Guarding The Gates of Eden

Communion, Comfort, and Keeping Out The Least of These

By Rose Proctor

"Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there."
— Revelation 21:25

Introduction

On September 7, 2024, I was out hiking with my friend through Washington Park, and I recommended we grab a bite to eat at the Fred Meyer around the corner and sit on the cathedral steps to eat. We sat down and started unpacking our lunch when a man with a gun came around the corner and motioned for us to leave. Instead, we went down the street to the synagogue, sat on the short wall next to the sidewalk, and ate there instead.

Following this experience, I began sitting on the church steps, building community trust between ourselves and the neighbors who come to our doors every day (except Sunday) for a meal and fellowship. I've made friends, asked questions, and tried to get a comprehensive understanding of the situation. I've spoken to staff, volunteers, and church leadership about why we feel we need a guard.

Sitting on those steps, I've been asked to leave by the guards many times. They claim that my presence will inevitably attract others and, before long, a group will have congregated on the church steps. I stood up and replied, "Someday I sure hope so," before I left.

The truth is that Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, while preaching a message of radical hospitality, faces pressures as an institution that ensures the hospitality we extend is anything but radical. While the church may be hamstrung by legal pressures, liability concerns, and a sense of "decorum," we as congregants are not bound by the same constraints. We have the ability to bridge the gap created by the high ideals of an institution organized in such a way as to sabotage those same ideals.

In light of that reality, we need to consider as a congregation what our part in the gospel really is. Is it to dress nicely and come to a perfectly manicured cathedral every morning, or could it be far more than that?

Who Am I?

To provide context: My name is Rose Proctor. I've been going to Trinity Episcopal Cathedral since around August of 2023, and I'm a transfemme

ex-sex-worker who's been homeless three times in my life. While I was fortunate enough to find couches to sleep on rather than having to stay on the streets, I know what it's like to have your life reduced to what you can carry—sometimes in a car, sometimes in a suitcase, and once just in paper bags. The precarity and stress of not having stable housing, of depending on others for shelter, gives me a different perspective on the current crisis than many in our congregation.

This experience informs my current work and perspective. I am passionate about contemplation fueling direct action, community engagement, and social justice. I've been a political organizer before, when I lived in Michigan, organizing grassroots action to defend and build community. One event I organized was an alternative free pride event that drew hundreds of people who brought their own contributions, leading to impromptu stations where people shared food and non-perishables, set up a free clothing closet, local artists sold their art, and local musicians performed. Local activist groups stepped in to provide protection from right-wing pride protesters, and we protested the paid entrance fee and exploitation of gay culture at the corporate pride event.

My time as a sex worker has taught me much about human nature and relating to others who are far different from myself in an embodied way. I take the insights I gleaned from that portion of my life into my everyday interactions with people, understanding the importance of listening and validating those who are struggling and lonely with empathy and grace.

What is Happening?

As we all have probably observed, Portland is currently going through a combined housing and drug crisis. Rev. Shana informed me that in the middle of the summer, the numbers of folks receiving food at the pantry every day suddenly doubled. Drug use on the cathedral grounds has become impossible to ignore or avoid, and people leave quite a mess on our steps. The sextons work very hard to keep the grounds beautiful, but from what I've seen, the work is largely thankless and futile—like building a sandcastle against a rising tide.

The Church's Response

The church's response to these challenges has concerned me immensely. I was alarmed that my church would resort to hiring a man with a gun to chase away undesirables from the church steps. At around 4 every weekday, the man with a gun arrives to "secure the perimeter," which includes removing sleeping and injured folks who obviously have no better place to go. These are not anonymous threats but people with names and stories: Trish, Aljnay, Steve, Conrad, Frank, just to name a few. They're here seeking sanctuary and community like the rest of us. When they are driven away, they don't just disappear; they show up time and time again, only to be asked to leave once more.

I've learned about dangerous confrontations between sextons and drug dealers who were themselves armed and threatening our church staff for attempting to prevent drug deals on the grounds. One sexton shared with me his experience of having a gun pulled on him by a dealer—a genuinely traumatic situation that emerged from attempts to prevent drug activity on church grounds. The institutional role itself creates these dangers: staff members are more likely to face violence precisely because their position marks them as authorities trying to control the space. Meanwhile, I can sit safely on the steps because I'm often seen as part of the street community rather than an enforcer. Drug transactions themselves, when left unimpeded, rarely lead to violence—it's the enforcement and intervention themselves that often escalate situations into dangerous confrontations.

Sunday Contradictions

The presence of armed security has become so normalized that the guard stands outside the grounds during worship, known to the street community as "Walker Texas Ranger," who they recognize easily by his cowboy hat, since he doesn't wear his security uniform on Sundays. While we are inside the church doors, experiencing community, acceptance, and preaching "radical hospitality" and an Eucharist open to all, there is a man with a gun maintaining our comfortable distance from a population that is hungry, tired, cold, injured, and sick.

Building Bridges Between Communities

The reality is that, at Trinity, there are two communities: the worshiping community and the street community. These communities remain segregated despite living shoulder to shoulder with each other throughout the week in the city at large. The difference is that one community is treated as first-class citizens at the expense of the other.

The Sunday morning after my own experience of exclusion on the steps, the New Testament reading was from James 2, and the sermon was about the Syrophoenician woman who retorted to Jesus after being called a "dog," that "even the dogs are fed the scraps from the table." I nearly stood up and walked out in the middle of it all. Instead, that moment became my resolution to sit out on the cathedral steps, start building community with our houseless neighbors, and learn as much as I could about why Trinity feels the threat of violent force is a justified response to the current crisis we are facing.

This is why I take a sharps container with me for handling drug paraphernalia and carry Narcan in case I witness an overdose. I've taken time to talk to as many people—both on the street and in the church—about the nature of the crisis and their feelings about it, whether they be of concern, fear, or exclusion. I stand especially near people who are sleeping and make sure they can rest undisturbed. I make friends, particularly with people who regularly come around for the food pantry or shelter under the big red doors.

During my time on the steps and in conversations with church staff, this is what I've observed happening on the ground: The physical manifestation of exclusionary policies has resulted in armed security enforcing boundaries, the physical removal of vulnerable people, and the normalized presence of "Walker Texas Ranger" even during Sunday worship. The segregation between the worshiping and street communities is stark—despite sharing city space throughout the week, one community is treated as first-class citizens while the other faces armed exclusion. The real human impact is impossible to ignore on those steps, as known individuals, the sick, and the sleeping are routinely confronted by a man with a gun and excluded from the community for the audacity to seek shelter and peace.

Understanding how we arrived at a place where armed force is seen as a necessary response to human suffering requires examining the fears, assumptions, and contradictions that have brought us here.

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Why is this happening?

To understand how we got here—how a church came to post armed guards against hungry people—we need to look honestly at our motivations. Our response to crisis stems from fear, from institutional self-preservation, from choosing comfort over gospel demands. We've turned real people into abstract problems, traded direct relationships for "proper channels," and prioritized protecting property over protecting the vulnerable. These reactions might feel natural, but they directly contradict our claimed values and Christ's teachings.

Fear and Institutional Self-Protection

This response stems from fears that are both understandable and valid. I get the sense that Trinity, at last, resorted to hiring a man with a gun in the absence of obvious alternatives. Concerns have been raised around property damage, the fear of liability, the fear of losing comfortable congregants, and the fear of direct engagement with drug use and poverty.

The property damage is constant and visible. Sextons spend their mornings cleaning the garbage left over every day from food pantry hours and repairing what they can. Sometimes there is human waste that must be cleaned and washed off the steps. Needles are sometimes left in the doorways, although that is not a very prevalent form of drug use out here from my personal experience. The costs of repairs and cleaning mount up, straining already limited resources.

Liability concerns have also been cited, with legal risks of letting people

sleep, use drugs, or potentially getting injured on church property creating real institutional vulnerabilities. Insurance requirements and legal advice often push toward greater security and clearer boundaries, frequently conflicting with the Christian obligation to love our neighbor.

The impact on regular congregation members can't be ignored. Some families have expressed concerns about their children encountering drug paraphernalia or witnessing drug use first-hand. Longtime members have shared their discomfort with sharing the steps with the houseless and addicted. There are real worries that declining attendance could lead to declining donations if people don't feel safe coming to worship.

The direct engagement with drug use and poverty presents real challenges and sometimes dangers. Staff members have faced threatening situations. The complexity of addiction and homelessness feels overwhelming, especially when individual outreach attempts often seem to make little difference.

Abstraction over Concrete Reality

Another very real reason we find ourselves in this position is our tendency to euphemize violence and abstract away human beings into manageable categories. This process of abstraction distances us as a congregation from the real human impact of our policies, and it fundamentally changes how we respond to human need. "A man with a gun" becomes "security." Individuals with names become "the homeless" or "the addicted." Real human experiences become "incidents," and direct relationships become "proper channels."

To do their job, the man with the gun often uses body language if possible to move people along. If they don't respond to body language, they'll approach and say something along the lines of "I can't have you sitting out here right now" or "I need you to pack up your stuff and move along." If someone is sleeping, they'll wake them up.

I find my friend Conrad sleeping on the church steps often. They leave him alone until the guard shows up (which is around 2-4pm), and the guard wakes him up. Conrad usually gets mad at the guard, but the last time I saw Conrad, Elise and another sexton came to wake him up and ask him to leave. I noticed and just started saying his name: "Conrad, Conrad, the sextons are trying to close down the grounds for now because there's an event happening and they need to use these stairs. Can I walk you down the block to a better place to sleep?" When we got to the synagogue down the street, Conrad asked me for a hug, and of course I gave him one.

His response to the man with the gun is... less graceful. In another instance, I had to step in to de-escalate a situation between the guard and Conrad who had become upset, presumably because it's threatening to be approached by a man with a gun.

Institutional Thinking

Institutional thinking is a large barrier for most people to become engaged in directly including the street community in the church. All of the responsibility is laid on the staff and volunteers who maintain an institutional distance from the population they are serving. Returning to my example with Conrad, that institutional distance is evidenced in church staff not knowing people's names on the street despite holding their positions for years. And why should they? That's the volunteers' jobs.

In Simone Weil's The Need for Roots, she discusses the converse of human rights—human obligations. When we say that a person has a right, for instance, to food and shelter, we often fall back on institutional thinking to absolve our personal obligation to help secure those rights. In a similar way, many consider our charitable programs to be giving as much as we can given our resource constraints, and many consider their donation to the church as their contribution towards the poor, assuming that their obligations are fulfilled despite maintaining a sense of institutionalism and distance from their struggling neighbors in the flesh.

We have a system at Trinity where "helping the homeless" means delegating to programs rather than knowing our neighbors. When we see someone doing drugs on the church steps, our first impulse is to control the behavior, to ask them to stop, that they "can't do that here," rather than learning the person's name and building rapport that can go a long way in future scenarios where the person can be asked to not use drugs on church grounds from a place of mutual respect.

We have convinced ourselves that professional distance is safer than personal connection and structured charitable programs are more effective than personal relationships, and that our financial contributions absolve us of the need for direct personal engagement. However, this is an insufficient response to the housing and drug crisis our neighbors are facing, precisely because institutional pressures are what led to this atmosphere of segregation and exclusion.

Material Conditions and Their Consequences

Property Damage is Communication

It is no secret that the housing and drug crisis in Portland is exactly that: a crisis. As I mentioned before, recently the food pantry numbers doubled and drug use became more common to witness on the church property. Property damage is frequent, and I have already mentioned the infrequent, but very real threat of violence. My friend Trish looked at the property damage, and she asked me why people feel so unheard that they fling shit at the doors?

That question gets to the heart of it. The property damage isn't just a response to the housing crisis—it's a response to an institution that has chosen to maintain barriers rather than relationships.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Exclusion

On the ground, the church's response to the heightened property damage and threats of violence has been to tighten schedules and create more guidelines which essentially act as conditions to participation in what should be freely given. Furthermore, these are not natural or inevitable responses—they are institutional choices that create the very problems they claim to solve.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that feeding the hungry is something we should stop doing. Rather the contrary, that we are obligated and have the profound opportunity to step even closer to our suffering brothers and sisters and provide them not just food, but also community when everyone else has denied them that right.

Two Tables, One Church

For another example, there are two meals on Wednesday: a beautiful hot meal for those on the street who are hungry and need a dry place to be for a few moments (it's actually quite touching), and later in the evening, a meal for class attendees to which no one from the street is invited to participate. This separation isn't required by external conditions—it's a choice the institution makes to maintain comfortable distance. It may seem quite practical and natural to keep these particular meals distinct, but this fact can possibly provide a hint as to how we might be able to change the material conditions to foster greater community integration.

During events, people are segregated between churchgoers and pantry attendees. I noticed that when I came to the door, they kept telling me

"there's an event inside, the food pantry is over here" when I went to go into the event myself after grabbing a snack. Because of the division between church community and pantry community, the volunteers couldn't imagine me being there for both. This wasn't their personal failure—they were acting out the segregation the institution had trained them to maintain.

Conclusion

The institution hasn't just responded to a crisis—it has created a system of division that generates its own crises, then uses those crises to justify even more division. Each boundary it creates produces new tensions that it then uses to justify more boundaries, in an endless cycle of institutional self-protection at the cost of human relationship.

What Ought to be Happening?

In a utopian world, obviously, we wouldn't be facing this crisis of housing instability and drug use. But we are. We also wouldn't be in a world that further stigmatizes housing instability and drug use, or where capitalist forces (like insurance) force our institutions to betray gospel values to keep their doors open.

So really, the task is up to each of us to dream up alternatives, and I invite any reader to think how they can create their own vision of what ought to be happening. I would like to provide a vision of what could be possible instead of prescribing any specific path.

From Charity to Solidarity

I've seen glimpses of what is possible when we move from a primarily charity-based model to cultivating true solidarity with our neighbors. Charity asks how to help people while maintaining a comfortable, institutional distance. Solidarity asks, "What's your name?" and sits down on the steps to share lunch. Charity creates food pantry hours and rules about when people may or may not be present. Solidarity notices when Frank is sleeping and stands watch so he can rest safely. Charity worries about liability when someone uses drugs on church grounds. Solidarity is carrying Narcan because we care if our neighbors live or die.

Charity is baked into every outreach program we have at Trinity. It maintains a helper/helped binary that imprints an inherent power imbalance, with the recipient on the disadvantaged side of that imbalance. This is evidenced in the separation between churchgoers and the street community meals and events, like the separate Wednesday meal or the way volunteers couldn't imagine me belonging to both communities.

Building Real Relationships

My own practice of sitting on the steps is first and foremost an act of solidarity. This is why I haven't volunteered directly—I wanted to transgress those boundaries between the helper and the helped. In return, I am recognized and respected as a helpful member of the street community. I build relationships, engage in conversations, and share moments of joy with my friends at the food pantry.

Instead of encouraging the volunteer staff to follow suit (although it would be fantastic), I want to encourage every reader that they don't have to volunteer to help. Neighborly help is needed whether or not you wear a red apron. In fact, the red apron might do more to distance oneself from one's neighbors through social signifiers. Our distance from those we most want to help is ingrained even in the way we dress.

Practical Steps Forward

Our food pantry guests and neighbors ought to be included in the decisions we make that affect them. We could do this, for example, by announcing community meetings at the doorway of the pantry, so that next time there is a security meeting, we might hear from those who are directly affected by the security policies on a day-to-day basis.

Another possibility would be to have a joint meal on Sundays, an agape meal where our neighbors are invited to join us to break bread together.

We can stand witness while the security guard removes sleeping people from the steps. If they can't sleep on the steps, where might they be able to sleep? Can we take a moment in our day to recognize the humanity in another person, to meet our neighbors where they are instead of demanding they rise out of their misfortune before association?

Even drug dealers can be related to as human beings—I have made friends with a couple of them in the neighborhood. Consider the difference that

relationship creates in contrast to coercion by an armed guard. Safety is built on a foundation of mutual trust rather than mutual suspicion.

How Might We Respond?

Christ taught us to welcome the stranger, to befriend the prostitutes, and spend time and build community with the outcast. He didn't command us to look for the best deductible on our cathedral insurance, or make sure the red doors remain spotless. Christ came as a gritty man from Galilee and touched lepers, and died a gruesome, dirty death. This is not a gospel of vestments but of vulnerability.

Biblical Witness

The early church insisted on breaking down these barriers. Consider James 2:

> *"My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality. For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here in a good place, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit by my footstool,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?"*
>
> — *James 2:1-7*

Or the example set in the Acts by the early church:

> *"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions,*

> *but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."*
>
> — *Acts 4:32-35*

We can choose to adapt our interpretation of the Bible to be more "practical," but then what right does Trinity Episcopal have to claim "radical" hospitality when our own holy book gives us examples of what the word radical actually means without even using it?

We can't come to church on Sunday, listen to nice words about welcoming the stranger, throw some money in a collection plate, and assume that absolves us from our responsibility—not just as Christians, but as humans, one to the other—to secure each other's rights to dignity, food, shelter, medical care, and so on.

> *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."*
>
> — *Matthew 25:40*

When we see the presence of God in our struggling siblings, should we really be asking how to fix or manage them? Would we fix or manage God? Instead, perhaps, we would be quicker to listen than to manage. Quicker to help, yes, but to accept help as well. That's how we can give each other dignity.

Moving Forward Together

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral lies in a difficult position. Housed neighbors are becoming angry with the church's food pantry, and they are placing a stigma on the practice of loving our neighbors. Armed conflict has occurred on cathedral grounds, forcing the church as an institution to respond in kind, even considering security fencing to keep people off of the property. The church has to navigate law enforcement, liability concerns, and comfortable,

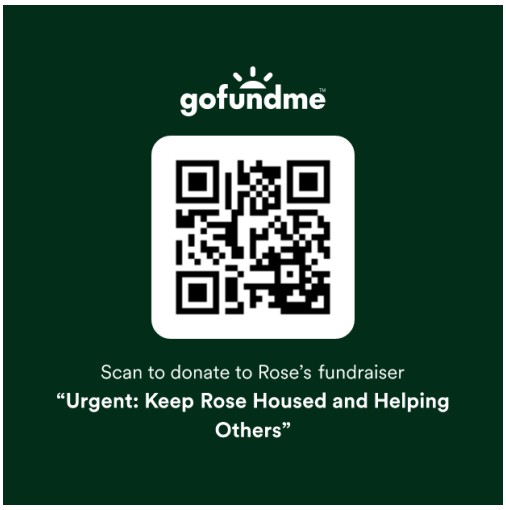
wealthy congregants' generous donations. But as human beings who just happen to go to this church, we are not bound by the same limitations.

We can watch our neighbors as they sleep. We can overcome our prejudices and fears. We can learn how to use Narcan and carry it with us as we go about our days. We can not only save lives, but build trust and a community that truly cares for each other. We can educate each other on the realities of our lives. We can learn how to break bread together.

Join Me

As a first step, I encourage anyone who can to join me on the steps. I'm usually there on Fridays and Saturdays, but my time is limited because of my lack of income. If you're interested in joining me out there, text me at 503-729-8623 or email me at rosemkatt@gmail.com, and I would be delighted to have you.

I'm also facing eviction and need help finding stable housing to continue this work. The systems I'm critiquing in this zine aren't abstract - they're actively affecting my ability to maintain this presence on the steps. If you can help or know of housing options, please reach out.



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