A recent report released in August 2015 by the Economic Roundtable, a nonprofit research group based in Los Angeles, reveals that about 13,000 people fall into homelessness every month in Los Angeles County. That sheer number surprises even those who work in the field, and challenges those of us with faith to ask what we can do to help our sisters and brothers with no place to live. Besides advocating for affordable and subsidized housing, as well as effective public assistance programs, what can we do? How do we put into action, in our commute to work or daily activities, the directive Pope Francis gives us when he says “Go out. Go out and share your testimony, go out and interact with your brothers (and sisters), go out and share, go out and ask. Become the Word in body as well as spirit.”?

We might begin becoming the Word for others by coming to terms with the reasons we shut people out-communally and individually. Miroslav Volf proposes the radical notion of embrace as a response to exclusion. “And if we, the communal selves are called into eternal communion with the triune God, then true justice will always be on the way to embrace—to a place where we will belong together with our personal and cultural identities both preserved and transformed, but certainly enriched by the other.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Every Sunday we re-enact the expansive actions of a God who modeled for us complete and utter embrace, “The Eucharist is the ritual time in which we celebrate this divine ‘making-space-for-us-and-inviting-us-in.’”[[2]](#footnote-2) It also centers around a table. This is not a coincidence. The table is where all come to be fed, physically and spiritually. Even if not at a table, can we offer to share a snack, or meal, with someone obviously in need?

The table fellowship that is so prominent in Lukan writings reveals the radically different meal partners Jesus had. “While meals in the ancient world often function to consolidate the boundary of an existing community, many meal scenes in Luke aim instead at breaking such boundaries.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus eats with those one might not expect, “tax collectors and sinners” (Lk. 5:30, 7:34, 15:10). The tax collectors represent those not in the mainstream, the outcasts (cf. 3:12; 18:9-14 , 19:1-10), the sinners, the unclean and impure (cf. 6:32-34; 18:13; 19:7). “By participating in fellowship with these stereotypical groups, the Lukan Jesus challenges the traditional boundaries of God’s community.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Might not the local homeless shelter be a likely place to mimic the example of Jesus?

In three years of weekly visits to Isaiah House, I have observed that there are different manners of practicing hospitality to strangers, some more Christian than others. Some pray before serving, either with the women or not. Several weeks ago, a well-meaning gentleman began the prayer in their backyard, “welcoming” them, which was awkward, as it is actually their space, more than his. Some food preparers socialize with the residents before meals are served, chatting with those they are familiar with, and eating with them. Others do not. Some food-servers have the women come up to the high pass-through counter to receive their plates of food through the window area, while others invite the ladies to come directly through the large kitchen to receive their meal, an experience allowing for much more interaction.

If we have not often experienced need or marginality, we might not be able to identify with being on the receiving end, and all that that entails. Evagrius Ponticus, a Christian monk and ascetic of the fourth century, writes, “there is great shame from accepting the necessities of life from another.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Father Gregory Boyle speaks of shame being the root of all addictions. It affects not only our relationship with others, but that with our Creator, “Shame has a profound effect on one’s intra-and interpersonal life. It has the power to induce feelings of inadequacy about oneself, inferiority relative to others, and a sense of deficiency relative to a relationship with God.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

There is a danger of perpetuating this debilitating sense of shame if we are not able to approach the other with humility. Spending time is necessary, as is a willingness to spend self. We can insist upon maintaining the distinction between server and served, giver and recipient, or we can realize that as Father Boyle proclaims: “we are mutually in need of healing.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Meister Eckhart was “not so much concerned with works as with the spirit with which we perform them.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Boyle speaks along the same lines when he says that the measure of compassion does not equal service, but the willingness to be in kinship with another. If we insist on taking the role of hosts, and therefore allocate the role of guest to the one in need, we reinforce the stigma already there. The provider of food/resources must be able to receive also, even, and perhaps especially, from one who has little to give. “There is a complex dance between recognizing our own need, ministering to those in need, and recognizing their ministry to us.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Looking at someone without judgment and with love, with what Leia Smith of the Orange County Catholic Worker calls an “eye blessing,” can help with healing. There might be some awkwardness at first, on both sides, but putting ourselves, deliberately in a new situation might be the first step towards softening our stony hearts and replacing them with more compassionate ones.[[10]](#footnote-10) Being open to conversion experiences may not come naturally or comfortably to those of us who are wary of new situations. However, exposing our lives, and hopefully therefore, our hearts, to others who differ from us may, with time, reintroduce us to the Savior who resides in each of us.

1. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996),129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David W. Pao, “Waiters or Preachers: Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan Table Fellowship Motif,” Journal of Biblical Literature. April 2011. 130 (1), 127-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James M. Bowler, “Shame: A Primary Root of Resistance to Movement in Direction” Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International. September 1997. 3 (3): 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fr. Gregory Boyle’s talk, January 20, 2012, West LA United Methodist Church [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies, (New York, NY:Penguin Classics, 1994), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ezek. 36:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)