

## “Abandoned Lives”

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In 1970, 25 years after this church was founded, *Midnight Cowboy* won the Oscar for best picture. It was not an obvious choice at the time. It was up against some pretty heavy competition – John Wayne’s western *True Grit* and the crowd pleasing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman.

It was a huge surprise for all sorts of reasons. *Midnight Cowboy* is the first and only x-rated movie to win an Oscar for best picture. It earned the x not because it features graphic sex – it doesn’t, all the sex happens off screen. No, it was x-rated because it featured homosexuals. That was considered too psychologically harmful for a general audience. The gay director, John Schlesinger didn’t mind, he thought it would be good to get the film some publicity.

*Midnight Cowboy* is the story of two marginalized young men in New York City.



Joe Buck, played by John Voight, is a young Texan who arrives wearing a cowboy hat and boots. His dream is to be a male prostitute, a hustler of rich women. But the women of New York are too worldly for this hayseed, and end up hustling him, from his first day. He is soon plunged into hopeless poverty.



He is robbed and then befriended by Ricco, played by a young Dustin Hoffman. He is a gay man with a limp, who is also a petty thief. They become friends, living in an unheated apartment in an abandoned building.

Ricco is in love with Joe, but it is unrequited. Nevertheless, they form a strong loving bond that lasts through thick and thin as they are ripped off and abandoned by the people of New York City.

Back in 1969, critics were not kind to the film. They didn't like its rawness, many disliked the way the theme song, which we heard William and Polly perform, kept cropping up over and over again in montage sequences.<sup>1</sup> But what is most striking about the reviews of the day is the way the critics referred to the characters. Terms like "homo" and "cripple" were used.<sup>2</sup> This was a time when a person could be called a cripple or homosexual and that would be the end of the conversation. Once those labels were applied you knew all you needed to know about a person. We all hope that we have come a lot further than that. But terms like "homeless" or "transgendered" or even "Trumpist" still have the same power. Labels that sum up who a person is, labels that serve to define a person with a simple word.

In today's gospel reading we are warned that as believers, we should not be judgemental. "Judge not lest ye be judged." It sounds like a commandment, and often that's all we hear or remember. But as you heard in the passage Danielle read, those words are just a short sentence at the beginning of a longer passage that contains the famous example of log in someone's eye, and the promise, seek and ye shall find. Nothing in the New Testament is written in a random or careless way. Ink and scrolls were too expensive back then to allow for over-written, repetitive passages. So, we can assume that we are meant to keep reading after Jesus declares we should not judge others. So, let's see whether what comes after those famous words can help us understand *why* we shouldn't be judgmental.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Ebert, "Midnight Cowboy," *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 05, 1969

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Landry, "Midnight Cowboy," *Variety*, May 14, 1969.

Christ follows up that injunction with the example of a person who is trying to remove a speck in someone else's eye, ignoring that they have a log in their own eye. It's a vivid, exaggerated image. If you take it literally, it would look like this:



Clearly impossible.

So, we are not talking about literal sight here, we must be talking about spiritual insight.<sup>3</sup> You think you can see into another person's character, and you see a flaw. But before you try to fix them, you should tend to the impairment of your own spiritual vision, the log in your own eye. All those faults in ourselves which we happily overlook as we put down others for their faults. It's interesting that Jesus doesn't say take care of the speck in your own eye before you tend to someone else's speck. He implies that in our rush to judge others, we are revealing that our spiritual vision is clouded by more than just a speck, it is more like a log. Our urge to judge others appears to be the log in our eye, the impulse which is holding us back spiritually. But that raises the question, why is judging someone else such a problem? There *are* bad people out there doing bad things, why should our spiritual state be impaired by calling them out on it?

Judging others can be a delicious pass time. It feels good when we judge others because in judging, we are puffing ourselves up. We feel empowered. We have assumed a position above them, as though we are standing on a ladder. But the harm in judging is that we think we are seeing clearly, even when we are not. And this may be why Christ chose a metaphor about sight to speak about the dangers of judgement.

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, Book 2, ch22.



In *Midnight Cowboy*, people think they know everything they need to know about Joe and Rico when they see them on the street. Hustler, Homosexual, Cripple. But as the film shows, they are much more than these mere labels suggest. These two men whom society has labelled are loving towards each other, they have dreams, and they have nightmares.

Joe Buck is haunted by a past he never talks about. In flashbacks we see he and his girlfriend being caught having sex, and then they are raped by a gang. He is living with a trauma that makes him desperate to reassert his manhood as a lover, who will be paid for his sexuality. No one could ever guess by looking at him how he got there, or what is haunting him.

We are all more complex than any label can ever capture. In our neighbourhood, these issues have come up a lot lately in the debates about the Roehampton Hotel homeless shelter down near Yonge and Eglinton. The labels that have been tossed around are “homeless”, “addict”, “criminal.” The local neighbourhood has been divided over the shelter’s existence. Many wish it had never opened, while others see it as our city doing its part. But the animosity towards the residents has been clear. The city has found that one way of dealing with neighbourhood fears and concerns is to set up a committee, so condo boards, rate payer associations, and politicians can get together once a month with the shelter administrators to talk about issues, real and imagined. It also includes some local clergy, including myself.

The meetings are a great way to learn what is going on inside the shelter, and to find out more about who actually lives there. It turns out that most of the residents are male, on average around 50 years old. There are women there, although they are a minority. There are some couples, who get a room of their own, while others double up with residents of the same gender. There are lots of people who use opioids, but this doesn’t mean they spend their days high and incapable of functioning. Some can function quite well even with their addiction. Overdoses continue to occur, and one person died just before Christmas day.

Lately the shelter’s biggest challenge has been an outbreak of covid-19. It began a week or so before Christmas and is ongoing. As soon as it became clear COVID-19 was at Roehampton, a mass testing was conducted. It started in the morning, and by dinner time, there will still lots of people who hadn’t been tested. So the medical team waited until late into the night to test

everyone as they came in from the outside. The reason they were late? They were at work. That's right. They were at work, doing their shifts at their jobs. Our committee was surprised – what do you mean people in a homeless shelter have jobs? Aren't they in the shelter because they are unemployed?

It turns out there are many people in the shelter who have jobs - their problem is that they cannot find a place to live. This is common across the shelter system. We were told that each month for the last six months, 600 people have entered the shelters who have never been homeless before. They have lost their housing through evictions, renovictions, and other causes, and they simply can't find any place to stay. Even though they have jobs. This existed before, but it has become much worse over the past year.

So what does it mean to call someone "homeless?" As a label it does not reveal much beyond a state of housing. But in practice, when we speak of homeless people, the term comes with a whole set of assumptions – they are poor, they don't have a job, we may assume they are too lazy to work, or that they made bad life choices and that's why they ended up on the street. The term "homeless" isn't just a description, it is often used as a judgement.

I was told this week by a street nurse that the reason many homeless people use drugs is because they have been told over and over again by society that they are worthless. People tell them this to their faces, over and over again. And that value judgement against them turns into policy.



In Toronto, the police regularly give out tickets to homeless people, fining them for loitering or being in the wrong public space.

**42  
interactions  
with  
police per  
year.**



On average, people experiencing homelessness have 42 interactions with the police each year.<sup>4</sup> Think of that: 42 encounters with the police— how many have you had this year? Many of those encounters result in tickets being handed out which even the police know will never be paid.

But that doesn't stop the system from fining them for not showing up in court, and for not paying the ticket. So these people accrue a long list of prior offenses. A survey of Toronto jails found that one fifth of prisoners had been homeless at the time of their incarceration.<sup>5</sup> So, judging people experiencing homelessness has consequences. It can severely undermine their life prospects by judging them, both personally, and at a societal level.

Our gospel passage today suggests that there is a better way. We are told that if we can resist the temptation to judge others, we have the capacity to take that log out of our eye. But once it is removed, Jesus doesn't say "don't worry about the speck in your neighbour's eye". Instead, he says, *now* you can help them get that speck out. That person could be anyone who is suffering in their spiritual vision. Someone who has lost hope, or who is embroiled in anger or despair, clouding their vision. It could be your spouse, your friend, or a stranger. Jesus seems to be saying, until you deal with your own pride and egotism, you won't have the right kind of vision to be able to help another person.

"Judge not- " we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously, assuming that we have all the answers. We don't. We're probably wrong about everyone we have ever judged. None of us has enough information to know if that other person is doing the best they can or the worst, given their situation. In *Midnight Cowboy*, we slowly discover why Joe Buck is so determined to hustle wealthy older women. He's reacting to trauma in his past. You would never know it to look at him, just as none of us can ever really know what brought another person to place they are in life. The first step in wisdom is to realize that on your own, you don't have much.

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<sup>4</sup> Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, *Rethinking Community Safety: A Step Forward for Toronto*, 2021, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, *Rethinking Community Safety: A Step Forward for Toronto*, 2021, 6.

But once we have that log out of our own eye, Jesus suggests that we are at the beginning of a spiritual journey which will benefit us all. He says, Ask and it will be granted to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. Those are three stages in a spiritual journey when we leave judgmentalism behind.<sup>6</sup> The first stage is to ask – ask for something consistent with God’s way and it will be given to you. To ask means I have something specific in mind. Next comes seeking – that is more open ended. If you go house hunting, you know you want a place to live, but you don’t know exactly which place you will move into. Seeking is less well defined, it requires some trust that God will provide what we are seeking for, but we don’t know the particulars – and we’re ok with that. How many times have you decided to do some good for the world, but what you ended up doing was different from your original plan? When you agree to work for God, you never know what kind of assignment you will get, and that’s okay. The last statement in this passage is knock on the door and it will be opened for you. But what lies behind that door? Simple answer: you don’t know, and you can’t know. But you trust that God will be there, guiding you on the next step of this journey *with* God.

The spiritual path is not about knowing exactly how everything works. It can’t even start as long as we are slapping judgmental labels on everything we see. Judgement is like a lockdown that condemns us to be stuck in our own little worlds. Our spiritual journey is about giving up on that urge for certainty so we can be open to the world, and open to possibility. When we decide not to judge, our vision clears, that log is taken out of our eye. We see more than we suspected was possible, in others, and often in ourselves. The world becomes richer and our vision of it more accurate. And in that openness, God reveals a way of living where we will be rewarded as we seek to help God heal this world. Doors open to places we never suspected we could go. And it all starts with deciding not to judge, a journey that can begin, one step at a time, one day at a time.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, Book 2, ch21 for the sense of these three phrases being a progression.