



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Is There Room in the Inn?”
a sermon given by Dawn Fortune
on December 11, 2011

They arrived at the drop-in center downstairs after a week on the road. I'm not sure when they last showered. Apparently not all shelters and hostels have safe or functioning showers between Texas and here. They both hear voices. Maria says several members of her family hear voices. She says they are the voices of angels sometimes, and sometimes God. A doctor once gave her some medicine, but she can't afford the prescription and doesn't like the way it makes her feel, so she stopped taking it. Besides, she doesn't mind the voices. They tell her she's special. Jose refused to talk to us about his auditory hallucinations.

This couple triggered a lot of judgments that come naturally for many of us. She's young – 16 or 17, and he's my age – mid 40s. She's pregnant, he's not the dad, but they're devoted to each other and determined to stay together. They've been on the road for a week, taking Greyhound bus trips by day and sleeping in hostels and shelters each night, traveling from east Texas, where Jose has work in construction. He's from this area, originally, and through some kind of nightmare of government bureaucracy, he was required to show up in person to pay some kind of fee and retrieve his identity paperwork. He's a citizen, but there was some kind of screw-up with his license after his wallet got stolen, so he had to come back in person to handle it. Maria can't sleep on the moving bus, so they've had to ride during the day and find a shelter at night. Her feet and ankles are swollen from the pregnancy, which appears close to the end of its duration, and from the long hours sitting in a cramped bus seat. They've been staying with friends in Texas, saving for their own place, so when Jose had to come east to handle things, Maria did not feel comfortable staying in Texas without him.

We took their information, such as it was, and tried to get them hooked up with services while they're here. Jose knows the area a little, but moved when he was pretty young and no longer has contacts that could help them find a place to stay. They don't have money to afford a hotel room for the night. Not if they want to be able to get back home to Texas when Jose's business is concluded.

The area shelters are all full, particularly at this time of year. We called all over, trying to find a place for them, but nothing panned out. Some shelters wouldn't accept Maria because she is not yet 18, even though she is emancipated from her parents. The other shelters did not have any beds. A shelter for women who have been abused had a bed, but Maria didn't qualify, was too young, and that would have left Jose out in the cold. We tried everything. Nada. Perhaps on

Monday they might be able to get general assistance at the municipal office to get a cheap motel room, but there's no guarantee, and by then they're due to be headed south again.

I talked to Pat on the phone Friday. Someone in the drop in center let the couple stay in a defunct minivan. It doesn't run, but it doesn't leak either. It's not heated, but they've got some blankets and each other, so they're ok.

Baby Jesus was born last night in the back of the minivan.

OK, so that's not exactly true. In fact, the details of this story have been stitched together from the stories of the dozens of people I have met in the three months I've been working at the drop-in center. There is no Maria and Jose, at least not in the exact way I have described them to you today. But the situation I described is not exceptional. People are transient and/or homeless or nearly so every night, right here, in this city. Their circumstances are rarely dignified, and rarely simple. Life is complicated and messy, and life on the edges of society is all that raised to a debilitating degree.

The story I just told you is thousands of years old. It is my 21st-century adaptation of the story told in the Gospel of Luke of Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a census. Mary is pregnant and they're traveling by donkey, which can't be comfortable in the 39th week of pregnancy. But then again neither is walking, and those were the options, so what should have been a four-day journey lasted them at least a week. They arrived tired and dirty to a town that was already full up. Resources were low and the only place they could find to sleep was in a barn with the cows and donkeys.

If that story were to take place today, the players and circumstances might look a lot like I described them. Would any of us recognize them? And more to the point, would any of us let them sleep in our spare room?

I've been spending one morning a week at the center since I started in September, and I have to tell you, it is both eye-opening and intensely gratifying work. The drop-in center serves anywhere from 40 to 150 people in a day. Some people come for a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal and leave, while others stay from the moment the doors open at 8 a.m. until they close at noon. All manner of people come through that humble space. Gifted artists, construction workers, parents, grandparents, young adults struggling to make a life, all finding themselves somehow in need of a safe place to be in the morning.

Some of the clients have homes but need a place to be. Some have been staying at one of the area shelters for extended periods of time – I can think of one client who has been at the shelter for over three years.

Many are hamstrung by forces beyond their control. Many are struggling with mental illness, others are battling addiction, some are overwhelmed by the all too often deadly combination of both. Some have criminal records that make it difficult to get housing or employment, some have invisible disabilities that go undiagnosed and untreated and that prevent them from getting the

services that would help. Once hooked into the social services network, things can go along relatively smoothly, provided one has some pretty humble expectations around housing, electricity and grocery needs. Addiction and mental illness compound the problems when they affect the behavior and decision-making of clients who are free and independent agents. People refuse assistance sometimes. People accept help, but then reject it later, only to later request it again. There is no point – nor should there be – when a person is simply cut off from assistance programs for such behavior. It just makes it frustrating for the staff who really want to help.

Pat Dennehey is the director of the drop-in center. A formidable woman, she manages minuscule resources and stretches every donation until it squeaks from the stress. She knows every client, their story, their history, their family situation, their drug, their drink, their diagnoses and their chances. She provides advocacy and resource referrals and management. Some clients have asked her to manage their funds, so she is their “payee” and she pays their rent and bills and disburses their money (usually from a disability check) so that they don’t run out before the end of the month. She supervises a small staff of paid workers, volunteers, and two students. She doles out groceries, frozen chickens, tooth brushes and bars of soap. She does what she can to counsel clients to lay off the booze, to put down the crack pipe, to stop buying scratch tickets, and she does so with an amount of grace that leaves none of them humiliated when it’s done. Sometimes she can help people, and sometimes she can’t. And while she’d probably deny it in public, the little victories and moments of tenderness can reduce her to tears. Pat and I get along just fine.

This is the time of year when we talk a lot about sharing what we have, about opening our hearts and our checkbooks to help those less fortunate than ourselves, and I think it is worth asking how open we actually are.

Knowing our boundaries and limitations is valuable. Priorities vary among us. A parent’s first job is to provide for and protect their children. A pastor’s job is to serve and lead their church. Like the flight attendants say, when the cabin pressure drops and the oxygen masks drop out of the ceiling, put yours on your own face before you help your neighbor.

Not everyone has what it takes to bring Jose and Maria into their homes to sleep in the spare room, or even the garage. I get that.

But what might we be doing that we’re not already doing? What could we be giving that might make a difference? Do we give just that portion of our resources that does not really make an impact on our comfort, or do we share things that make us wince just a bit? Do we clean our closets of old clothes we no longer want and donate those, or do we go out and pick up some new things to donate so someone will have a shirt that’s never been worn by anybody else? Giving our trash to someone hardly counts as virtue in my book, save perhaps its relative value as an effort to recycle. But like Hosea Ballou said about intention – if our desires are not pure, our hearts are not pure and we cannot claim virtue from good behavior done for disingenuous or self-serving reasons.

So I challenge us this week to examine our giving habits. Without crossing into the realm of codependent self-abuse, are we giving all that we could? Are we sharing as much of ourselves as we can? Is there room in the inn of our hearts for those less fortunate than us? Can we make welcome those who are difficult to welcome – the unwashed, the mumbling, stumbling masses?

In 1883, New York poet Emma Lazarus composed a sonnet called *The New Colossus*, inspired by America's acceptance of immigrants from around the world. The words will be familiar to some, and new to others.

The New Colossus
Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Those words were inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty when it was dedicated and unveiled in 1886. This is what the world thought of America then – that we were able to welcome the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. We, as Americans, often pride ourselves on our generosity. So now I challenge each of us. In this season of holidays and holy days, let us push ourselves to give as much of ourselves as we can, and to see how it makes us feel, about ourselves and the world around us.

Blessed be and amen.