

The churls and the charitable

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Christopher Fairchild is the editor of Panacea magazine and Welcome to Fayette magazine, and works as a photographer and graphic designer for Fayette Newspapers.

In 1838, the English novelist Charles Dickens, who always had an eye out for society's misfortunate, wrote in "Oliver Twist":

"Bleak, dark, and piercing cold, it was a night for the well-housed and fed to draw round the bright fire and thank God they were at home; and for the homeless, starving wretch to lay him down and die. Many hunger-worn outcasts close their eyes in our bare streets, at such times, who, let their crimes have been what they may, can hardly open them in a more bitter world."

In our own time, things have ostensibly gotten better for the struggling poor, both in sheer reduction of numbers, as well as in available social safety nets. This improvement in how we treat our fellow citizens is by no means complete or foolproof, and many individuals find themselves, often through mere accident of circumstance, opening their eyes on cold mornings to a bitter, distant world. The homeless are still amongst us. Some, indeed, may have been driven to live such lives due to mental illness, but too many people find themselves without shelter because of dearth of means, the expense of remaining within the safe boundaries of society beyond their reach. Still others are driven to leave their homes because of safety issues; an abusive parent or spouse making it impossible not to make an escape from the

homestead. For many of us, a few bad turns of luck could soon render us into the hunger-worn outcasts of the bare streets that Mr. Dickens describes.

This is precisely what happened earlier this month in Tyrone. A group of individuals (I don't know if they considered themselves a family or not) found themselves with no other choice but to sleep in Veterans' Memorial Park in downtown Tyrone. I'd venture to guess that such things don't occur much in Fayette County (but probably more than we are aware of), and so the guests attracted attention among some of the locals. The police department was called with many ideas of how to help the people, as well as with less-generous entreaties for the TPD to remove the individuals from the park.

The Chief of Police, Brandon Perkins, penned a letter in response to those entreaties that he then shared on the Tyrone Police Department's Facebook page. One might get the idea that Chief Perkins has read his Dickens, or maybe he just knows his Constitution really well. Whichever it is, he's apparently got a pretty big heart.

His post read:

"We've had a lot of calls over the past week or so in reference to a small group of individuals who have been hanging out and presumably sleeping at Veterans Park due to some personal circumstances that have left them homeless. Some inquiries have been out of concern and others have been downright nasty as in, 'I don't want those people in my town.'"

Folks, the Department of Justice has ruled that ordinances or laws that prohibit sleeping in public spaces when other forms of shelter are not available (anyone want to open a shelter in Tyrone?) are unconstitutional (violation of the 8th Amendment). Therefore, we do not have any such laws on the books in Tyrone.

Homelessness is part of life and its presence can be seen in ANY city – large or small, rich or poor – and Tyrone certainly isn't immune from it. This will be increasingly true as Tyrone grows.

Call us if:

They're camping on private property.

They're breaking the law.

They're disturbing the peace.

Otherwise: live and let live.

If you're the praying type, I'm sure they'd appreciate a few of those!

Enjoy your Saturday!

-Chief"

The responses to Chief Perkins's post on Facebook were overwhelmingly supportive and sympathetic. Many of the people (presumably Tyrone residents) wanted to know how they could help the individuals in need, and many offered ideas of where they could receive help to get back on their feet. There were, however a few selfish/scared residents who took the Chief to task for his decision not to force the homeless folk from the park.

I don't have any way of knowing Chief Perkins's religious beliefs, but perhaps in addition to knowing Dickens and the Law, the Chief also knows the Bible pretty well. The book abounds with passages about giving to the poor and helping those in need. I literally could fill the entire page of this newspaper with just the verses dealing with this subject. Here are a couple of particularly pertinent ones:

Proverbs 19:17: Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.

Deuteronomy 15:7: If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother.

This next one perhaps is the best as it pertains to Chief Perkins:

Proverbs 29:7: A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.

It's this consistent theme throughout the Bible that makes one wonder how so many so-called Christians can follow a man such as televangelist Joel Osteen, amongst many others of his ilk (such as our own Creffo Dollar); those men that preach a gospel of prosperity rather than a gospel of charity. Osteen is reportedly worth over \$50 million and lives in a 17,000 square foot mansion. He preaches that God will reward the pious with material wealth. Conversely, that implies that God does not favor the poor and that fact has led to their dire circumstances. That is an all-out rejection of what the Christian Bible professes and anyone who denies that is either self-deluding or a liar. (Stage direction: Jesus crosses arms, purses lips, and shakes head slowly). Osteen proved his mettle during the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey last year in Houston. He refused to open his massive Lakewood Church auditorium to refugees of the flood, until pressured to do so by public shaming. If you are religious, it all comes down to whether your religion is based on faith in the teaching of Jesus and the dictums of God, or if it is based on which church will give you the greatest status amongst the status-conscious. Basically, a social club: you pay dues, you get friends, you can exclude whom you don't like. Including the Living Poor. Most of the residents of Tyrone seem to genuinely want to help their brothers in need. A few bad apples obviously do not.

We could all use a lot fewer dogs in the manger like Joel Osteen. But, if there are any more fellows like Brandon Perkins around, please send them our way.