
A Christmas Story

Rise and Walk

Matthieu IX, 1 à 7 - Marc II, 1 à 11 - Luc V, 17 à 26 -

by Christine Murray

Vernon arrived late at St Teresa for the homeless Christmas dinner last December 25th.

Although meal service was over and most guests had left the hall, a parishioner welcomed him and made sure that he would sit and be helped to the same nice warm dinner everybody else had enjoyed earlier.



He sat at a table where volunteers chatted and relaxed after serving the meals. They engaged in conversation with him: He was tired and discouraged, he said with tears in his eyes: In his difficult life, Christmas for the past 2 years had been a specially harrowing time: both his parents had been robbed and killed on Christmas day 2 years ago.

Hard news, a brutal eye opener on what reality is on the other side of the tracks.

Tired. How could he not be? You are homeless, reluctant to go to the shelter and be robbed, unable to afford a proper roof and yet you try to stay out of the cold. Riding the train or the CTA all night will shelter you from the cold but of course you won't sleep and fatigue will accumulate.

I still see him, with his head lowered, slouched on the chair, without real shoes on his feet, just some old rubber clogs.

Around our table sitting with him a cross generational sample of our parishioners: a father in his middle fifties with his two children, young adults in their twenties, another father, probably 10 years younger, my husband and I, seniors in our early seventies.

I asked Vernon: "What is it that you need most?"

"Not give up" he responds. Again, "I am so tired."

I asked him, as I had other guests during the course of the meal: "Do you have a cell phone, a number where we can reach you?"

He said, "No I don't. I have asked for a government phone but it takes a long time."

Not having a phone makes it nearly impossible to get out of homelessness: no way to connect, find jobs or contact helpful institutions. Hence, the government phone program. As I was explaining that basic reality to the younger people at the table, I notice that one of the fathers is busy helping Vernon try on shoes that he had just handed to him. How these shoes appeared, I do not know. They were badly needed, they fit and Vernon laced them up.

The other father said: "It would be no problem for me to get him a phone." As we discuss that option, one of the young women who is sitting with us leaves the table. She has had enough of this, I figure.

We still chat with Vernon.

"Believe it or not", he says, "I have a college degree in social work."

What happened?

He shrugs and smiles sadly. "Things got bad."

We are making plans for him to come back for the next *Loaves and Fishes* on the following Friday (January 1st) when we will give him a phone. He agrees, sort of.

Then, the shoe-giving parishioner tells us: "Well, I think my daughter has located a phone for him, she will be back soon."

Things look good, I thought, and left the table to resume the job I was doing before Vernon's arrival...

A few minutes later, I see him, a big smile on his face, holding a little shopping bag with the phone and instructions inside. He shares his phone number with me. His

many issues are not solved, yet he is walking decidedly. Momentarily he has risen from the depth of despair and is walking.

My Christmas story ends here.

Or does it?

Maybe the reference to the paralyzed man of the Gospel has come to your mind and you are wondering on the good we, and especially young people, can make happen. Maybe you will draw other lessons from its happy but probably short-lived ending. Maybe you will ask yourselves, as I do every day, how do we find a way to empower Vernon and many other like him, not only to rise but take real steps leading to durable autonomy?

Many do-gooders, sociologists, philanthropists confront this vastly complex issue. They study it and write about it. No easy answers seem to surface. Yet, maybe we can pool resources, research and learn from projects that have succeeded. Projects that have served the poor not only by giving them food but also by empowering them through training, teamwork and accountability; projects that could start very modestly, with a minimal goal.

For inspiration, you can start by reading a book:

“Begging for change - The dollars and sense of making non profits responsive, efficient, and rewarding for all” by Robert Eggert, Harper Business Publishers.

What do you think?

Looking forward to hearing from you!

Christine Murray, *St. Teresa of Avila parishioner*

zanmiparis@mac.com