

FOREWORD

Every time I revisit the parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8), Jean Kim appears in my mind. I suspect it is the same for many others – maybe Jesus himself. Short in stature and nearing her eightieth birthday, Jean has been pounding on the church’s door for decades, demanding justice for those whom society has forgotten. Wearing her every present purple *End Homelessness* t-shirt, she would be a shoe-in at any audition for the persistent widow role.

When I was coordinating the Presbyterian Hunger Program “Jean is on the phone” always meant I was about to have a long conversation about homelessness and what we needed to be doing about it. And I would most often agree to what she requested. With her sense of urgency and infinite patience, Jean wears down all resistance.

This collection of sermons that she has delivered over 40 years, documents that persistence. In churches large and small, rich and poor, conservative and liberal, Jean has brought a consistent message about the contrast between God’s love for poor and homeless people and our neglect of them. She calls for action – repentance, actually – and she will not go away without a response.

Tell her that there is nothing your church can do – that you are in the wrong neighborhood, that you don’t have much money, that you are all retired – and she will point to her list of “77 Ways (106 now) Churches can Help” from her *End Homelessness Manual*. Dismissing resistance, she says, “If any church says you cannot do any one of the 77, you may go to see a psychiatrist.”

As Jean acknowledges, her message can be “tough,” challenging us to move beyond our comfort zone of writing checks to actually engaging with our homeless neighbors. But she also brings the authenticity of one who has lived a tough life and emerged with deep faith. The frequent sharing of that personal history gains her an audience willing to hear her out.

But tough and demanding are just one side of the story. These sermons are also informative – often sharing statistics about homelessness “right here in River City.” And they are always very practical – hence the *77 ways (106 now)*. Finally, and quite endearing, these sermons share a sincere appreciation for the efforts that churches are making. At least once we hear her say, “If every church does what you do, we can end homelessness.”

In Volume five, Jean has explored the scriptural foundation of her work on homelessness. In this volume, we see how she has applied that scriptural analysis to build a practical theology of homelessness. Her preaching provides biblically grounded guidance, challenge, and inspiration to both comfortable Presbyterian congregations and communities of homeless people as they gather for worship.

I find the sermons Jean addresses to homeless people to be the most enlightening section of the collection. Many of us who support and encourage the church’s response to the needs of poor and hungry people often preach “about” poverty and homelessness. It takes a different skill set, a different sensitivity, and a fuller grasp of the gospel, to preach good news “to” the homeless.

Over forty years ago, while taking part in the Urban Institute’s “Urban Plunge” in Chicago, I sought respite for the night at Pacific Garden mission. Attendance at worship was a prerequisite for being offered an invitation to go downstairs for a warm meal and a place to sleep. The preacher – presumably like most who preceded and followed him – ended with an invitation to come forward and be “saved.” It wasn’t long before several men made their way to the front to pray with the preacher, while the rest of us headed downstairs to eat. At dinner, the men openly talked about how they took turns answering the altar call. “It’s the only way to get him to stop,” they said, “so we can get down here and eat.”

Jean's sermons to the homeless are not that kind of sermon. She clearly knows what most of us have found out in our dealings with homeless women and men: a lack of faith in God's saving grace is not the major issue. Their needs do, however, closely reflect the people whom Jesus met and to whom he demonstrated the good news. Like her savior, Jean addresses these victims of illness, demons and addiction with love and respect. Like Jesus, she often engages them in dialog, treating them like the homelessness "experts" that they are. Reading these sermons, you will often hear echoes of Jesus' haunting question, "Do you want to be healed."

I must note that these sermons reflect their context in community. Jean speaks as a pastor to the flock she has gathered. Close, trusting relationships – or, at least, an in-depth "knowing" in the cases where people had built up impenetrable defenses – sustain an authenticity far beyond that of the visiting evangelist. The invitation to make changes always comes with the implicit assurance that "we will be here to fight the battle with you."

These sermons, then, cannot be easily picked up and preached by those of us who occasionally drop into the lives of our homeless neighbors. They do, however, give us a clearer understanding of what is really "good news" to those who struggle with homelessness. This collection belongs on every preacher's bookshelf. Not because they are sermons to be poached, but because they are ones to be pondered. They raise important questions:

- Is it too bold to speak about "ending" hunger and poverty, or is a lack of faith to speak otherwise?
- Do our sermons ask enough of our listeners? Should we be more persistent in expectation of a response?
- Is the gospel that we proclaim truly "good news to the poor?" Would poor and homeless people hear that way?
- What authentic words of assurance and hope would I share if called on to speak at the funeral of a homeless neighbor?

When Jesus describes the dividing of the sheep and goats at the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 25), we hear him affirming the ones who took "the homeless poor into your homes." In our security conscious world, that always sounds like a very high bar to clear. Perhaps it is, but I know a woman who can tell you about 106 ways that you can take them into your church, and that's a good start. These are her sermons; we can all learn from them.

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FOREWORD

Passion with Grace.

That's what the following pages in this book by Jean Kim are about.

That's right. Passion with grace. From the time Jean Kim and her family left North Korea to Korean War over a half century ago, becoming homeless in the process, she has become an advocate for the homeless and done it with both passion and grace.

As Jean's pastor for most of those twenty-five years, which continues through my retirement, I have watched this passionate and graceful woman lift the needs of homeless people in this country

to a national concern. Her broad experience as a mental health worker in St. Louis and in Seattle, a Campus Minister with international students at the University of Washington, a street Minister at night for the homeless in Seattle – all fed into her founding the Church of Mary Magdalene in Seattle which has become a model for many such institutions for homeless women across the country.

These sermons which you will be reading are really the heart and soul of Jean Kim's life. She also speaks of the heart of God and from the heart of the homeless. They, and her advocacy work in many other ways, are why the national Presbyterian Church in this country has adopted a broad action-oriented project for the disinherited.

This volume might especially be a good resource for preachers who struggle with what to preach on themes related to poverty and homelessness in particular both in an ordinary church as well as the homeless congregation. It is often hard for preachers to be relevant and insightful to people who experience poverty and homelessness, and rarely example sermons are available that are relevant to such a theme. I'll say it again: Passion and Grace.

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