

“Hands Out”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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II Cor. 8:7-15

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

‘As he came ashore, Jesus saw a throng of many, many people,
and he was moved by compassion for them
for they were like sheep without a shepherd.’

Mark 6:34

Let us pray... O God,

Teach us how to show compassion in this world and how to receive it, too.

Amen

Today’s sermon touches on stewardship,

but the kind that is more about serving the bigger Church
of our extended family as Children of God.

And it is about entering unknown territory – the places of our own fear and
collective ignorance that allow poverty, insanity, & violence to fester...

Last week, I talked about going into the Big City as a young person
and learning to be aware of big city ways.

Well, the very first time I went to NYC, was to go by train on my way to visit
family & friends in MA and I had to transfer at Grand Central Station.

While waiting there – a man came up to me and asked for money.

I asked if he was going to use it for alcohol – as if he would admit it,
and he told me, ‘No’ – so, I gave him a dollar.

I was still waiting around an hour or so later for my train,

when...I saw the same guy again – and I gave him some more money.

What was I thinking? I kind of knew at the time it was silly –

but I wanted to help him...

Years later, I went up to Boston, MA to work as a summer intern for
the City Mission Society – which is affiliated with the UCC
and this was when Valerie Russell was the director.

I stayed with friends in Wellesley and would drive in every day
to leave my car in the huge parking lot beneath the Commons
or take the train in.

I’d get there early enough to get a cup of coffee and a piece of cornbread
from Brigham’s before walking over to the Congregational House
just a block up from the State Capitol on Beacon Street.

Willard, p.2

I'd sit by the Civil War memorial honoring the all black 10th Regiment –
and on most days, shared a bench with an older Jewish man
who always wore a light raincoat and travel cap.
And he would tell me about his life in the shoe business before he retired
and he always added this refrain, 'But on the whole I can't complain.'

Now in the Commons, there were many people who were homeless –
panhandlers who would ask passers-by if they could spare a quarter.
Often, they wouldn't look you in the face or even say anything –
just have their hand out.

I remember that discomfort of wanting to help,
but not wanting to contribute to an addiction.
But at some point, I made a decision...

I wasn't making a lot of money as an intern,
but I was working and getting a paycheck every other week.
And I always seemed to have a pocketful of change,
so, I resolved that when someone asked me for money,
I'd just give them some or all of my change.

One time I did that and a guy told me his name;
It was a Hindu name – though he wasn't Hindu.
He said it meant, 'Protected By God' and that he
'was a jazz saxophone player down on [his] luck
though [he] expected to be back on top soon'.

It was so unusual for someone to tell me his name,
and that taught me the importance of taking someone –
especially, someone down on their luck,
seriously as an adult human being.

I had just bought a copy of Somerset Maugham's Razor's Edge
which I had been looking forward to read all summer –
and I said, 'Here – something to read for a cold night.'

One time, I met a young man who said he needed money for a bus ticket home,
so I gave him what I had in my wallet – \$15.
I saw the same guy the next day at a concert in the park, walking towards me,
arm in arm with a girl – and he looked away.

Willard, p.3

It was a lesson learned, but I still felt sorry for the guy.

So, my encounters with homeless or needy people
have not always been pleasant.

One rainy morning, my Jewish friend was nowhere to be seen,
a woman came up to me and asked for money.

I offered her the cup of coffee I had just bought –
but she knocked it out of my hand, called me a ‘Warlock’, and went away.

Another time, a man asked me for some change
and I gave him a cup of coffee I had just bought.

And he said,

‘Hey, man! I ain’t seen you in a long time!’

I never saw this guy before in my life!

I figure he recognized the gesture of someone sharing their cup.
And doesn’t that pretty much illustrate what communion
ought to be for us, what it ought to be doing for us –
helping us recognize Jesus in acts of compassion
and taking his part when we can.

In such instances when we are asked to give something to someone,
it’s more about giving something of ourselves – like our time,
rather than just money or some material thing.

There’s a lot of desperate people out there
and some are not so gentle in their demands.

But there are a lot of folks who are grateful for a break
for simple things like mutuality and respect, a kind word even.

You still have to maintain your street face,
so long as you know when to peak out from behind it –
when you feel safe to do that.

I offer these little vignettes about “my adventures with the homeless”
to give you some ideas for when you may find yourself
in a situation of deciding whether or not to hand out some help...

It was late in the winter and I was back at seminary in Lancaster, PA
and I had gone into Philadelphia for the day.

Willard, p.4

At day's end, I was at the train station, walking up a ramp
and there were about fifteen young men standing along the wall.
The first one approached me and made like he was going to ask me something,
but I said, 'I'll be right back!'

I bought my ticket and I came back and said to this fellow,
'Come on!' and he walked with me over to a refreshment stand.
I said, 'What would you like to eat?'
and we both had hotdogs on a bun, those big, salty pretzels,
and cups of coffee.

And we sat down and talked and he told me he had been living
in an abandoned building until drug pushers and users ran him off.
He had been working as a food preparer who specialized in salads
before he got laid off.

Then, I drew a picture of him on a napkin,
wearing a chef's hat while mixing up a big bowl of salad.
He got a kick out of it,
and then he said, 'I wasn't going to ask you this...'
And I said, 'I already made up my mind to do this'...
and gave him some cash –
without asking him what he was going to do with it.

Each day, we run into situations of some kind or another
about whether or not we should give – our time, talent, treasurer.
If it's the occasion of meeting someone panhandling on the street,
you're not going to stop someone from an addiction –
but you can help them remember their dignity.

Jesus gave freely of himself, healing people where they hurt most –
in their hearts.

And afterwards he would often say,
"Your faith as made you well."

Willard, p.5

Woody Guthrie sang about such times and such people –
and he sang this song about “Jesus Christ”...

*Jesus Christ was a man who traveled through the land
A hard-working man and brave
He said to the rich, "Give your money to the poor,"
But they laid Jesus Christ in His grave*

*He went to the preacher, He went to the sheriff
He told them all the same
"Sell all of your jewelry and give it to the poor,"
And they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.*

*When Jesus come to town, all the working folks around
Believed what he did say
But the bankers and the preachers, they nailed Him on the cross,
And they laid Jesus Christ in his grave.*

*This song was written in New York City
Of rich man, preacher, and slave
If Jesus was to preach what He preached in Galilee,
They would lay poor Jesus in His grave.*

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Amen

II Cor. 8:7-15

⁷You do everything better than anyone else. You have stronger faith.
You speak better and know more.

You are eager to give, and you love us better.

Now you must give more generously than anyone else.

⁸I am not ordering you to do this.

I am simply testing how real your love is

by comparing it with the concern that others have shown.

⁹You know that our Lord Jesus Christ was kind enough
to give up all his riches and become poor,
so that you could become rich.

¹⁰A year ago you were the first ones to give,
and you gave because you wanted to.

So listen to my advice.

¹¹I think you should finish what you started.

If you give according to what you have,

you will prove that you are as eager to give
as you were to think about giving.

¹²It doesn't matter how much you have.

What matters is how much you are willing to give
from what you have.

¹³I am not trying to make life easier for others
by making life harder for you.

But it is only fair ¹⁴for you to share with them when you have so much,
and they have so little.

Later, when they have more than enough, and you are in need,
they can share with you.

Then everyone will have a fair share, ¹⁵just as the Scriptures say,

“Those who gathered too much had nothing left.

Those who gathered only a little had all they needed.”

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

When the disciples re-gathered from their first missionary journey
they reported to Jesus about all that they had done
and about all that they had preached.

And Jesus said to them,

“You need to get away to be by yourselves for a bit.

Let’s go out to some desert place to reflect for a while.”

For there were so many people coming and going around them,
they didn’t even have time to eat!

So, they set sail for a desolate place to be on their own,

but the people saw them leave

and many recognized that Jesus was with them.

Therefore, many set out on foot from the surrounding towns
and even ran ahead to get there before him.

As he came ashore, Jesus saw a throng of many, many people,

and he was moved by compassion for them

for they were like sheep without a shepherd.

And he began to teach them many things...

[and this is also where he fed this crowd of more than 5,000 people.]

Later, Jesus and the disciples crossed back over to the land of Gennesaret
and moored there.

And when they came ashore, people there knew him right away

and they rushed to go to him from all around the countryside,

bringing sick people on stretchers

to where they heard he was now.

And wherever Jesus went –

whether it was in the villages or the towns or the fields,

they took their sick loved ones with them out on the road.

So, they would approach him –

even just to touch the tassel of his prayer shawl, in order to get well;

And everyone who touched him was healed.