "upright citizens." West's critique of shelters for battered women applies to homeless shelters as well. She argues that they focus on the "problems" of the women they treat (e.g., helping them overcome their "learned helplessness") without challenging forms of racism and economic exploitation in society that support male violence. Similarly, in shelters and programs for the homeless there is little focus on exploitation in society and lots on teaching "life skills" to people with so-called underclass values and practices. Such shelters "pose no real threat to the established arrangements of social power in the community."[13]

A dualistic perspective on power, in which we can clearly identify the "oppressors" and the "oppressed," is not helpful. All individuals occupy multiple roles and have multiple group identities that influence their behavior. While it is clear that more power is given to some social groups over others in our society, our mixed identities make power analysis complicated. The homeless have very little social power in our society, yet even among the homeless, people can inhabit roles of both oppressor and oppressed. For example, homeless women of color report that they often have little in common with white women, being routinely treated more negatively by the police, social workers, and the judicial system.[14] While white women might not always be aware of this differential treatment, they can unconsciously use it to their advantage in ways oppressive to women of color. A binary analysis of power can mask the destructive relationships that exist among racial, gender, or class groups. So while we need to be attentive to where the lion's share of power and privilege lies in society, such analysis does not discount the ways different types of oppression occur even among those who have little power and privilege.

False dichotomies can be misleading. We cannot assume, for example, that the theological stance of an individual or institution gives us

a clear picture of their liberating potential. We should be open to the potential of many different perspectives (even apparently conservative ones) for liberation, and at the same time critically analyze all perspectives (even apparently liberal ones).

Identifying Victimization and Agency

While the homeless and poor have little political power, this does not mean they are simply victims without the ability to affect change (referred to as "agency"). In her work West illustrates the multiple ways that black women are victimized but argues that focusing on victimization does not mean that black women who have suffered abuse have no agency. She refers to survivors of domestic abuse as "victim-survivors," noting that simply "when a woman survives, she accomplishes resistance."[15] In comparison, it will be important to recognize the multiple modes of resistance employed by the homeless without ignoring the realities of trauma and oppression they face.[16]

We must reject approaches that focus only on oppression. Such approaches can be used to support stereotypes and give credence to interpretations that suggest the pathologies of any particular group suffering from homelessness caused the problems; and they can keep us from recognizing and understanding resistance. However, the other extreme of focusing exclusively on the courageous responses people have in light of homelessness can negate the victimization they face.[17] We must take an integrated approach that does not overstate assertions of victimhood or of agency. On the one hand, we must resist labeling as pathological any group that experiences homelessness. On the other hand, analysis of the ways in which homelessness affects the psyches of people victimized is important. Ignoring the depression and self-doubt that homelessness can cause (normal reactions) is not liberating for people. Agency and victimization are not polar opposites. We must learn to recognize both in our analysis of homelessness. Paying attention to the ways that people who are homeless both negotiate their situation and resist it might dispel many of the myths and stereotypes that attribute their plight to laziness or lack of character. Such

analysis might also give insight into the actual oppressive barriers that people face.

While some modes of resistance are healthier than others, we should be open to the possibility that all are "integral to making even the possibility of healing viable."[18] West cautions against identifying some forms of resistance as heroic and others as failures. She illustrates with an example of a girl who became a prostitute at age twelve to get away from an abuser. Rather than stigmatizing her behavior, we should acknowledge both her victimization and the steps she has taken to assert agency. Anger is another form of resistance that gets censured. Having a mind-set that all forms of resistance count can keep us from automatically labeling particular behaviors as pathological or destructive. Unless we can stand in the shoes of someone who is homeless and know the obstacles that person has faced in life, we cannot really know what counts as agency or passive acquiescence. Listening to a person's story and walking with someone in solidarity is the only way to gain insight.

Creating a Social Movement

Justice-making will always be a process, not ever a final achievement where we can rest easy. While we will always need to resist and disrupt forms of social domination, our final goal should be constructive. Thus, there must be a social movement that keeps the momentum of prophetic disruption going, that structurally addresses the root causes of poverty and homelessness and does not settle for short-term efforts at charity that do not address deep-seated domination and oppression. Although a social movement would challenge institutions that support oppression and encourage destructive ideologies, the goal is not to get caught up in ideological debates that entrap participants in conversations that distract from the ultimate goal of justice-making. A social movement should instead create public spaces for everyday people to participate in pluralistic dialogue about social values. A broad array of coalitions should be part of the dialogue and ensuing actions. The goal is not to create more bureaucracies where voices of opposition are

subsumed (as always happens in bureaucracies) but to create a move-
ment of coalitions that nurture prophetic disruption and the creation
of a more just world.

A social movement will only be sustained by connecting politics
and spirituality. Such a connection does not mean a deeper tie between
church and state. Local church communities are important primarily
because they have independence from both corporate and state con-
trol, giving them the ability to play an advocacy role. We can have an
explicitly Christian approach to homelessness and housing and offer a
moral voice in public dialogues, while also finding common values with
non-Christians in constructing ethical responses. Politics occurs "in
the personal interactions between intimates as well as in public arenas
like the mass media or a county domestic court system." Thus, strategic
political connections are made in both the public and private realms of
our lives.[19]

In a pluralistic social movement different forms of spirituality will
develop. These spiritualities will nourish and sustain a social movement,
and provide a deeper moral basis and direction for the movement.
Critical analysis alone will not create a "heightened moral sensibility."
The movement requires "poetic work" that incites "dreams, passions,
images," and contemplation about the dignity and well-being of the
exploited and marginalized. In homeless newspapers and Internet sites
the homeless, through their art and poetry, offer spiritual foundations
for the movement.[20] Claire J. Baker, a homeless poet, shares her poem
"Truce on War" in the San Francisco Bay Area's homeless newspaper
Street Spirit:

> You speak from
> that side of your mouth—
> I from this.
> Maybe someday we'll meet
> in the middle
> and share a kiss.[21]

Churches will ideally offer the critical analysis as well as the poetic
imaging supportive of a movement for social justice.

The primary task of Christian faith communities is "truth work," that is, embodying the ways of Jesus and speaking truth against death-dealing realities. Churches are community organizations that can be involved in societal transformation, both by enacting the process of justice-making in their own communities and by joining the coalition of organizations that support a social movement of creating just and compassionate societies. To be involved in truth work today requires a shift in consciousness, moving from a "consumer/client" notion of citizenship that buys into the commodification of everything (including church affiliation) to a more participatory citizenship that embraces communal resistance and solidarity.[22] In other words, we can choose to make a right relationship with God, self, and others central, rather than buying into the image of ourselves as primarily consumers of the latest marketed ideas.

Churches must start with self-critique, eliminating any ideologies and practices that deny the spiritual and physical well-being of particular groups of people. Churches should also create resistance rituals, justice education that begins at a young age, and space for communal and peer sharing of resources to develop church responses to particular social issues. Finally, churches should participate in strategic conversations and actions that promote practices and policies for the well-being and dignity of those who are most marginalized and/or exploited, both in their own communities and beyond.[23]

Liberating responses will have to confront inequality and poverty, not simply by taking an oppositional stance to dominant culture, but through strategic resistance. No one-shot response will suffice. Only a social movement in solidarity with those who experience poverty will do. Such a movement will not simply address housing policy but will prophetically address all social and economic policies that create poverty and vast inequality. An approach of prophetic disruption is less about reaching some ultimate finite goal than about participating in the hopeful process of becoming a more just and compassionate society. Such a process will always be a "perpetually unfinished task." Therefore, courage, vigilance, and deep spiritual resources will be necessary to uphold such an approach.[24]

Discussion Questions

1. What is your experience with homelessness and/or people who have been homeless? Are you familiar with responses that "blame the victim" or that offer "patronizing compassion"? How might a liberationist approach both disrupt poverty and oppression as well as create communities that foster physical and spiritual wholeness?

2. What would it mean to place subjugated lives and voices at the moral center when it comes to homelessness? How do we step out of our own worldview and truly hear perspectives different from our own? By what criteria do we assess different perspectives?

3. What would it mean to make power analysis central to the issue of homelessness and housing? How are power, privilege, and social domination connected to homelessness, and where do we see intersecting oppressions (e.g., race, gender, class) at work?

4. What is the importance of recognizing both victimization and individual agency in understanding homelessness? How do we avoid emphasizing one at the expense of the other?

5. What forms of Christian spirituality or "poetic work" can we draw on to nourish and sustain a social movement of justice-making? How do we encourage our faith communities to do "truth work," that is, confront inequality and poverty and support the dignity and well-being of all in God's creation?