

One of the worst ideas I've had was giving my personal phone number to a neighbor of the church where I work. I said something like, "I'm not always here, so if something happens on a weekend or late at night, just text me at this number and I'll take care of it."

He was upset about folks gathering in the church parking lot, settling in for the evening with camp chairs, or laying out sleeping bags like they intended to stay even longer. He was upset about shopping carts full of belongings parked near his fence. He was upset about being woken up in the middle of the night by dogs barking or people fighting. I don't blame him for that last one. I get grumpy without a good night's sleep, too.

He used to call the church about these incidents, but at the end of the day at the church, we turn off the lights, shut the doors, and head home. So his calls would ring and ring in an empty office, and he wanted a response sooner than the following morning. At a meeting where we talked through several possible ways forward, he didn't seem eager to try any of them. Feeling desperate and guilty, I scribbled my number on a sheet of paper and passed it across the table to him. "Just text me," I said, "and I'll take care of it."

Now, I hear from him regularly. I respond in ways that appease him—picking up belongings left behind, urging folks to find other places to gather. When things are clean and quiet, he is happy. And I have told myself that if I'm not hearing from him, it means all is well in our neighborhood.

Of course, that's a lie. It is a lie older than John the Baptist, older even than the Hebrew prophets in whose lineage he follows. It is the lie they come to condemn.

When the church parking lot is full with folks sitting in camp chairs, rolling out sleeping bags, setting out bowls of dog food, it is because they do not have other spaces to settle in those ways. When those folks aren't in the parking lot, they are around the back of the Dollar Tree, or outside the soup kitchen, or down by the creek. They can't stay in one place for too long before someone makes sure they're on their way again.

Those of us with privilege have convinced ourselves that the offense, the violence, is the detritus of homelessness we have to see, step over, or swerve to avoid on the way to our cozy comforts.

Of course, that's a lie. It is a lie some of us tell ourselves to not feel the pain others of us suffer—the pain of having no place, no real rest, no safe shelter.

One morning, I sat on the steps with a woman who had come to the church for breakfast. She asked me if we had a tent she could have. We didn't. I suggested she check back again next week—sometimes people donate tents, tarps, sleeping bags—but we didn't have one at the moment.

She shook her head, sputtering, "Next week." She said, "You think you're being so helpful, don't you? You're really proud of all this." I kept quiet. She went on, waving her arms to indicate the breakfast room, the volunteers finding socks and hats for guests. "You're open when you want to be, and you close when you decide the work is done. You help when it's convenient for you, and then you go home. But we are always here."

I knew she didn't mean here, as in, at the church. She meant here, as in, in this reality. Some of us are always here, in this vulnerable state. Some of us are always here, exposed to the elements and to whatever charity or cruelty people fling from their mouths or car windows.

She wasn't asking the church to be open at all hours, or for volunteers to work an endless cycle. She wasn't asking for my phone number. She was asking for some acknowledgment of her world. She was that wild-eyed, truth-wielding prophet from long ago, coming again to disrupt my comfort, challenging the notions of "good" often cherished by church folks, asking us to consider what sacred accompaniment might really require. She was reminding me that quiet streets for some of us do not equal calm hearts, or peaceful sleep, for all of us.

And I needed her. I'd gotten so caught up in keeping the housed neighbor happy, in trusting his assessment of what's just, I'd nearly forgotten Jesus was born in whatever makeshift shelter his mom and dad could beg off a stranger.

Reflection Questions

1. Tell a story of a time you've witnessed, or participated in, a peace-making effort.
2. If "peace" doesn't (always/only) equal "quiet," what might it sound like?
3. What lie is it easy for you to believe? What truth is hard for you?
4. If John the Baptist were to visit your community, what might he ask you to pay attention to? Are there others playing his role now?
5. What resources do you and your community need to engage in peacemaking work? Where might you find them?