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Proper 21 C
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In my early twenties, I had the opportunity to live in New York City. And for a young man from a small community in east Arkansas, it was an eye-opening experience. My middle initial is G and GAWK could have been my middle name, because I gawked at everything. I gawked at the tall buildings, I gawked at the people, I was mystified by this place; it was so different from what I'd ever experience growing up in rural Arkansas or even going to college in Florida. All kinds of people, dressed all kinds of ways. There were a million different places to go. You could go out and get a hamburger at midnight or later, in a restaurant. It was intoxicating to just walk down the street and experience being there. I was in a daze the first few days; I felt like Dorothy in the wizard of Oz seeing everything in color for the first time.

I snapped out of that daze one day when I was down near New York University in a park called Washington Square. I was sitting on a park bench taking it all in when I looked over my shoulder and saw a man eating what was left of a Kentucky Fried Chicken meal out of a garbage can. I had never seen anything like that before and the glitter of the city grew dark, I was horrified. We had poor people in Trumann Arkansas, most of us were economically challenged, but nobody was eating out of a trash can. I realized at that moment that I wasn't poor growing up, I just didn't have a lot of cash.

So, I wasn't prepared in anyway for someone who was digging through a garbage can for a meal. I was shocked, but most of all I was scared. I was scared to death of what I was seeing and I just wanted to get away from it, and I did. Of course with some of that glitter gone, I began to see this sort of thing all over the place in New York. Over the years things have changed and now you can see that kind of poverty in a lot of places, you see homeless people everywhere and I often have that same feeling of fear when I see them, as if poverty is contagious. I guess that's why I'm sympathetic toward the rich man in the gospel story. I'm not any better

than he is. It's not that I wouldn't have been willing for Lazarus to have the scraps off my dinner table, but I wouldn't want to get too close to him, especially with those sores. You see there really is a chasm that divides us.

When I served in Seattle, we lived in a rectory next to the church that faced a main drag in our neighborhood. We often got strangers knocking on the door looking for help. One day I was headed downtown for a meeting at the Bishop's office and a man came to our front door asking for money. He told me his story about his car being broke down and I didn't have my discretionary checkbook or the form we filled out for this sort of thing, and I just thrust two twenties toward him. But you know I didn't give him that money to help him, I gave him the money to get him off my front porch. He was obviously in distress whether his story was true or not, but that's not why I responded. I was leaving Joanna there alone and I was fearful. There is a chasm that divides us. It is the same chasm that lay between the Rich Man and Lazarus. It is a chasm of fear and anxiety instead of a bridge of love and faith.

I'd like to give you a simple answer to these horrendous social problems of people without homes and children going to bed hungry. I know there are simple answers, like telling them to work harder or giving them the forty dollars and getting them off the porch, simple, but wrong. HL Mencken said "there's a simple answer to every complex problem, and it's usually wrong." Holy scripture today suggests that the answer has something to do with how we handle what God has given us, our resources, our money. But I don't think the dilemma will be solely solved individualistically. It's too big, too complex, it's going to take all of us working together, and that's just one of the reasons that God called us together to be the Church. God is not calling us to individually rescue the poor,

It's not just one person's problem, it's everyone's, it's a community problem that will take a community solution. Of course it's always easier to do things the lone ranger way, individually. It's hard to work with other people. Working with people is not the simple way, but it's the way that God has called us to, it's the way that will ensure that God is glorified instead of ourselves, and it's the way in which all of us, even we who are afraid, will be inspired with the courage and the grace to cross that chasm that divides us from those in need. May god give us that grace

and courage to be made one with the poor, the hungry, those who suffer and with Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN