

## Stronger Than the Dark: Hope in Hard Times

*What we have within our hearts  
Is so much stronger than the dark  
What would we fear when the light  
Is so much greater than the night?*

-Lauren Daigle, *And Then I Will*

The little girl stares up at me with her dark brown eyes framed by her just-woke-up-from-my-nap hairstyle. Her mother, Lupe, scoops her up, resting her on her hip. The little girl, whose name is Angel, points to a box of oranges in the bed of “Dorothy” our Catholic Worker truck. “Angel,” I ask her, “would you like some oranges?” She looked at her mother, who nodded yes. Angel then turned to me, nodding her head exuberantly while at the same time saying, “Yes, yes, yes!” I immediately pulled out a bag and began filling it with fruit. As I packed the fruit, Lupe selflessly cautioned me, “Not too much, save some for the others who need it.” Lupe then proceeded to tell me that the milk we gave out the week before was “so good and was fresh all week. Thank you. Thank you for being here.”

James is a disabled veteran who found himself short of money due to a scam he fell for in early November. “I have nothin’ this month but a pound of hamburger,” he revealed to us. James needed food, household items, and pet food (for his cat and newly rescued dog). We were able to bring him all the items he needed. When we delivered them, James said to us, “I get paid at the beginning of next month, I’ll pay you back, I promise.” My husband, Bryan, assured him that was not necessary. Thinking about what our Pastor, Fr. Michael Pflieger always says to everyone he encounters, “Be blessed and be a blessing to others,” I advised James to pass on the blessing to someone he knows in need. “I sure will!” James happily replied.

Charlie is a young man in his twenties who takes loving and attentive care of his mother, Misty. Misty is living with end stage kidney disease. Charlie struggles with providing nutritious meals and support for her physical needs and his own needs as her caregiver. Charlie and Misty receive fresh organic produce and fruit, and various grocery items distributed several times a week by the St. Benedict Catholic Worker. We support them with pastoral counseling, medical advocacy, and help with meals. For example, we recently purchased a crockpot to help Charlie make easy and nutritious meals using simple recipes and ingredients we provide. We purchase cases of *Premiere Protein* drinks for Misty’s supplemental nutrition. Her current favorite is *Bananas and Cream*.

Lupe, Angel, James, Charlie and Misty are some of the many people at Summerset Village Apartments whose stories we carry with us. These are the stories that grace our lives. These are the stories that connect us to one another creating the beloved community. These are the stories of light that pierce the darkness (depression, poverty, discrimination, domestic abuse, food insecurity, fear of the future) in people's lives. These gifts of light--the selflessness and generosity of Lupe who thinks about others' needs, the openness and joy that Angel shares with everyone she encounters, the willingness of James to pay his blessing forward, and the love that Charlie shows in taking care of his mother are all ways out of the darkness for us and the people we serve and call friends. It is doing what is written in our hearts, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, that is stronger and greater than the darkness we encounter.

Along with serving those living at the Summerset Village Apartments, we deliver food to other areas of Fresno (trailers parks, food desert areas, and individual referrals). We do pop-up *Welcome Tables* (serving coffee, hot chocolate, food items) in neighborhoods of need around the city. We pass out bagged meals for people living on the street and gift cards to the working poor at laundromats and bus stops. We sustain a *Ministry of Correspondence and Financial Support*, which includes writing to those in prison and providing financial support to other Catholic Worker Houses and people engaged in our shared work of the Gospel. We do holiday food baskets at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. We initiated a *Period Poverty Campaign* that offers free menstrual products to girls and women who cannot afford them. We provide opportunities for prayer and spiritual growth, such as: Vespers at 7pm on Fridays, weekly round table discussions, and spiritual journey groups during Lent and Advent. Our St. Benedict Catholic Worker House of Hospitality welcomes the stranger--whether it is an overnight guest, a person needing refuge for the day, or a visit for conversation and coffee. We are committed to the spiritual and mental health of all by providing pastoral counseling (Liza holds a master's degree and specialty training in grief counseling). This coming February we will resume our 12-week-twice-a-year *Grief Education and Support Group* for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

The St. Benedict Catholic Worker, now in our 28<sup>th</sup> year, believes that Jesus came 2,000 years ago to write his Word in our hearts. It is his Word, our faith, that calls us to practice the *Works of Mercy*. And when these are practiced, our light, the light of Jesus' Word, is stronger than the dark. The *Works of Mercy* transform the world, transforming lives--ours, yours, and the people we serve.

Will you join us in being the light in the darkness? We depend on your generosity--your prayers, your participation in our work and your financial support. Please be as generous as you can this Christmas as we prepare to light the world with his acts of mercy.