

FAITH

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[Assignment: From the exhibit of photographs now on display in Christ College Commons, describe a single photograph or a group of photographs that impresses you most in terms of composition, suggestiveness, or subject. Your descriptions must uncover the artist's concerns and the implied message, if any.]

(1) I'm standing in the Christ College Commons looking at a series of black and white photographs entitled "Faith." This exhibit is rather puzzling. The pictures are of run-down, old buildings in the slums of Gary, Indiana, and of the people who are surviving in this poverty. I find myself asking, "What could these surroundings have to do with faith?" Then one picture in particular stands out from the rest, and for me, it provides the answer.

(2) The photo seems simple: an older man is sitting alone at a run-down shoeshine place, and a small poster is hanging on the wall to the left of him. Although the man and the poster are of different sizes and off-center, neither one detracts from or dominates the other. In fact, they seem to have complementary characteristics in this photograph. The large size of the man makes the smallness of the poster stand out, while the straight lines of the poster allow the relaxed and curved lines of the man to show his importance in the photo. Because of these complementary characteristics, I am drawn to the picture for a second look. I want to understand why the photographer would take this simple snapshot. After I look at the photo for awhile, I begin, vaguely, to understand the point the photographer wants to make with this picture in particular, and with the exhibit in general.

(3) The photographer's message becomes clearer as I take a closer look at the man. He appears to be dressed for church: clean-shaven face, clean suit, and recently shined shoes. His suit is made out of a heavy and itchy polyester, the kind that can never wrinkle. The jacket has a big collar and only one button, the size of a quarter, on the sleeve. The pants are simple, without pleats or designs. They are just a solid color with a crease neatly pressed down the center. Underneath the coat, the man is wearing a striped, wide-collared shirt, buttoned to the top. He is also wearing black support hose and slip-on loafers, the kind my grandfather once wore. To top off the entire outfit, the man has on a simple black hat that covers most of his bald head. Yes, the man is dressed neatly and cleanly, but I now realize that something is odd and inappropriate about his clothes. He is dressed perfectly for the 1970's, but the photo was taken in 1987. He is wearing a suit that reminds me of one my father wore over ten years ago--the suit my father gave to the Salvation Army. Suddenly, I

feel awkward and ashamed because of the nice clothes I am wearing. The man has to shop in second-hand stores.

(4) As I look at the rest of the picture, everything looks used, tired, second-hand, and uncared for. Underneath the worn-out chair where the man sits are bottles of shoe polish, torn rags, and crumpled newspapers lying in a disorganized fashion. The shoeshiner obviously does not care for his job, and is probably doing it for the money. The white wall behind the chair is full of indentations and cracks. The paint is also peeling away. I once again feel guilty as I stand in a very nicely kept building.

(5) Yet, amidst this uncared for, disorganized setting hangs a small poster without a torn edge or bent corner. The poster has an American flag in the background with a profile of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in front. Below his face are the words "A Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 1929-1968." Dr. King is giving a speech, and from the intense look in his eyes and the shape of his mouth, I can tell he is saying, "I have a dream." A dream of equality.

(6) I look one last time at the older black man, but I only look into his eyes. They appear old, full of experience, and also full of love. And in his eyes I also see the faith--the faith Dr. King and all the other blacks have in the dream. And it is this faith that brings them through all their tough times living in the slums of Gary, Indiana. The message of the photograph is very clear.