

“Angels Among Us”

Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day, 2021

Kevin Lindamood’s remarks delivered at McKeldin Plaza on 12/21

Here’s a poem by **Maya Angelou** entitled ***Touched by an Angel...***

*We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.*

*Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.*

*We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love’s light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.*

Angels among us. That’s the theme of this year’s Homeless Persons’ Memorial Day. And there are too many angels among us tonight.

We speak a lot of angels in contemporary society – in both religious and secular ways. We utter the word in response to kindness: “*Oh thank you, you’re such an angel.*” Or to hint at a less than angelic demeanor: “*Well, he’s no angel.*” We speak of *fallen angels*. Poets and politicians routinely summon the *better angels* of our nature.

Sometimes angels act as guides between another realm and this one. They watch over. They guard. They protect. Consider the names read aloud tonight – these friends and strangers and neighbors who died of homelessness – I know that some of them are speaking to us. What are they saying?

Sometimes angels are messengers, inspiring awe, heralding better days to come. Many faith traditions associated with this Christmas season feature an angel-as-messenger bringing good tidings of great joy for all people. What messages are the angels among us delivering to you tonight?

Occasionally in our mythology and stories, angels strike fear and vengeance. And sometimes I think we’d do well to be visited by vengeful angels – this richest nation in the history of history who’s racism and

misguided origin story of rugged independence produce an unsustainable gap between the have-a-lots and the have nothings who, hungry and cold and homeless, die on our streets. This divided nation that doesn't guarantee access to health care, that disinvests in affordable housing, that can't even seem to get itself together enough to provide the most basic and modest financial assistance to people struggling two years into a devastating pandemic. Sometimes angels bring vengeance. What is our response to it?

There are far too many angels among us tonight.

But let's be mindful of how much time we spend thinking about angels. *How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?* That's a question that first appeared in the 17th Century, used to deride philosophers and theologians of the middle ages who lost themselves in contemplating the hierarchies and metaphysical properties of angels. In common usage, it's become "a metaphor for wasting time debating topics of no practical value, or questions whose answers hold no intellectual consequence, while more urgent concerns accumulate."

Wow. How often do we – in our personal and professional lives – find ourselves debating topics of no practical value while more urgent concerns accumulate? How often do we debate and defend limited definitions of homelessness – who gets help and who doesn't – while an affordable housing crisis sends more people to shelters and the streets? How do we, in the ways we live our own daily lives, maintain a status quo that upholds racial inequities and creates homelessness?

We've been here so many times before. Many of us have advocated for the public policies necessary to end homelessness for decades – and here we are at yet another damn memorial. We know all too well that homelessness kills.

While we rightly seek answers from those in power, let's first ask ourselves what we have the power to answer. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. reflected that "power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love." Echoing the words of Dr. King, Dr. Cornel West summarizes that "Justice is what love looks like in public." What does it mean for society to harness this kind of love and power? Individually and collectively, how can we become what love looks like in public?

I think Maya Angelou was answering – and asking – the same questions, too...

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