

Jedediah Mannis  
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King's Chapel, Boston, MA

SERMON 130  
John 20:19-31

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing. Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

I am a minister of the Outdoor Church of Cambridge. Many of you are already familiar with the Outdoor Church. King's Chapel and its members have provided us with encouragement and financial support - not to mention toiletry kits and faithful attendance at our Sunday morning prayer service - almost from the very beginning of our ministry.

The Outdoor Church is a church for homeless men and women. We're out there in all seasons and in all weather. We reach out to men and women who, because of shame or embarrassment, hostility or illness, cannot or will not enter conventional churches. We take the church outdoors to those who cannot or will not reach it on their own.

Our ministry has expanded since I was last here.

We still have a prayer service every Sunday morning in Porter Square, right under the mobile steel sculpture at the intersection of Mass Avenue and Somerville Avenue. After the prayer service, we share sandwiches, juice, coffee and doughnuts, and give out socks and toiletries. And we still have a prayer service on the Cambridge Common later in the day. After we have shared a meal there, we take our sandwiches and socks and toiletries around Harvard Square and Central Square. And we now have a Compline service every Thursday night at the wet shelter at 240 Albany Street on the MIT campus.

We've expanded the range of our pastoral services. Now, we go up to the rotary near the Alewife T station on Friday morning, and visit with the people who panhandle

there. We now have teams of volunteers – most of them members of our supporting churches and students at the Harvard Divinity School - who take sandwiches and socks out on Saturday afternoons, following the same routes that we follow on Sunday afternoon. Altogether, we hand out about 250 sandwiches every weekend and more than 5,000 pairs of socks each year.

And, every Tuesday night, we walk through Harvard Square and Central Square, with no interns, no volunteers and no sandwiches. Our ministers want to talk to our people at night without having to monitor the distribution of food or the behavior of our volunteers – much as things were when we first started out. We're ministers, not vending machines, and sometimes the sandwiches get in the way.

This is the only time when we're out at night. It's even more different than we expected it would be. Anyone who is going inside has long ago found their way indoors, leaving behind people who will be sleeping rough that night. Drug dealers and prostitutes are more visible. People are less aware of our presence, less concerned about how they look to us. The desperation, self-medicating and violence that our congregants successfully hide from us on Sunday mornings spill out on Tuesday night, especially in Central Square. Same people, different city.

We still do a lot of pastoral visiting at jails, hospitals, prisons, shelters and locked wards. We have done no marriages. We *have* done five baptisms and more memorial services than I care to count. Most ministers see the entire arc of their congregants' lives, from birth to death – we see only the last five years. Our people are dying in slow motion while we minister to them. The memorial services, which we do in the chapel at Christ

Church Cambridge and at the wet shelter at 240 Albany Street on the MIT campus, are our attempt to make some sense of lives that have disintegrated before our very eyes.

We've also tried to *diversify* our pastoral services, and tailor them to the specific circumstances of our congregants. We're about to start a memorial quilt, very much like the quilts that - more than two centuries ago - New England churches made for their departing ministers. The quilt will hang at 240 Albany Street, behind heavy protective plastic and across from a bank of vending machines. Each square will represent someone who has died on the street. The quilt will be designed by a team of experienced quilters from churches near Laconia, New Hampshire, but the guests at 240 Albany will make the individual squares, assemble them and sew them into a quilt - a continuing, visible and personal symbol of our congregants' lives and deaths.

We now encounter one hundred and twenty or so homeless people every week - pretty much most of the chronically homeless men and women in Cambridge. These are the people we want to serve. There are new faces every year. Recently, most of the new faces belong to young people. Some have aged out of the foster care system; some are fleeing parents who have become more abusive as the economy continues to lag; and some - mainly gay and lesbian kids - are running away to the only place where they think they'll be accepted. That place - the street - is full of violence, drugs and prostitution. The kids think they have all the time in the world to work it out, and no adult can tell them otherwise - but, if they stay on the street past October, they may be trapped there for a long, long while.

Are we making any difference at all in the lives of the people we want to serve?

Nowadays, many of the people who want to end homelessness use metrics to make and evaluate funding decisions: how many homeless people have we fed? How many meals have we distributed? How many people received medical or legal assistance? How many hand warmers, socks, hats and gloves have we handed out? And, especially, people want to know how we are ending homelessness. A whole movement – Housing First – rests on the premise that meeting the need for shelter first is the best way to deal with every other problem that besets the homeless – drug abuse, mental illness, unemployment and the like – and the best way to keep them off the street and out of emergency rooms and prisons, as well. That may be true for the homeless people we *don't* serve: people who have just lost a job, or can't pay their medical bills, or who are escaping from an abusive domestic partner. But most of the people we *do* serve can't manage housing any better than any other kind of material assistance: many either return to the street because they're lonely, or invite their friends to share their new apartment and get evicted for violating their lease.

Even if a substantial number of our people *could* manage social services, we're not the most effective way to make them available. Cambridge is full of experienced, well-trained and deeply committed social service providers, offering every conceivable kind of assistance. With our lack of experience and training, we wouldn't add much to the mix.

What we do is more analogous to hospice care than to the delivery of social services. We appear in people's lives at the very end, when people are dying in slow motion and social services don't seem to make a difference one way or the other. Like

hospice care, we offer an alternative – spiritual care framed by our people’s circumstances, and not by metrics that measure the service itself. Like so much of the care offered by the many individuals and groups that seek to help the homeless, such material help as we do provide is essentially palliative. The fact is, we’re not ending homelessness.

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Like Thomas, we are troubled by doubts. Our people tell us over and over again how much they value the sandwiches and every thing else we give to them but, like teachers, social workers and other ministers, we can’t easily see what is happening in front of us.

*They don’t seem to have any doubts: people on the street trust us (within reason), depend on the sandwiches, juice and snacks that are the only two meals served outdoors in Cambridge over the weekend, and see the Outdoor Church as their own, a place where they are free, for an hour, of the violence, pain and chaos that govern the rest of their week. Why do we doubt, when our congregants do not? Why do we resist their testimonies? Like Thomas, we doubt *even though what we doubt has already happened*. We doubt *despite the evidence of our own ears and eyes*.*

Pride is the issue. It’s easy to think that, because we’ve moved the church outside, we’re responsible for what happens spiritually when a homeless man or woman joins our church.

But we are not.

It’s because of pride that we’re prone to think so. We see ourselves in the lead role of the drama we imagine our lives to be. We get in our own way.

We need to remember that it is God, and not ourselves, who offers the spiritual succor that our people need. We are a mere shadow of God's love for the people we see every week; we point the way through the church toward God for those of our people who, once buttressed by spiritual resources, will find their way to the spiritual gifts of calm, peace and love. Perhaps we should worry less at the end of a long Sunday on the street about whether we have handed out enough toiletries and socks, and worry more about whether – by taking the church outdoors – we have encouraged our people to encounter something greater and other than themselves.

If we are, as we believe, called to this ministry, then – however much we may doubt how well we've responded to that call – we should have no doubt about God's delight in helping those who come to him for help. We can take at face value our congregants' love for their church and their confidence in us to sustain it for them because we are acknowledging the results of God's work, not our own. As we point the way to the church, our congregants point the way to God. Just as he promised, he is where they are. Like Thomas, that's something we cannot doubt.