

### **Matthew 25:34-45**

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

### **Luke 8:1-3**

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

### **"Invisible Angels"**

**Megan Ryan**

**March 6, 2011**

A few weeks ago, a small group of us had the honor of going into Sister Mary Alice's home and asking her a bunch of questions. In the sermon today, there will be five short snippets of her answers, but if you would like the full interview, there are copies of the DVDs in front of the office. Now let us see the clip.

"Well, because I'm a Christian, I feel that the Gospel has given us the image of God and Jesus, and so I see Jesus as my best friend, and I talk to him like I would to a friend, and I believe that everything that I've done, down to the smallest detail, has been because I've been guided. I don't think I'd have the guts to do the things I've done if I didn't have a strong faith life.

At a young age, Sister Mary Alice's interest in the church began, and grew to the point that, as a teenager, she decided to become a nun. In looking for an order to join, she developed four criteria that any order she joined must meet. First, be dedicated to working with the poor. Second, be dedicated to the Blessed Mother. Third, offer work

other than teaching or nursing. And finally, minister to Mexico's poor. After much research, she joined Our Lady of Victory. She says that her parents were quite involved in the church, but never pushed her into it, which she calls a blessing. She is quick to state that a lot of who you are is what your parents instill in you. Her favorite scripture comes from Matthew 25, which Wendy just read, the one that says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

When we went to her house, we got to meet her little dog, Molly, who she's had for about four months now, and who was a stray at one point. She says that it's only natural that that would be the way that she acquired the first dog that she has ever owned. When asked why she has dedicated so much of her life to this cause, she responds, "I've been blessed, and I have a responsibility to bless other people. If we all bless each other, what a great place this would be."

"What would you say has fueled your long commitment to social justice? "

"Well, first of all, I'm highly committed to social justice, and believe that it's an integral part of the Gospel. I feel that in the Jewish tradition as well, and even in the other traditions, I don't know them as well, but there is that call to help. Not to live a selfish life. So that's a conviction I've had, and was nourished by my parents, and my grandmother, so that's part of it. But also, the need, when I see how many people are needy, and sometimes how little it takes to help. But I think the big thing is that, if everybody does something,... The homeless, that's such a complex problem, and we can sit and philosophize and theologize about it, and not do anything. And my commitment is to say, if this is important, then we need to do something about it. We don't just talk about it, we do something. One little thing. And if everybody did something, then it's not an overwhelming problem. So that's my commitment. The other wonderful thing that fuels it are the marvelous, marvelous people that I work with. Because I get embarrassed when people single me out, 'Oh you do all this wonderful work for the homeless,' when in reality, there are so many people that have helped me, I don't know, it would be in the hundreds, easily, in this community, that have helped, either with their prayers, their money, their actions. One person can't get very far."

Sister Mary Alice has had some challenges in her life, and at the beginning of her career, had a harder time being heard by the community than later on. For example, a businessman once told her, "Sister, you mean well, but you're bringing the wrong people into this town." She hopes that maybe one day someone will get through to the heart of that man and change his heart for the better. She reasons that homeless people are here because they have friends and family in the area, or because they feel comfortable here, and she feels that if they have a desire to be here, then that desire should be respected. When she is met with such opposition, sister Murphy has a simple answer "You need stick-to-it-iveness and can't let things get you down." Her sister says that she is like a dog with a bone, with her eyes always glued to the task at hand until it gets done.

One of her most intriguing quotes, in my opinion, is in response to the question of what she does when something seems impossible. Her answer? "If someone shuts a door, you

look for a window that's open. When the window gets closed, too, you go around to the back door and see if that works. Never give up." Her last piece of advice on gaining respect in the community, she says that people have to know that you're in it for the long haul. If they think you're going to come in with all these great ideas and then be gone before they know it, you're not going to gain their trust. Respect is earned by showing your commitment and your passion.

"It's interesting, these two women were the ones who opened my eyes. The one said, she had a child, and evidently the grandmother of the child said, "I'm going to take care of this child." But they had had so many arguments, and things had gone so afoul in their relationship that she said, "You can't stay here." So that woman had a job, and she said in order to be clean at her work, she would go to the public park and hose down in order to have a shower to stay clean. She said if you're not a bag lady, it's very difficult to exist on the street."

In Colossians 1:15, we are told that Christ is the visible image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. There are so many people in this world who live their lives feeling invisible. Many generations of women in history have felt that their wants and their needs did not matter, and they felt invisible. Often the requests for help made by homeless people are met with someone looking the other way, or staring at the cracks in the sidewalk, and they feel invisible. But God, who is invisible to our naked eyes, sent Christ in God's image. Christ, who took time to heal lepers who were not only invisible, but untouchable in their society. Christ, who singled out the woman pouring perfume on his feet, and honored her efforts, while the men around her scorned her. Christ, who told us in his Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of Heaven." "Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied." "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh." Sister Mary Alice states that if you're poor in an affluent area, it's easy to ignore it and think that the problem is with you. She continues by saying that Fort Collins looks so great when people just go through it, and this is the soft underbelly. It is easy for people to feel invisible when you are homeless, but it is our imperative as followers of Jesus to see the Christ in people, to see the visible image of an invisible God.

"Do you think because of our affluence that it's hidden?"

"It's just like, when I first came to town, the police chief said there are no poor people here."

"Well, that's why it's hard in Fort Collins, it looks so nice. You don't go through and see run-down sections of town. So hidden, but hidden doesn't make it better. That's why we have to look at it and stare it in the face and say we have to do something."

Sister Mary Alice says that no matter where you go, the problem of homelessness is there. And maybe it's hidden in some communities. It's hidden in this one. She adds that the hidden homeless don't put a sign on themselves saying "I'm homeless." The stigma of being homeless is something that they don't want anyone to know, and they'll do anything

to cover it up. A study done in 2008 showed that 556 men, women and children in Larimer County were homeless. But in fact the statistic is more something like 3,000 people in Larimer, but that does not mean that they are sleeping in the streets every night. The reason for this difficulty in quantifying homeless is that many of the homeless are episodic, and are nearly impossible to identify. Unlike the chronic homeless, experts say, the hidden homeless often drift in and out of stable living conditions as relationships sour, jobs get lost, and debt mounts. In short, homelessness can indeed be hidden by wealth in a community, but hidden does not make it better.

"Advice or inspiration you would like to share with our congregation?"

"I think I'd like them to think of themselves as a blessing, and that they bless other people, and do it in a concrete fashion. Do at least one thing to help people who are not as well-off as you are. If possible, one thing that you can kind of keep doing would even be better. It's just that to get off of our chairs and actually do something, and not say it's so overwhelming, because we can get at it in so many different ways."

Sister Murphy dubs all those who have helped in her mission over the years, her invisible angels, doing countless tasks behind the scenes. She says that without them, none of what she has accomplished in the last 30 years would be possible. Sister Mary Alice Murphy has indeed made an impact on the faith community and the homeless community in our area, and it is evident that she has paved the way for this ministry to continue. On the Center for Hope's dedication plaque, four Canadian geese fly in formation. They represent Sister Mary Alice's leadership style. She says the geese fly in a V formation so that the lead goose can break the wind for the rest of the flock. After the lead goose tires, it retreats to the back and another leader emerges. That is how Sister Murphy develops an organization, so that it may still be going strong long after she retires, with many dedicated, capable people ready to take the lead.

In closing, perhaps we should listen to the advice of the author of Hebrews, in Chapter 13, Verse 2. "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so, some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Thanks be to God, and to Sister Mary Alice Murphy, for her commitment and her dedication. Now, if we can please have Susan King bring out Sister Mary Alice, we would like to give you a gift.