

Saved by Faith by Julie Lombard 03/30/2014

I am studying to become a minister and this church is one of my many classrooms. You open this pulpit to me so that I can perfect my preaching skills. Every time I leave this pulpit I am a few steps closer to becoming a minister. You do that, you make that happen by your willingness to be my teacher and by sharing your church with me. You are the fertile ground where sapling ministers come to grow into the grand oaks they will someday become.

This city has a long history with their great Worshipping Oak. From the start, it's been a part of what makes this community so special; everyone was welcomed to worship together under that big Oak Tree. As that oak ages and eventually dies, the tradition will continue here in this city because it's part of your DNA to be hospitable.

I am taking a class at my seminary about homelessness and I am volunteering downstairs in our very own Community Action Program's Drop-in Center. The same one that happens in the basement of this church; it's been in operation for 25 years and the same one that reaches out far past the homeless of Haverhill to assist the marginalized and the oppressed. My seminary calls this experience a "border crossing". What they mean is that it's a new experience, an opportunity to get me out of my comfort zone. Hanging out with homeless folks will do that; it expands one's horizon. It's helped me to see things differently.

I wish to say that this was my great idea, the plan to learn about homelessness here at this church, but it was Dawn Fortune's idea. Some of you may remember Dawn; she was a student minister here a couple of years ago. We're seminary friends. She's a good egg, but many of you know that! It was at dinner many moons ago that Dawn shared with me the idea to do my border crossing in Haverhill because this church has a long, rich history of working with the homeless. She was right, you do. I could kiss her for sharing that wisdom because the learning I have had here with the Drop-in Center has truly amazed me.

Much of what I do downstairs while I am volunteering is being a human sponge. I absorb the human suffering and triumphs as they unfold daily. I drop in and hang out with the folks downstairs. Not all the folks are homeless, some have places to live and come for other reasons. Some people come to be with their friends while others are there only on Thursday morning for the best breakfast in town; eggs, bacon, and sausage. If you could only smell how delicious this church is on Thursday mornings as the scent of bacon permeates the building; it's a heaven all its own!

On March 20th, it was the first day of spring and after my husband cleared four inches of snow from our driveway with our snow blower, I was on my way to another Thursday morning at the Drop-in Center. I arrived exhausted from another long week of school and church business, but hanging with folks downstairs is usually not too taxing. These people have become friendly to me, they notice when I'm stiff from sleeping on a couch. They give me smiles and hugs to keep me going. That first spring morning, I found my favorite lover of poetry, the same gentleman who has been gifting this church poetry in the offertory plate. I had heard that he had broken a rib and I was curious to hear how he was. I sat down at his table only to find out that it was his neighbor on Jerocho Road with the same name that broke his rib.

My friend was in good spirits because he was surrounded by his friends; good people. Jericho Road is on the third floor of Mitch's Place, it's a privileged place to live when you are homeless, but you have to earn your place there. My friend doesn't have to sleep in the large bunk room in the shelter anymore. My friend eats his breakfast at the table with a couple who lives in their car and another friend who hasn't made it up to Jericho Road, yet. They are talking about hoarders that morning and they are all commiserating about how homelessness will cure you of that and of being overweight, too. I am there, soaking it all up. Who knew that homeless folks knew so much about what could cure these ailments?

Hoarding was the subject because there was a new person who had arrived at Mitch's Place with one too many bags. When you are homeless, you have to carry your worldly possession with you. So, you don't want to carry anything you don't need, only the bare necessities. The new comer arrived with a couple of bags of toiletries. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be clean, but the shelters will provide shampoo and soap. But the newcomer at Mitch's Place and at the Drop-in Center was just that, she was a new comer. She didn't know how everything worked. She had to get out of her home quickly. She grabbed as much as she could as fast as she could, it was like her house had been on fire and her toiletries were her prized possessions. She didn't have much.

I turned around from where I was sitting with the folks talking about hoarders; I looked a new face in the eyes. They were sad eyes and she was shaking. I told her she looked tired and she barely managed a nod. At that time, I hadn't made the connection that she was the new comer. I hadn't noticed the bags of toiletries surrounding her feet. She was not only a new face in the Drop-in Center, she was newly homeless.

It's my habit to float from table to table, sitting with whomever will have me. I pretty much have the run of the place; nobody has ever turned me away from sitting with them. Later that morning I sat with the woman with the toiletries. I wanted to hear more of her story, but it takes time to warm up to folks. I had tried to engage her in some conversation earlier, but she was shy and downtrodden "You haven't eaten any of your eggs," I said to her, and she told me that she liked to eat eggs with toast. Someone was getting her toast. Later, I saw her with a younger man who had indeed gotten her some toast and I thanked him for his generosity. "Of course." he said.

Eventually I asked if I could join her at her table, by this time she was sitting with another woman. I could tell that the woman with the toiletries was beginning to be ready to tell me her story, she clearly felt better because her friend was with her.

The woman with the toiletries stared me in the eye and told me that Faith had saved her. I responded, "Say that again?" "Faith saved me." She pointed to her friend. Her friend said, "Actually, my middle name is Faith." And then Faith told me the story of how she was on the train platform the day before sending her ex-boyfriend back to Revere when she walked by the woman with the toiletries who looked in tough shape. "I asked her if she was OK and my ex told me to mind my own business. Getting him on the train was the best thing I did all day." Faith continued to tell me that she returned to the woman who looked like she was having a hard time. "Are you alright?" Faith asked the woman again. This time her story flowed out like a flood, the woman was not alright. Her landlord had kicked her out and she

didn't know what to do. Faith called a cab and took the woman to Emmaus House. Faith had saved her. Faith took the woman with the toiletries to the shelter to spend the night and then she promised she would meet her at the Drop-in Center the next day to see how she was holding up. I was witnessing their reunion, they were fast friends only meeting the day before out of desperation. Faith showed the new comer how to survive being homeless in Haverhill. This rendezvous was her way of checking up on the total stranger she helped from the day before.

My friends, what would you do if you became homeless tomorrow? What would you grab? The woman with too many bags of toiletries wasn't planning on becoming homeless, it just happened. It just happened, but so did the grace of a total stranger to assist the new comer in getting the help she needed. Faith saved her and then returned to make sure she was OK. Does your faith do that for you? Have you ever been someone's guardian angel? When was the last time you helped a total stranger or a total stranger helped you?

Spiritual Siblings, every time someone walks into the Drop-in Center you help a stranger. This is an important and meaningful ministry: sharing your church as a sanctuary for all souls as a safe haven for the folks in need of companionship, of support, of food, of the help to survive their journey through homelessness. This is a teaching parish, a true example to the rest of the community; you are the fertile ground where sapling ministers come to grow into the oaks they will someday become. You offer security for the lost souls of the world. Each day that your basement doors warmly welcome folks with a hot cup of coffee, you make a difference in this community. This action turns this old church into a metaphorical worshipping oak where all are welcome to come together. Please continue to keep these souls close to your hearts. Let this always be a welcoming, caring faith community where Faith saves a lost soul.

May it be so. Amen.