

What About Homelessness?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 19, 2023 – Homeless Awareness Weekend

Text: Leviticus 25:35-38

Last night about two dozen people gathered in our upper parking lot as the sun set and the temperatures dropped. We huddled around the fire built by Fred & Kathy Tarasuk and many of us held battery operated flickering candles and cell phone flashlights. It was cold. The darker it got, the colder it got. It was impossible to escape the cold. Within minutes of gathering, we were fighting to stay warm, legs aching from standing, smoke following us even as we tried to avoid it. Some of us sat on icy metal chairs. Some of us chose to stand. The point is, we stayed. We stayed and we prayed. We sang songs and listened to stories of homelessness. We read Scripture and invited God into the midst of this sad and seemingly unsolvable crisis. We stood in solidarity for that brief moment – 45 minutes all told – with our brothers and sisters who have no homes in which to keep warm and relax. No homes in which to keep clean and fed. No homes in which to know happiness and security. Being there in that cold, smokey moment wasn't much to do honestly. We know that. Yet we did it anyway because answers to this situation must be found and until they are found and implemented, voices like ours must remain strong and loud. To all of you who joined us last night, thank you. To all of you who didn't come but thought of us as we gathered, thank you. We all need to remember we can only make a difference in a problem such as entrenched homelessness if we never forget the toll it is taking on our brothers and sisters, if we remember that the responsibility for solving this situation remains ours until it is solved, once and for all.

We also must never forget we are called on by our faith, by God's own self, to care for those less fortunate than ourselves. The Hebrew

Scriptures are filled with admonitions to care for the poor, the widows and orphans, in our midst. The Christian Scriptures echo this understanding of what God expects of us just as loudly. We've discussed many of those texts in recent weeks. As you might imagine, my research for this sermon series we are concluding today, led me to many such texts in the Old and New Testaments. But one stood out. It genuinely surprised me and that is the text we read this morning from Leviticus. It surprised me because Leviticus is no one's favorite book in the Bible. It contains many of what are known as the "lobber" passages against the LGBTQIA+ community and its directions for how a faithful person is to act and behave in worship and at home are ... overwhelming is the only word I can think of.

Leviticus derives its name from the tribe of Levi, the tribe designated as the priests in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible and the foundational texts of the Abrahamic faiths. It is divided into two sections. Chapters 1-16 are the instructions, incredibly detailed, to be followed by Temple priests. Chapters 17-27 are the instructions for how the Israelites are to live their daily lives. Dietary restrictions, clothing restrictions, beard length, family relationships, the very proscribed role of women – all of these are addressed in the second part of Leviticus. The reading of Leviticus is neither easy nor especially helpful. At least that's what I thought until I came across today's passage. I was literally shocked to find it in Leviticus, of all places, because this particular book is no one's idea of how to live as what some might call a touchy-feely person. This is not a book that offers soft and gentle words of reassurance, of healing, of nurture. This is a book whose entire tone is harsh, setting a high bar for all who seek to dare to call themselves followers of the Living God. And yet right there, almost at the end of the book, come these verses demanding that anyone who falls into a situation of needing help deserves help. No qualifiers really, although there is most likely an

expectation the person is Hebrew. Still, there is no escape clause if the person being asked for help thinks the person needing help doesn't deserve it for whatever reason. If the person needs help and asks you to help, you help, even going so far as to let them live with you if that's what it will take to solve their problem. And the text continues – you can't lend them money and charge interest. You must just give it to them, no questions asked. You can't sell them food. You just give it to them. Profit cannot enter into this arrangement at any point. If it does, it's not just a slimey thing to do – it is actually breaking God's law.

Holy cow! None of us rise up to that level of support for assistance provided to our brothers and sisters right here in this community in such desperate need of help. However, we do what we can, always knowing it's not enough but at least it's a start. This community is especially blessed to have so many human service agencies on the front lines of trying to help these people in such dire need. One of these is The WARM Center, a local agency which this church was part of creating several decades ago. WARM has become a leader in this work of caring for the homeless and our support for WARM continues. This is why we have asked Mojie Friel from WARM to join us this morning and talk to us about what it is WARM is about these days. Mojie, thank you for being here

[No copies of Mojie's remarks are available to include here]

Amen.