

The Garbage Cans of America

A friend once told me that a foreign exchange student who was studying in the United States made the comment that with the garbage cans of America he could feed the poor of his native country. Sadly for us in the United States of America, this is probably true. I think that we have become oblivious to the poverty which surrounds us to the point that what used to make us sick to see going on with the homeless and the hungry now no longer even gives us cause to notice. We may drive down Burnside Street and see the alcoholic homeless either passed out in the breezeway of a dilapidated old building or sitting on the ground leaning up against the same building while “passing around” the all too familiar bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. We might even see as one proceeds to vomit in the gutter. In the course of his standing up we may see that he has wet his pants because of the lack of lavatory facilities.

The meals for such persons usually come from a fast food garbage can. This, of course must be gleaned in a very clandestine manner, since “having a bum eating out of the garbage can” is not something which is supportive of bringing in paying customers. The concern for such as these is the immediate satiation of the gnawing pains of hunger and the crushing shame of homelessness. Mind you, there is a homeless shelter or two just off Burnside Street and a soup kitchen where the agony of starvation can at least temporarily be assuaged.

What the foreign exchange student did not realize was that the poor of his native country must stand in line behind the poor of the United States of America in order to gain sustenance from our garbage cans. What brings these wretches to this sorry state is irrelevant; the point is that they are here victims of a society which values economic and social status far above the value of a human life. In this ostensibly Christian Nation we, as a society, have deteriorated to the level of the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus[1]. It is a lamentable commentary of this country that there is for sale a class of automobiles which retails at over one half a million dollars....These are accessible by driving over the bridges under which whole families, including children, exist in the previously described manner.

We have just had a “bailout” of those persons, greedy for gain, who have loaned money they did not have to people who cannot afford to borrow so that they might purchase something which was out of their price range. As a nation, our priorities have not been where they should be for a nation who is “one nation under God”. We might learn a lot from the rich fool who thought he could sit back and lazily take his ease because of his acquired wealth[2]. For the rich man, monetary gain was of far more value than the physical suffering of one poor soul who survived just outside the rich man’s gates.

On two separate occasions Jesus was faced with a similar situation; hunger in the multitudes. On those situations, he demonstrated His concern by turning a small amount into a filling meal for five thousand men[3]. This number excluded women and children. This concern was repeated by feeding four thousand men out of yet another pittance offered by a faithful one[4]. On both these circumstances Jesus was able to feed a large number of seekers by miraculously turning a small offering into enough to satisfy a crowd. What was required, however, was the “seed offering” in order to start the ball rolling, so to speak. The initial seed was sowed by one who was faithful; the multiplication of the seed was up to God. The initial small meal could have been denied Jesus. In that case, the “faithful one” might have been fed one meal but many would have gone hungry. The seed of faith was sown because the one had seen what Jesus could do with little in other instances. I think that by sowing the initial seed, the faithful one not only saw the multitudes fed with so very little, and got fed himself with the meal but he also discovered something about this Jesus called Christ that could only be revealed through the exercising of his faith.

In the first bail out there was an enormous seed sown and it satisfied virtually nothing since the recipients of this seed were not satiated or even remotely placated by this outlay of earthly wealth. In the second case, Jesus’ intent was to fill the physical needs of a crowd of followers as well as to demonstrate His Deity by making something out of very little which was sown in faith. The first bail out was sown unwillingly by the taxpayers out of whose hands the huge sum of money was extracted.

The United States of America used to be called one nation under God, yet we now have lost sight of He Who paved our land with His Bountiful Favor and have looked in the wrong place for satisfaction of life. Solomon spoke in Ecclesiastes Chapter 2 of trying to find satisfaction for a spiritual problem by amassing secular achievements. In a tongue

in cheek manner, this is reminiscent of the comment made by another foreign exchange student from Kuwait who commented on the United States when asked what he liked about America, that he was particularly fond of the variety of automobiles here since all there was in Kuwait was Rolls Royce and Mercedes Benz. In both cases, the person has lost sight of the initial intent: Solomon forgot that it is not about him but about God; the Kuwaitis lost sight of the fact that it is about transportation and not what carries you there. It would seem that America has thrown away that which has the most value and kept the trash. Maybe we should go through the garbage cans of America and retrieve what we have foolishly thrown away.

[1] Luke 16: 19-31

[2] Luke 12: 13- 21

[3] Matthew 14: 14-21; Mark 6: 34-44; Luke 9: 12-17; John 6: 5-13

[4] Matthew 15: 32-39; Mark 8: 1-9