

Loving the Forgotten

June 11, 2023

Rev. Charlotte Cramer

Readings

Amos 5:10-15

They hate the one who reproveth in the gate [where courts are],
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.



Christ Preaching (detail)
Rembrandt

Eagle Poem

Joy Harjo

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.

We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

Good morning, dear friends. My name is Reverend Charlotte Cramer; I am an Interfaith chaplain and minister. I currently serve the unhoused and incarcerated population of Marin County as a spiritual care provider for The Street Chaplaincy, an organization dedicated to interfaith spiritual care. You may not know what any of that means—many do not. My hope today is to talk to you about the work I do, and perhaps deepen an understanding of what it is and why it is so vitally important. Before I go any further, I want to let you know that the subject I will be speaking on today is intense, upsetting, infuriating, and heart-breaking. I invite all of us, myself included, to breathe with whatever discomfort we may be feeling over the course of this conversation. Breathe into the pain, the guilt, the anger. Please, don't push it away. I'm saying this to myself, too. It is easy for us to want to make these hard feelings disappear. But they are, in this particular case, our friends. You may see me putting my hand on my heart throughout this talk. I invite you to do the same. Remember to breathe. Notice when your shoulders tense up. Say, "I love you." Pray to whatever holy spirit you believe in to be with you. This is how we soothe ourselves. I believe that this subject, one that focuses on the most intense suffering that exists in the United States today, is one that we must be wholly present for. I hope you will do that with me, because we are stronger when we hold this together.

I am called a street chaplain. Most people, when they hear the word chaplain, think of a Christian religious leader who is present in institutions like hospitals, prisons, and the military. That is changing rapidly, as chaplains, of all faiths, are spreading to places like hospice, the corporate world, colleges and schools, and the streets. Our world, thank the Holy, is slowly beginning to understand that spiritual care is a fundamental human right in the many institutions of modern culture.

Street chaplaincy, or street ministry as it is often called, is a young profession. There is no historical pointer to the first street chaplain, nor is there a specific timeline of the work's evolution. In the Bay Area however, we have a clearer idea—which is special in itself. The first known street ministry started in 1964 when Rev. Don Stuart and Rev. Chuck Lewis began to walk the streets of San Francisco, providing spiritual care for the homeless and therein starting the San Francisco Night Ministry, an organization that still exists to this day. Since then, the Bay Area has held a few more street ministry organizations: Raising Sparks and Faithful Fools in San Francisco, and The Street Chaplaincy here in Marin.

There is little history, and less understanding, around what a street chaplain is. In many ways, I am forging my own path and discovering what this work means and why it is significant. What I have found along the way has illuminated my passion for the necessity of spiritual care, which is what I want to share with you today. You may be wondering *what does a street chaplain do?* Well, I walk around on the streets of San Rafael, and I talk to people. I go into the jail, and I talk to people. I sit in courtrooms and watch. I bear witness. I bear witness to the fury, the pain, the fear and helplessness. I witness hope. The joy. The love. I cry for situations and people and experiences that no one else will cry for. I build relationships with people, and we laugh together, making ridiculous jokes. I drum with people, I dance with people. I sing with people, I pray. Oh, I pray. We pray.

I don't have any pathways to housing. I don't have money. I don't have much power in the twisted, complicated housing and care system. I only have myself. And cookies, sometimes. And herein lies the problem. Donors and grant makers and anyone listening to me describe my job often don't understand why what I do is so important, why what I do is a fundamental human right. I just talk to people. Just talk to people.

Have you ever had a bad day? Like a really, really bad day? And you didn't think you could hold it on your own, and then your partner, or loved one, or friend, gave you a hug and told you everything was going to be okay? That they loved you? Have you ever been in the hospital, and scared, and had your community members bring your family food and leave you cards and flowers? Have you ever had someone you love die in your life, and there was a community of people right there behind you to catch you in your grief? What did that feel like? To have someone there, to have love there, in times of pain and suffering? If you have had these experiences, you will know that I am not *just* talking to people. I am showing them love: the kind of love that humans depend on, the kind of love that keeps us alive, and well, and whole, the kind of love that is supposed to be a human right. And yet, the people I love every day are humans whom our society has deemed different and other. Why? Perhaps we are afraid of what we cannot control or quantify. Perhaps we fear what we cannot understand, afraid of something so unique that our cultural notion of what it means to be a human being gets challenged. Or perhaps we are afraid of looking suffering dead in the eyes, as if it is contagious. We have always been afraid of that which is "different," and we have always been afraid of pain. And yet we are all different, and we will all experience pain.

I have a client who is living entirely in a reality created by his own imagination, so much so that our conversations have nothing to do with what is happening in the here and now. I have a client who is so depressed, sick, and old that he cannot leave his tent, despite incontinence and hunger. I have a client who is bound by the chains of decades of addiction, unable to escape the merry-go-round of streets, drugs, jail, streets, drugs, jail.

I see schizophrenia and its many, many faces every day. I talk to people who are so mentally ill that there aren't enough scientific words and diagnoses to describe the severity of their condition. I walk beside addiction and its harrowing, consuming power, and despite all the fear I feel, the discomfort and the confusion, I have learned to love all of this. I give love to schizophrenia and the myriad of mental illnesses that can plague a human brain. I give love to the addiction. I give love to the trauma. And I give love to the beautiful, whole and true human being who is experiencing these things, and who is beyond these things in his or her vastness and wisdom.

One of the reasons I so passionately believe in the work I do is that human beings are meant to be seen as their best, most beautiful selves. Yes, we all have to face our faults and weaknesses in our life. But when we exist solely in that world of perpetual wrongness, where who we are is not good enough, or needs to be improved, or needs to change, then something happens to us: disempowerment, sadness, giving up. Human beings living in the institution of homelessness are constantly in a state of wrongness in the eyes of our society and in the social services systems. They are blamed for every wrong turn, every missed appointment, every forgotten call. Yes, they are accountable for their actions. And yet, at the same time, they are also the ones facing endless

daily traumas that add to the trauma they have already experienced in their lives. They are the ones who are mentally ill in a world that has no comprehension of what mental illness is. And they are the ones who experience addiction, the most mysterious and incomprehensible disease a human can go through. Anyone who has run into mental illness, addiction and trauma in their lives will understand that there are some things that are out of our control. So why are we not giving them more *love*? And *grace*? And *kindness*? Why do we not believe in them more, and why are we not searching for the best within them? No one wants to acknowledge that the person bound to his tent is one of the wisest, most spiritual people he knows. No one wants to acknowledge the true kindness that comes from a man who does not live in this reality. No one wants to see the raw passion and dedication to care that exists within an alcoholic and depressed woman living outside. No one wants to see the resilience, the determination, the love, the hope, the joy, the wisdom.

My friends, over the course of this job, one that I have been doing for a year, I have learned to be a human being! I have learned to love. I have learned what true community looks like, and how to show up for suffering that is so great that my heart breaks every hour I am working. I do not work as a street chaplain; I work as a human being, with other human beings. I am the only person walking the streets and sitting in the jail who is being paid and supported by an organization to *listen* and *love* the traumas, and pains and experiences of those who our society has deemed worthless. And the greatest pain for me, the greatest sense of hurt, the thing that hits me deeper than anything, is not the injustice, or the oppression, or the trauma or the unfairness of it all. It's the fact that there are probably only a handful of people doing this same work as I am in the Bay Area. And beyond? I have no idea. We as a society seem to have forgotten the crucial importance of providing an abundance of care, kindness and compassion for our most vulnerable. I walk around outside, and I go through my never-ending list of people in the jail, and I wonder why there aren't fifteen more people doing the same thing as me. In my mind, it is common sense. In my heart, there is no other way. And yet, here we are.

One of the things I do is provide programming for inmates in Marin County Jail. This means that I go inside the jail, into the pods, as they call them, and hold a circle with the inmates. I will never forget the first time I walked into the jail pod. I don't know if you've ever been to a jail or prison before, but it is, to put it lightly, nonsensical. As someone who lives from her heart and soul, I could not comprehend where I was or what was happening. Why were these human beings locked inside tiny rooms? How are we helping them? I remember walking into that massive room alone, and feeling the eyes of many, many men looking down at me. When the deputy announced that there would be chaplain programming, almost twenty came out of their rooms to sit with me. We made a circle, outside. I sat there, looking around at all of them, aware that it was just me at this moment. I told them who I was, and why I was there. And I started asking them questions. At one point an inmate began to talk about the way they were treated in the jail and prison system: with disrespect and disregard. I looked around at the group, seeing nods and bitter, sad faces. I felt within myself a desire to say something. I could not be silent anymore. When the man finished speaking, I thanked him for sharing and said to the group, looking each of them in the eyes, "What is happening to you is not fair. This entire system is wrong. And I see that. And I'm here for you, even when I'm not physically here. I see you, and your love. And I am sorry that we have done this." In that moment,

I felt and saw something shift. It was subtle, and one of the most powerful spiritual experiences in my life. In that moment, I felt like a piece of the trauma, and the hatred, and the abuse of oppression and injustice, crumbled. Some tiny thing, not all of it, but some tiny thing, was defeated. I walked out of there with my life changed.

This work, the work of giving love, is incomprehensibly important. It is a piece of the puzzle that we have been missing. Yes, we need the activists, the social workers, the scientists, the institutional changes, the politicians, we need all of it. But we also need the spiritual care providers. We need the chaplains and ministers. We need the people who see the human spirit and feel the human spirit and can spread that love with a radical power. This world is never going to change unless we begin to bring our humanity back to the front of the cause for change.

I have this radical hope that lies deep in my chest, a hope that tells me that we can all be reminded of goodness and love. I can feel change rising, a tidal wave moving along the currents of each and every heart, a movement that is subtle like the moment I had in jail – one that slowly deteriorates the hatred and the trauma, composts it and uses it as food for the growing seeds of liberation, grace and love. I am calling out to the universe each and every day, begging for support, begging for more love to enter into this suffering world I witness every day. I walk with sorrow and grief, but a cloak of hope sways around me, because God is the sufferer, and God is the healer. She is everywhere with us, her love pervading every moment. I hope that you will join in the movement, aid this organization, reach out to other organizations, create more organizations, to love our forgotten, and make them forgotten no more.

Amen.

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To learn more about The Street Chaplaincy and/or to donate

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