

Spring 2007 Clergy/ Religious Leaders Breakfast
Sponsored by Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs,
www.interfaithhousingcenter.org

May 15, 2007, at Trinity United Methodist Church, Wilmette, IL

Reflection Offered by Rev. Robert Oldershaw:
“No Place Like Home (in the Gazebo)”

I have a good friend named Jim. His home was the gazebo at the foot of Deming Place in Lincoln Park. He dwells now, I'm, sure, in the far reaches of God. Much-improved accommodations! I met Jim in 1985 when I opened the door of St Clement Church on a Sunday morning. There he was clothed in rags with his life's possessions over his shoulder and in a grocery basket. I didn't want him that stuff into the church, at first I wouldn't let him. Almost closed the door on him. When the Spirit of God finally got it into my head and heart (thru the memory of the Canaanite woman's savvy response to Jesus "Even the dogs..." that this was a brother, a fellow member of the human family, created in God's likeness just as I, I not only let in, but gushed a little generosity for this poor man. Would you like a cup of coffee, I asked. "No thanks, Father, I just want to pray. And pray he did, becoming a permanent fixture in the last pew, as he hauled all his stuff laboriously from the gazebo to church for morning mass. Jim was featured in the Wall Street Journal as a symbol of homelessness---this was after he had been evicted from the gazebo and burnt off the bench at Deming and Clark.

I recall one of my early morning jogs when I passed Jim hauling his stuff to the church. I thought how much easier it would be if he would let go of some of that stuff...not realizing, of course, that it was his life. Jim was for me and for many a contemporary parable, a mirror of myself, with all my stuff, too burdened and blinded to see and hear what Jim was telling me. He troubled me. Made me think. He made me wonder. He turned me upside down and inside

out and made me look at the world differently...This Ragman of Lincoln Park became for me an icon. Was he Moses leading the people where they didn't necessarily want to go? Was he Jesus crossing boundaries, hanging out with all sorts of people? Was he a prophet like Muhammad? He could have been Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi--All I know is that he upset me, challenged me, stretched me, made me see my nearsightedness, and narrow world of security and comfort where I take refuge. He made me realize that 'mi casa was not 'su casa', my sense of hospitality was not as genuine as I thought it was.

I thought of Jim when I was trying to gather some thoughts for this morning. What do I say when I'm speaking, as it were to "the choir", religious professionals, steeped in theology and morality?

I thought first: We all need Jims in our lives, especially those of us who are religious professionals. We need people to trouble us, to make us wonder, to make us think, to make us refresh our vision of the world around us--the people of our communities, struggling for a living and a place in which to live. Yeah, we all need Jims.

Then the thought struck me. We need more than prophetic people to prod us. We need to be parables, like the ragman. Disturbing, troubling some, comforting, consoling others. But making people think and wonder, helping them to see the world--that it is upside down and challenging them to put it right side up.

Parables are open-ended. They don't answer as much as they question. Maybe that's what we should be doing. Calling the question for our folks who live very comfortably and securely.

They and we need to be troubled by those who don't. Like Kenya Cooper who works in Morton Grove but lives on the south side of Chicago and leaves home every morning for a two and a half hour commute, or Carmen Smith who travels for almost

two hours on 3 busses, 2 trains and still another bus....these two representing thousands who work at restaurants, shopping centers and malls here in our suburban communities where 2/3 of the jobs in metropolitan are.

It's our responsibility to make our congregants wonder and worry about Carmen Smith who on \$25,000 annual at \$9 can't afford to pay the \$1200 rent in the community where she works (being one of 400,000 workers who can't afford to pay more than \$750 month rent and so this single mom spends 4 hours a day commuting and works 8 hours for \$9 hour....It's for us to get our folks into their shoes so they truly worry about questions like: when does she sleep, cook meals, spend time with her kids doing homework...Worrying isn't enough. They need to do something. As you'll hear Lali say: "Do it! Don't just talk about it."

We need to trouble and disturb our congregations about municipal workers like firefighters, police, and teachers who can't afford to live in the communities in which they work. As a chaplain at the EPD I know our Evanston police can't afford to live in Evanston.

And then there are the seniors. There's very little multifamily housing up this way. You know the long waiting lists for senior retirement facilities--some ten years or longer.

It's our job to call the question.

It's a matter of strict justice. We know that.

All our religious traditions call us to this. Not an invitation but a command.

Whether Isaiah 58: Loose the bonds of injustice,

Undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.

Share your bread \with the hungry,

And bring the homeless poor into your house"

Or the judgment of the nations in Matthew: I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

How do we do it?

We do something. 11 years ago a teen in my parish murdered another young man, not of the parish but of the community. I didn't know what to do but I knew I had to do something....I put one foot in front of the other.....an amazing story of reconciliation and restorative justice still unfolds today. “If you don't try to do something, you're guaranteed to fail.”

We preach the just word. We screw up our courage, overcome our timidity to overcome peoples' apathy. As truth-tellers, we say what must be said (even if it alienates some)... not about red-lining and block busting that is history, but about institutional racism that is still alive and well in our communities. (It has been said, I think by me, that Evanstonians are limousine liberals practicing drive-by diversity!) We welcome the stranger, black white, Anglo Hispanic, immigrants -legal or undocumented. We insist that our communities open their doors wide!

We empower. WE need to multiply ourselves; entrust and trust those within our communities to be heralds of justice, advocates for affordable housing
We don't go to city council meetings. We get ten people to show up there. We inspire them to get involved in local government.

We collaborate. That's why we're here today. To geometrically increase the capital of our time and power. And we are powerful.

We know that but sometimes it takes a politician like Senator John Danforth in town last week to remind us religious folks that we have entrée into the minds and hearts of our people.

We Pray. This is an enormous problem. We need to engage the struggle in the mystery of prayer, to bring God's wise, healing order into the world now. To live consciously out of tune with the world as it presently is and in tune with the way God intends it to be.

In a word, we need Jim. **We need to be Jim.** To be like the parables we preach. To make people think, and wonder, and be deeply troubled by the upside down world and be driven to DO SOMETHING to right it.

In his inaugural address as president of South Africa in 1994 Nelson Mandela said:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves: Who am I? I'm just.....

You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.”

We are children of God. We are the shaman...the keepers of the flame. Let's light the fire!