

I want to start today with a story by Ed Hayes. Fr. Hayes was a mystic, writer, and storyteller who lived in an ashram in Kansas and was a prison chaplain. He was one of those rare people who taught us how to be fully alive. My favorite quote from him is the most profound six words I know. He said: "Don't believe in God. Follow God". Which is exactly what this sermon series is about. The story goes like this:

God was sitting out on her deck one beautiful (yes, one might even say "heavenly") summer morning, enjoying her second cup of coffee, when an angel approached, bowed, and said:

“The recently deceased from earth have arrived. They await your attention.

With a sigh, God took one last swallow of the Java and followed the Angel, whose name was Buster, by the way, to the arrival area. They entered the first doorway and saw bodies lined up into the distance. They were all emaciated. Ribs showing, hip bone protruding, bellies swollen. “Who are these?” God asked.

Checking his clipboard, Buster said. “These all died of starvation and malnutrition,”

God frowned. “how can that be?” She asked quietly. “Didn’t I create enough food to go around?”

“Sure you did”, Buster replied. “But it seems that your earthly children are having some distribution problems”.

Shaking her head, God stretched out her arms and spoke. Suddenly, every body in the room came joyously alive, no longer weakened by famine.

The next room was similar to the first, with bodies stretching far into the distance. But these were deformed by disease and physical injury. Many had

sightless eyes , tumors, or other malformations and birth defects.

“And these are?” God asked.

Once again, checking his paperwork, Buster said: “Uhhh, these are the ones who died from treatable diseases and injuries because they didn’t have access to appropriate health care”.

“Are you sure about that”, God asked.

“I’m pretty sure I arranged for there to be enough doctors, and nurses to meet everyone’s needs. Why were these people not tended to.”

Starting to get a little nervous about how this was going, Buster kept his eyes on his clipboard, and replied: “It seems that the hospitals and medical personnel tend to congregate in the areas where the wealthier people live so that they can live better and make more money. You could say that it’s another distribution problem.”

Once again, God stretched out her arms and spoke, immediately the room became alive with laughing people returned to perfect health.

The third room contained bodies that were chapped and blue from cold. Their clothes were tattered and they were

dirty, insect bitten, and most were children.

“And these”, God whispered.

“ These were people who had no place to take shelter. They were exposed to harsh environments and toxic pollution, and their just couldn't take it” Buster now wished that he was anyplace else but here as God's face darkened.

“Another distribution problem,” was all God said. But she stretched out her arms and at the sound of her voice, eternal life filled the room.

The final room was filled with well dressed corpses. Their bodies well-formed and beautiful, if maybe a bit chubby.

“Ahhh”, God said with some fire in her eyes. “These look different”.

“These are from the more we’ll-to-do parts of the world. Many have died from over indulgence of one form another. You know, alcohol, overeating, lack of exercise, automobile accidents. That section over there is all jet ski accidents. You get the picture. You could say that they are the beneficiaries of that distribution problem.”

“You certainly could”, God replied as she turned on her heel and headed for the door.

“Wait God”, Buster cried out, “you haven’t awakened them!”

God stuck her head back in through the door and said: “I know”

“But God, you are the source and being of all love and mercy!” Cried the angel.

“That’s true” said God with a sad smile.
“But, at this moment I have a distribution problem”.

When Pat and I worked out our schedule for these 10 weeks, I thought that I had lucked out this week. I get to talk about caring for the poor. In Christianity that should be a “no brainer”. After all, the words “poor” and “poverty” appear in the Bible 446 times and never as a good thing. Does that give you a hint? There are also more than 100 passages that remind us that is our responsibility to help those in need. That should be another big hint. But, who are the poor?

If you're honest with yourself, when you think about the poor, the first image in your mind is probably a person of color living in the South End or Arbor Hill in Albany. Right? Or maybe people

somewhere in Africa or Asia. You may also think that many are able bodied people who just don't want to work. It's wrong, but it's an image we have.

Contrary to the myth of poverty, The typical poor adult person in the United States is a young, white woman living in a rural area, and who has small children. And, the group most likely to be poor are that woman's children. 20% of all the children in this country are poor. They are all around us. There are way more than 20% of them at Miller Hill elementary. Just check the number of reduced price and free lunches that are provided every day. And many of the

poor do have jobs, but they still can't make enough to live.

I'll admit, It's easier to see the urban poor. They're all stuffed into neighborhoods of apartment houses. Out here, the poor are hidden away. Down country lanes and on farms. They are isolated and they are afraid. They have inherited the idea that to ask for help is bad. And even if they're willing to seek help, They don't know how to even look for it, let alone get to the places where they might receive services.

In many ways, being poor in an urban area is easier than out here. At least

you have public transportation. At least you are in contact with others. There is no Berlin to Averill Park bus. I've looked for it every day. The nearest supermarket is 5 miles away. If you're rural poor, You may not be very near your neighbors, and, let's face it, they may not want to get involved with you because you're just "white trash".

Since that bus doesn't run, You have to have a vehicle to live in the Town of Sand Lake. Cars are expensive to buy, and especially expensive to maintain with gas, repairs, and insurance.

The federal poverty level for a family of 4 is currently \$28,290 or \$544 a week.

That ain't much. Try and buy a car and pay insurance and then see how much you have left for silly things like rent, food, utilities, clothes, and medicine. It's not easy to be poor in Sand Lake.

It's even tougher in other parts of the world. More than one half of the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 a day. No wintering in Florida for them. Worse still, it is reported that 127,000 children under the age of 5 die each day from treatable causes. Children just like us the child we baptized this morning. Children like the ones we watched leave to go to Sunday school. That's one every 1 and ½ seconds. Should we Start counting?

Overwhelming, isn't it? Alone, you and I aren't going to solve the problem of poverty. Fortunately, God doesn't ask us to do everything; but God does ask us to do something.

You know this community. Who needs help? What do they need? How can we bring the available services to those who need them. Could we open our hall to aid groups one day a week? We're great at food. Maybe we could feed people that day. Not to make money, but to fulfill God's command.

Wouldn't it be nice to be known as the church that reaches out to everyone?

Think about it. We won't be making any concrete decisions until we've gone through all the various options. Maybe helping the poor is one of the things we, or at least some of us, want to do. After all, God has only asked more than a hundred times.

Kathy Khang wrote this week in the magazine *Sojourners* that "it's hard to live as an Easter people when we are so often reminded we live in a Good Friday world". But, for me, that's exactly the point. We have to pass through Good Friday in order to get to Easter. And we cannot do it alone. We are called to act as a community. Remember the words of Jesus "wherever two or more are

gathered in my name, I will be there". It isn't just me and Jesus. It has to be us and Jesus. We are called to community to engage the darkness of our world. Alone our individual lights are dim. Together, our brightness drives out the darkness. How shall we do that in this time and place?

I'll end with another story. This one from Anthony DeMello.

Once upon a time there was a very devout and pious woman. Each morning she would walk to her church to pray. On her way, ragged children would call out to her, and beggars would plead with her. But she was so caught up in

her desire to speak with God that she did not even see them.

One day she got to the church and found the door locked. She was terribly distressed that she could not enter God's house. Then, She looked up and saw a note with her name on it. The note read: "I'm out there". Amen.