



Immersed in the disturbance. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

Highland

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Did the painter or pastor consider that the silent sleeper might appreciate some food, medical attention or simply another blanket? I never made it a habit of giving money, but often listened to what people said they needed, and sometimes what they needed most was a safe place to sleep where they wouldn't be disturbed!

The painter obviously had compassion for the denizen of the doorway. But in not wanting to disturb the person, only to take their photo and paint them, was that deflecting a responsibility or at least another option: to disturb the person; to disturb poverty?

The scene painted by the artist caused an unintended disturbance. Memory took me to past years of evangelical fervor when we regularly recited the biblical verse from The Revelation: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." We prayed it and preached it, believing that the Lord is standing at every human heart asking to come in (one origin of "accepting Christ into your heart"). The painted image of the person on the porch presents a more disturbing picture. What if we read the verse in a more troubling way: "Behold, I sleep in your doorway, and wait."

I'm not suggesting we "see the Lord in the poor."

The way I view it, we need to really "see" people and their poverty.

Our chaplaincy team shared a belief that "spiritualizing is ultimately dehumanizing" – that if our personal beliefs cause us to "look for God on the streets," or turn someone's suffering into a personal "spiritual lesson," we might be seriously disturbed! At worst, our beliefs can serve to keep people in poverty, in suffering. No one intends that. But until we decide to be "disturbers of poverty," even if our actions create a disturbance – in us or our community – we may pass by and ignore the very ones King said will "revolutionize our era," who can be tumultuous to our faith traditions.

Poverty needs disturbing. Maybe it's time to disturb poverty, because poverty is real people who suffer, who cause disturbance and turn our faith upside down. "Going to church" may be transformed into "going into doorways," or opening doors, unsurprised when a disturber dares to come in the front.

As I walked out the door onto the cold and windy street that morning, I mused: If Jesus was invited to church, would he show up? Or would we find him disturbing poverty in a doorway nearby?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.