

Unity Acres

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Dear Friends of Unity Acres,

And now, Israel, listen to the laws and customs which I am teaching you today, so that, by observing them, you may survive to enter and take possession of the country which Yahweh, God of your ancestors, is giving you... Deuteronomy 4:1

It's not untypical during the course of a day to receive several inquiries from various sources whether we might have a place available, a bed for a man, currently homeless and in need. Often the call will come from someone who has lived at the Acres at some time in the past, and who already 'knows the ropes'. Or perhaps, the caller will be someone we know quite well and who knows the Acres, and is making an informal referral. The person seeking a place for himself, or for whom a referral is being made, is almost certainly in a state of crisis of one sort or another: usually homeless, often having unmet health-care or other needs...

Not infrequently, the phone call (or email) will come to us from a hospital or other institution in another part of the state, or further afield, in another state, and we are left struggling to explain what Unity Acres is all about, when on the one hand the caller's expectations are stated in terms of programming and funding, lengths of stay, criterion for admission, and so on, and on the other, our customary language flows the experience of life in community, belonging, mutual assistance, and from our understanding of Scripture.

In liberating Israel from their condition of hard servitude in Egypt, God offers the people a sort of *quid pro quo*. God promises land and protection and prosperity, blessing and life, in return for the people's fidelity and observance of 'statutes and decrees'. God offers the people the blessing of land, a place of their own in which they could hope to live in security. The Land of Promise – a place of their own, a place of peace and security – is, in God's view, critical to the people's healing from their bitter experience of oppression.

Similarly, a place of healing, security and belonging is a critical need for homeless men seeking to join the Unity Acres community. This is true, even

when the man himself or the referring agency, is unable to articulate the concept in those terms. A place of safety and belonging and healing is offered in exchange for adherence to short list of “*dos* and *don'ts*” that constitute ‘community norms’ at Unity Acres. For many years these ‘rules’ were summarized in just two points: “no drinking and no violence.”

We have found it necessary and helpful to spell out more explicitly a few further points about cleanliness, ‘passes’, and so on, but the purpose of these few rules and guidelines is to assure that Unity Acres remains a safe and peaceful community for residents, staff, and volunteers.

But life in community is not primarily about rules and community norms. Our smart attorney-adviser years ago described Unity Acres as a “house of hospitality where men, seeking shelter from the turmoil and temptations of their lives, are welcome to come and stay ‘a day or a lifetime’ in a community which asks only that they keep the peace that is given to them.” And so, in speaking about the Acres, we describe life here in terms of Matthew 25, 31-46: the men meet and greet one another and take care of one another, offering to one another food, clothing, drink, and caring for the sick within our community. This is perhaps an idealized portrayal of day-to-day life, but really, only a little idealized, because meals are prepared three times daily, seven days a week, entirely on the initiative of our residents; our laundry service and clothing room, similarly, are run by our residents; the drinking water tested daily by one of our residents, who assures the safety of the water supply. Currently there is one resident who is quite ill and who is receiving round the clock care from a team of residents able to offer whatever assistance is required. And I could multiply many positive examples of the men’s participation in the life of the community: housemen, nightwatchmen, carpenters, plumbers, woodcutters, our ‘concierge’, gardeners, yardmen, and so on...

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Another important aspect of life in community is celebration. (And this is a scriptural understanding, too! See Deuteronomy 16: 1-17 for feasts in the religious life of Israel.) In late August, our annual family picnic is in a sense Unity Acres’ Festival of Booths, an Appreciation and Thanksgiving. In planning this year’s celebration, Father Jones resumed the theme from this spring’s fundraiser dinner: The Mustard Seed.

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Matthew 13:31-32 ESV

The picnic was scheduled for August 19, but preparations began many weeks in advance: Meetings were held with the kitchen staff to discuss menus, amounts of food to be prepared, and ordering of hot dogs, hamburg meat, relish, olives, sausage and so on. Many men were involved in various ways with the 'tidying-up' of buildings and grounds and gardens in advance of the 'big day', and with setting up the temporary altar and the gathering space with folding chairs borrowed from the Town of Orwell. These preparations give a focus to many of our summer activities

for several weeks, and then the big day arrives at last, and bit by bit visitors gather for Mass on the lawn, with a back-drop of sunflowers and the heavily blooming Rose of Sharon bushes, and a bright clear sky overhead. Jan and Mary Agnes convene the proceedings with a gathering hymn, then Father Jones, assisted by Father Moritz Fuchs and Frank Ellinger, celebrates the Mass, while Jim McCarthy leads the



Outdoor Mass & Picnic, August 19. [\(Click here for more photos\)](#)

congregated assembly in song, and sharing a few songs and hymns that have become particular favorites for our Picnic Sunday: *Bloom Where You're Planted; Patience, People; the Garden Song.*

After Mass we proceed to the dining hall in our 'Star' Building and to an abundance of food – many of the vegetables raised in our own garden. Both the staff and residents were happy to see so many old and new friends as well as family members come to join us at this annual picnic celebration. It seems each year we end the day feeling that perhaps this year's picnic was our best ever, nevertheless, we say, happily: All the efforts and enthusiasm of the men resulted in maybe our best picnic ever!

To all of you who were able to join us, thank-you....to those who were unable to attend, you were with us in spirit... Thank-you!

Steve Dickhout

Prayer for the Blessing of Labor

“We praise You, O Lord, for *all* Your *works* are wonderful!
We praise You, O Lord, forever is Your love! Your wisdom
made the heavens and the earth, O Lord. You formed the
land, then set the lights, and, like Your love, the sun will rule
the day, the stars will grace the night.” — Damean Singers, *God's
Work of Creation*. (Based on Genesis 1 & 2)

Creator God, by Your works of creation, You give our works on
earth an added dignity. But our world is in dire need of work that
sustains all people. Work that is just, creative, life-giving and healing.
Work that enables all people to live, not a life of numbing luxury and
idleness, but a life that is truly human.

We beg you to gently pull us out of the pit of poverty and the
quicksand of hunger, despair and all the evils that chronic
unemployment brings. Help us, O God, to work against the ‘works’
that bring death. Fraud, stealing, inhuman conditions of the
workplace, the insane build-up of weapons designed to kill.

Saint Joseph the Worker, intercede for us, that God will remove all
greed, envy and laziness from our hearts. Amen.

Wonderful and great are Your works!
Father Robert Jones