

**NCC Seminarian Ann Aaberg presented this sermon on Sunday, 3 October 2004 in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. It is based on Lamentations 3:19–26.**

# Body Language

SHE SAID TO ME, This is my twenty-third year of being homeless...and my eyes widened.

She said to me, My throat hurts and I feel sick and I have nowhere to lie down...and my mouth went dry.

She said to me, I'm struggling with addiction...and my arms opened.

She said to me, I will never give up my childhood – that's why I carry my stuffed duck around the Common and cuddle it – I don't care who sees me. And my heart ached.

She said to me, You're just practicing on the poor...and my chest tightened.

She said to me, I'm going to visit my mother in Worcester and I haven't seen her since.

She said to me, Where can I buy the cheap imitations of the sandals you're wearing...and my cheeks reddened.

She said to me, Why can't they do anything about these poor people...and my shoulders fell.

She said to me, Please remember me in your prayers this week...and my feet left the ground.

As you can see, my visits to the Women's Lunch Place, a day shelter in Boston for poor and homeless women, have had varying effects on my body. When I leave the sunshine and descend the stairs to the church basement, my eyes have to refocus. The smells that hit my nose as I enter the dining room sometimes make me salivate, but some of the words I've heard there have made my stomach jump.

My hands have been surprised at the softness of the ones I've held. And always the headache, the pounding, escalating as the noise level does and never really subsiding until long after I've left, when I nurse my own feelings of helplessness and – admittedly, at times – my guilt.

Remember the War on Poverty? For those of you who may not, it was an initiative of the Johnson administration in 1964, a result of many realizing that the postwar economic boom of the Fifties had left far too many Americans far behind. That realization in part was informed by a writer named Michael Harrington who wrote a book entitled The Other America that raised awareness about the invisibility of poverty.

For example, he explained that newly constructed highways go around or over or under poor city neighborhoods – those of us on the highways hardly get a glimpse; he reminded us that the media – TV, magazines, billboards – proffer mostly images of affluent people; and even those areas that have been rebuilt tend to displace the poor to – we see the newly renovated building – but we don't see the poor anymore.

Now, forty years later, the bodies of those who have enough or more than enough still seldom encounter the bodies of those who don't unless we make an intentional effort. The homeless shelters empty out their guests on the streets as early as 6:30 in the morning – hours before we arrive for work. And if those same guests want a bed again that night they need to be in line, inside and accounted for in many cases by as early as the late afternoon, well before we're back on the streets heading home. The Women's Lunch Place, which offers a place of respite during the day with breakfast and lunch, is located down in a church basement – out of sight of the neighborhood it inhabits – the corner of Newbury and Berkeley Streets – in the midst of the finest shops in the world.

Among the folks strolling by the shop windows we may notice a person every now and then pulling a cart behind her overflowing with stuffed green garbage bags. But unless we follow her down those stairs, we won't see the additional hundreds of women with similar trappings all together in one room being served on any given day.

As Christians we are taught that although we all have separate bodies we are united as one in the body of Christ. I came across a reference to the body of Christ recently as it regards our responsibility to help those who suffer and the author said if your finger was hurt and it was bleeding, would your brain have to stop and decide whether you had enough time or the resources to bandage your finger? No, it would be an automatic response – finger hurt, get the bandage.

Friends, we are wounded and bleeding. We can see it on the front pages of the newspaper, and on the TV news and it appears as if it is other bodies that are wounded and bleeding from poverty, from racism, from abuse, from war. But as one in the body of Christ, we are the wounded ones. If we choose to term our actions as a "war on poverty," we need only recall the words of that famous cartoon philosopher Pogo, who said: "We have seen the enemy and the enemy is us." Perhaps we could view it as our own internal bleeding, the kind that does not show itself

very readily but yet we continue to weaken. We have to look for it not only externally, but internally as well, in order to heal it.

Yet, even in the raw gaping holes of humanity, we see signs indicating recovery all the time.

Every time we make a trip to Father Bill's Place to serve a meal, when we contribute to our Tree of Joy at Christmas time, when our youth go to Workcamp, when we volunteer our hammers and paintbrushes for Habitat for Humanity – all these are warm healing compresses on our cuts and bruises. And still we can do more: we can give gifts when it isn't even Christmas time; we can speak for those who cannot speak for themselves at the State House and in Washington; we can buy the Spare Change newspaper when it's offered to us on the street by a member of its homeless sales force. And we can look our sisters and brothers on the street directly in the eye and, whether or not we put something in their cups, we can say "Good morning." We can say, "I'll keep you in my prayers." And then we can do exactly that: we can pray.

Our scripture reading was from Lamentations this morning, a book said to be filled with more cries of displacement and suffering than any other book in the Bible and yet we heard: "BUT, this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning."

Jesus told us to love one another – told us we were commanded to love one another – and he showed us how, by healing lepers, by dining with tax collectors, by lifting up the downtrodden, to ultimately embodying the suffering of the entire world. This morning at the Communion table, as we remember again his body broken for us, let us renew our commitment to our suffering sisters and brothers that they may know God's healing love and with it the hope for a mended world.

Amen.