

Sermon for Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, San Jose
San Francisco Night Ministry, Associate Night Minister
Rev. Dr. Richard H. Park, July 29, 2007
<http://video.google.com/> and type the sermon title

“The Bridge between the Divine and Humanity!”

Isaiah 53: 1-7/ Psalm 23
Matthew 25: 31-40

Thank you for inviting me to share some stories of SF night ministry with you, especially pastor Bea, Randy and all congregations.

Let us pray!

Gracious God, full of mercy and full of love, tonight we come to you by serving people both through phone calls and in person. Empower us with wisdom of speech and warmth of love. Encounter us by opening our eyes and ears to see Christ through those we serve tonight. In Jesus' name, we pray!
Amen!

“I have no money! I have no career! I have no partner! I have no home!
I was smart and successful then, but now I am fat, ugly, deaf,
can't see. And I am tired!”

“I don't love myself! I hate me! I am a loser! I am a Fuck up!”

“I don't know how the guy who jumped was at the lowest of the low
in his life.”

“She was just at the end of her rope!”

“He ended up as homeless at the street of San Francisco
before he jumped from the bridge!”

After all these last words they jumped from the bridge.

This is from the movie, “The bridge!” featuring Gold Gate Bridge.

As a night minister I met Thomas one night who came from Wisconsin near Greyhound bus station. He was dancing and singing but his dance was more trembling in the cold night and his song like a desperate outcry.

Thomas said he just came out of Wisconsin prison but no one was willing to accept and welcome him. His father, his sister, his ex-wife and his grown up children didn't care for him and provide no shelter. He said to me, "I didn't want to be homeless at my hometown." He said he was a born-again Christian.

He told me that he eats out of garbage cans near the Business district everyday around 1 pm, when many business men throw away their lunch boxes. He tried suicide several times by means of gas, pill overdose, and jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. He was hungry and cold. I told him to wait for me and I returned to the office at St. Mark's to bring him clothing and sleeping bag. On the way back I stopped by at pizzeria and bought one piece of pizza and some hot coffee. Thomas was so happy that he asked far more, telling me that he had lice all over his body from using a blanket from the street. He only asked for money though I suggested him to buy medicine. We are not supposed to give money to the homeless and this is where night ministers should be always careful and draw a borderline.

One busy Saturday night, I met Jason who is 39 years old at the Tenderloin. He grew up in a Lutheran church as an illegitimate child. His mother was conceived him when she was 16. Jason told me that he was diagnosed with AIDS by the use of Drug when he was a teen. He became a hustler for 6 years started at the age of 13 in San Francisco. He worked as a social worker for youths, who also had AIDS but now side effect of AIDS medicine generated a serious illness and hinders him from working. He was so grateful that I listened to his story while giving him warmth of love and respect. Mother Teresa once asked, "Do we look at the poor with compassion? They are hungry not only for food; they are hungry to be recognized as human beings."

Another night I was walking outside the bus depot area. I met Matthew, who was writing something under the street light as I passed by. I asked him, what are you writing? Matthew said he is writing science fiction. He already published short stories on the internet. One can buy or download his short stories from LuLu.com/mattstohler, titled "Stohler Worlds. He even showed me some poems he wrote.

"There were Dragons"

by Matthew "Dragon" Stohler

Can you tell me where the dragons are?
Who once flew the skies so free?
Over mountain and sea, forest and plain,
Of such have I witnessed in my dreams.

.....

But what is next if we lose what's left?
How to make up for that lost time?
And the question I must ask.
Where have all the dragons gone?

Matthew was a computer guy from Seattle but was fired and he was without a job for several months and became homeless for 4 years in San Francisco. He started to write fiction during the day in the library using the computer and night time on the street with the street light. He showed me his big notebook he is writing. He said success or money is not his aim. He writes every day and it is also his meditation. I felt shameful because I am also writer but sometimes am too lazy. I often complain and rationalize of laziness to write.

Isaiah 53 says, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." We should pay attention to this mystical identification of the Messiah and suffering humanity. By his being suffered he identifies himself with us. Messiah is with humanity who suffers, who have sorrows.

On the other hand, Gospel Matthew writes, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

If Messiah was identified with us who suffer, then, Christ is found in those who suffer. This is so in two ways. Messiah identifies with humanity who suffers, yet those who suffer are conversely Christ. I believe this is one of the most quintessential mysteries in the Scripture!

How does the divine become the humanity who suffers? How does the suffering become the divine? Christ identifies himself with those who are hungry, who are thirsty, strange, cold, sick and in prison. Salvation comes not from knowledge of faith but it comes from action: Give, Invite, Look after and Visit! In this, we can play the role of God and Christ, or we can experience God and Christ!

Also righteousness does not come from religious practice but it comes from daring to reach out to the suffering! Episcopal priest Myers who had worked for youth gangs in New York City once declared “The Church, therefore, must march out of the oasis into the enemy territory by irrigating the dry land.” What is true spirituality where we can meet God? From this mystical identification of the divine and humanity who suffer, we find the way to meet God.

Night Ministers work with crisis line counselors in the office who picks up phone calls for counseling and referral. One night I received a phone call from an old lady who live in Peninsula. She said that she is a retired amateur writer. She started complaining of her lack of money after paying for her nice apartment. She said she only has several hundred dollars to live on. I told her the story of Matthew who writes on the streets. Right away she was overwhelmed by the story and told me that she is complaining too much!

Polk street in San Francisco is very famous for its sex industry especially prostitution. One night I went to a bar there. Night ministers go bars to counsel people as well. While sitting there an old man who has long hair approached me and said, “Priest! Are you free tonight to come over to my house?” He came and sat next me, and said that he is lonely. I laughed and talked with him and said I am working on night ministry.”

There is one donut shop at Polk street. The owner is a Japanese woman who married Korean man. Her mother-in-law was famous as a philanthropologist before she died. She gave food to the needy and offered night ministers free shelter and free coffee in the wet night. She is known as the street saint. They are following their mother-in-law’s footsteps.

There are more street saints I can add. They are not priest or minister. They are normal people but they simply follow Jesus; they simply give, invite, look after and visit those in need and in crisis. Whenever I see them I think there is no big gap between the saints and the secular.

San Francisco Night Ministry follows this discipleship on behalf of God, and Christ, and the Church since 1964 when two ministers discovered there was no ministry after dark--to lighten the darkness and rekindle the hope!

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me!

The Lord replied: "My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Amen!