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A Knock at Midnight

Pat Marrin | Oct. 13, 2008

By Patrick Marrin

Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"? Luke 11:5-6.

?Although this parable is concerned with the power of persistent prayer, it may also serve as a basis for our thought concerning many contemporary problems and the role of the church in grappling with them. It is midnight in the parable; it is also midnight in our world, and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn.?

The words above were delivered some 50 years ago by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a now famous sermon titled ?A Knock at Midnight.? Their challenge is timeless, but they take on an added relevance today if applied to the stunning meltdown of the global financial markets. Equally unnerving has been the inability of the rescuers of last resort -- governments and central banks ? to stop an entire system entrusted with the savings and investments of virtually everyone from going into free fall. It is midnight in our world, and as one large institution after another fails to reassure us, uncertainty has turned to fear, and many are knocking on the door of the church.

There was no talk of stock portfolios or personal 401ks at the local Catholic Worker House last Thursday night as a small circle of guests, staff and volunteers celebrated Mass after serving a nightly meal to about 200 guests. Some are homeless; many are working but unable to make it to the end of the month without food assistance. One way to remain immune from market gyrations is to have nothing to lose. In case we haven?t noticed it as economists argued about how to define a recession, millions among the working poor have been living in one for years.

The small cart used to dispense bread in the serving line doubles as the altar for Mass. It is a quiet symbol of the seamlessness of true religion and service. As the parable from Luke is read about a man who goes to his neighbor in the middle of the night to beg for bread so he can offer hospitality to an unexpected visitor, heads nod. The parable describes the daily process of gathering donations of perishable food from supermarkets, bakeries and staples from the Harvester?s warehouse in town to create the nightly meal for whomever comes.

Within this small circle of faith, the Gospel comes true. Persistent prayer and a bit of work reap a simple abundance to support the House?s hospitality. Through a network of friends, God provides for everyone. On some nights, the ?Beloved Community? dreamed of by Catholic Worker cofounders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin during the Great Depression, and then proclaimed by Dr. King during the struggles for racial and economic justice in the 1960s, actually seems visible.

The model they envisioned is familiar. It describes the early church, when unity in faith created communities of mutual support: ?From each according to their means, to each according to their need? (cf. Acts 2:42-47). It also echoes stories we all have heard about Depression-era sharing. We don?t remember or honor stories about hunkering down and hoarding. We praise neighborliness, civility, generosity.

Because we are all in this together, we will rediscover that in practice genuine self-interest lies in promoting the common good. When the larger systems have faltered and failed, and they all eventually do, what we hope will be left is basic community.

We are in crisis, and everything we have come to know as normal is about to change.

If there is fear in the air, it may be because we are not sure, after decades of consumer-driven individualism and isolation from one another, whether, if we are stripped of our personal resources and again become dependent on one another, community will emerge. The title of one of Dr. King?s books poses the question, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*

As experts and leaders have sought to calm fears about the financial system, it is clear that words are not enough. Attempts to explain the system have only exposed its vulnerability as an uncontrollable global exchange that generates wealth by speculation. Whatever actual math underlies the market, lack of fairness, sales-pitch rhetoric and a psychology of greed and fear have overwhelmed it. Will anyone ever trust it again?

Which leaves us to seek out and knock on other doors. God, unlike the reluctant householder in the parable, always provides when we ask for help to be hospitable. The church, if it is faithful to the Word of God and the Eucharistic Table, will provide as well by helping us to be community for others, especially those in most need.

If there is good news in a sea of bad news, we are about to discover just how strong our faith can be in a time of crisis.

Patrick Marrin is editor of Celebration*, the worship and homiletic resource published by National Catholic Reporter.*

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Thoughts to lift and clarify the soul

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[1]

Why spend money on what is not bread ... on what fails to satisfy? Isaiah 55:2 (CNS photo/Reuters)

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searching about the role of money in our lives. As the world goe
editors at NCR thought it might be helpful to place the moment
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