

**Mobile Loaves and Fishes
St. Augustine's Chapel
Vanderbilt University
February 11, 2007**

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

On January third I was driving around, minding my own business, when a story came on NPR about an organization in Austin, Texas called Mobile Loaves and Fishes. In 1998 a couple of friends from a Catholic parish were talking about a ministry in Corpus Christi that provided blankets and hot drinks to homeless people on cold nights. One of the friends in Austin had a thought: what if you took food out to the homeless, where they lived, on the streets, in parks, under bridges, instead of requiring that they come to central dispensing soup kitchens and shelters?

Last week Becca talked about how a call begins with a thought. Well, this thought, less than a decade old, has grown into a social outreach ministry to the homeless and the working poor. Alan Graham, a real estate developer who had the thought, shared it with some friends, so they loaded up a van with 75 sack lunches and hit the streets, guided by another friend, Houston Flake, who had been homeless since his childhood. Three months later they had raised enough money to purchase a truck outfitted with a catering bed to feed the homeless and working poor.

Now MLF has nine trucks, operating from six parishes in Austin and San Antonio, and most recently Trinity Episcopal Church in New Orleans. MLF has 7,700 volunteers from over seventy churches, schools, businesses, scout troops, and other

organizations. Their mission: “providing food, clothing, and dignity to our brothers and sisters in need.” Going out almost every night, each truck serves 25,000 meals/year.

Last year MLF served a quarter of a million meals to the homeless and working poor.

Listening to the NPR story, I thought, “We ought to have MLF in Nashville.” So I googled MLF and was blown away by the web-based business structure that enables this ministry. So my next thought was, “You ought to call Alan Graham up and see about this.” Not in 55 years have I ever had the thought that I ought to call someone up after hearing an inspiring story on NPR. So I called, and Alan Graham said he was going in to make a presentation to the Austin City Council about MLF’s latest initiative, affordable housing for the homeless, but he would call me back that day. And he did, and it was a blast talking with him. So I talked with my brother Bill and our friend and old high school buddy, Rob Barrick, about MLF and they both said, “I’m in.” So then I said, “Wait a minute, what do we know about homelessness in Nashville?” So I called Becca, she got Father Charlie Strobel, and we had lunch, and they said, “Go for it.”

Long about this time the story of Wesley Autrey hit the news. Mr. Autrey is the 50 year old construction worker who was catching the subway in NYC with his two little girls, when he saw a man have a seizure and fall onto the tracks. Autrey looks down the track and sees a train coming. He looks back at his little girls, jumps onto the tracks to save the man, squeezing both of them into the trough in the middle, which is only a foot wide and a half-foot deep. Everybody on the platform is screaming. When the train finally stops, two cars have passed over the men. Then the people on the platform hear a shout from beneath the train: "Those little girls, I'm their father. Let them know their father's OK, and let everyone know that man is OK.”¹

I thought to myself, “Good Lord, if Wesley Autrey can jump in front of a subway train, I can go check out Mobile Loaves and Fishes. This is not exactly jumping in front of a train.”

So on Thursday Bill and Rob and I hopped on a Southwest flight to Austin and visited the mother ship of Mobile Loaves and Fishes at St. John Neumann Catholic Church. Now I’m going to go fast forward to the end of the story. The next day, Friday, after we had seen their work, I asked Rob what he thought. He said, “Well, if you and Bill decide not to do this, I’m still in.” That pretty much captured how all three of us felt.

Here’s how MLF works. Five or six volunteers, a make-ready team, prepare the truck for its run, stocking it with sandwiches, fruit, cookies, water, milk, juice, hot drinks, clothes (especially socks), prayer cards, Bibles, rosaries. Then the truck team, five or six volunteers take the truck out. Teams are composed of folks of all ages – this is a great ministry for children. Typically people sign up to volunteer one afternoon or night a month. If you can’t come, you can’t come. “Guilt-free ministry,” Alan calls it.

On our run we went to parks, alleys, parking lots, a halfway house for men just out of jail, and weekly rate motels that charge the homeless and working poor \$200/week for “housing.” You have to see it to believe it. The truck pulls up, Alan honks the horn, and here come folks out of the darkness, old people, young people, children. They are so grateful for our showing up. When I saw immigrant working boys the age of my son Alex, with all this sweetness and vulnerability on their faces, my heart just broke open.

You ask what people want to eat, to give them some choice, some dignity in having a choice. You shake hands, make contact, and conversation happens. One man had a beautiful walking cane. I said, “Man, I really like your cane. Where’d you get it?”

“I made it myself,” he said. “How’d you do these drawings on the carvings?” “Oh, you know, with what do you call them, colored pencils.” I said, “Oh, OK.”

“The homeless” stopped being a category for me with that exchange. “The homeless” became a man with a cane he’d made himself. A woman with a crack habit that Alan offered to get into a treatment program. A man selling “Free Hugs” buttons. A man crying and asking if we had seen his friend. Another man who came running back to the truck, saying, “I was so happy eating my meal I forgot about my girlfriend. I was supposed to get one for her. I stopped eating my food and came back for her. Now that’s true love.” We all had a big laugh.

After giving out all the food, the truck team goes out to dinner together. We went to a great Mexican place, Gueros Taco Bar. Go there when you go to Austin. Bruce Agness, Alan’s long-time sidekick and All-American good guy, who had made the truck run with us, listened to all our questions, then he looked us in the eye and said, “Don’t worry too much about how all of this is going to come together. Just go ahead and do it.”

And so that’s what we’re going to do, bring MLF to Nashville. While I was preparing this homily, Alan Graham emailed me with a link to a blog written by a homeless man in ... Nashville ... thehomelessguy.blogspot.com. Here’s what The Homeless Guy says: “Homelessness is sometimes referred to as a slow suicide. The drugs, alcohol, mental illness all take a toll, as the exposure to the elements and the lack of privacy take a serious toll. People who die on the streets don’t die of old age. What homeless people need most of all is a way off the streets. And I must tell you, the idea of a homeless person pulling himself up by the bootstraps is a myth. Homeless people don’t have boot straps. Every homeless person who has successfully gotten off the streets has

done so with a lot of help from people with stable lives.”²

Mobile Loaves and Fishes offers the homeless a way to do just this. Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote the national best seller, *The Tipping Point*, had an article in *The New Yorker* last year, February 16, 2006, on homelessness. It’s really worth reading. The *Wall Street Journal* recently had an article, “Homeless in America,” quoting Philip Mangano, a former homeless advocate from Massachusetts. He’s now the executive director of the White House’s US Interagency Council on homelessness. Here’s what he says: “After 20 years of seeing the problem get worse, we are no longer managing the problem. We are ending the disgrace.”³

"I was in St. Louis recently," Mangano said. "I spoke with people doing services there. They had a very difficult group of people they couldn't reach no matter what they offered. So I said, Take some of your money and rent some apartments and go out to those people, and literally go out there with the key and say to them, 'This is the key to an apartment. If you come with me right now I am going to give it to you, and you are going to have that apartment.' And so they did. And one by one those people were coming in. Our intent is to take homeless policy from the old idea of funding programs that serve homeless people endlessly and invest in results that actually end homelessness."

Mangano is a history buff, a man who sometimes falls asleep listening to old Malcolm X speeches, and who peppers his remarks with references to the civil-rights movement and the Berlin Wall and, most of all, the fight against slavery. "I am an abolitionist," he says. "My office in Boston was opposite the monument to the 54th Regiment on the Boston Common, up the street from the Park Street Church, where William Lloyd Garrison called for immediate abolition, and around the corner from

where Frederick Douglass gave that famous speech at the Tremont Temple. It is very much ingrained in me that you do not manage a social wrong. You should be ending it."⁴

Mobile Loaves and Fishes is about immediate mercy and long-term justice, and it has St. Augustine's name written all over it. What better work for our new Contemplative Justice Center than this work? What better work for a spiritual refugee camp that has itself been homeless and dependent on the generosity of others for over a year? What better work for a community whose favorite anthem is Marcus Hummon's "Life is a Church"?

Right before we left Austin, my brother Bill said to Alan, "You know, I'm not a churchgoer. I am a believer, and I want to thank you for giving me a path to express my belief." Later Alan told us about a teenager out on a truck run who was asked what church he belonged to. The teenager turned and pointed to the truck and said, "That's my church."

What strikes me most about Mobile Loaves and Fishes is that this simple, well-managed ministry opens peoples' hearts. There is not one of us here who has not been angered by injustice, whether inflicted on us personally or directed at someone called "them." There is not one of us who has not been hurt by unkindness. And I will say for myself that I have in my life at times acted both unjustly and unkindly. Anger and hurt close the heart, whether we're on the giving or receiving end.

Our work, our inner work here, is to transform anger into justice and hurt into compassion, so that our hearts open. That's the spiritual path, and it's an ongoing, ever-deepening inside job. MLF is one vehicle to do this inner transformation, this opening of the heart.

Mother Theresa said, “Let us more and more insist on raising funds of love, of kindness, of understanding, of peace. Money will come if we seek first the Kingdom of God – the rest will be given.” So check out the Mobile Loaves and Fishes website. If you want, you can volunteer by signing up on the sheet outside the doors. Alan Graham is ready to bring the first truck as soon as we’ve done some discernment and preparation.

I’ll close with this prayer we said before we headed out to meet the poor of Austin and the Kingdom we sought in their midst. “God of the poor and afflicted, soften the hard edges of my heart that I might see your image in the eyes of those who are outcasts in our world. Open me to embrace those who are hungry and abandoned. Soften me to understand the angry and the desperate. Enliven me to offer my gifts and treasures to the stranger and alien. Empower me with compassion toward the imprisoned and forgotten. Enflesh my heart with the loving heart of Jesus, who lived among us to point the way to your reign of justice and dignity.”

C. Gordon Peerman, D.Min.

¹ abcnews.go.com

² thehomelessguy.blogspot.com

³ The Wall Street Journal

⁴ www.gladwell.com