

I want to give you money (Alms for the poor?)

You all have seen the beggars, right? Their handwritten signs say things like: Anything Helps. If You Can Spare It. God Bless. They gather on street intersections and highway medians, the better to catch you stuck in traffic. They say they're single parents, or war veterans, or victims of domestic violence, or living with disease. Beggars are everywhere; we see them as yellow stock characters in a gritty urban tableaux. When you encounter one, cup in hand, you are then confronted with a choice: to give, or not to give.

To give alms, I was told, is unwise: beggars are a coarse sort, which is not untrue. They have addictions, criminal records; problems I can't solve with a few dollars and a prayer. The money you give them may be used to buy alcohol and drugs. None of this money will help the real problems of poverty and homelessness, so it's better to donate to a shelter, or a food bank. But among the better off, it's a bit taboo to interact with the beggar as an individual. They're unclean, obviously miserable, and trapped in the gnarly cycle of living hand to mouth. Sometimes we just walk past them, eyes averted, pretending not to see.

But not to give is indifferent and harsh to one's brother in Christ. Consider Jesus' words¹ to an apostle who never was: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Jesus asks us to renounce our pride, our wealth, and our false certainty that the beggar's lot will never befall us. If you donate to the institutions which minister to the poor and homeless, but ignore the beggar himself when he asks for alms, you're missing out on an opportunity to recognize his humanity and essential similarity to you.

Beggars make us so uncomfortable that sometimes, we almost wish they didn't exist. Today, I want you to think about the beggars you've seen recently. What did they look like? Were they male? Female? Tall? Short? Black? White? Somewhere in between? What color were their clothes? What did their signs say? Did you make eye contact? Did you give them money?

Now I'm going to tell you a personal story about a girl I met on the subway in New York City in 2015. She announced herself with her appearance; she had this bulging mass on the side of her neck, which made her look like a female Quasimodo. We were on the express train uptown, so she had a captive audience. Her spiel was on the same train as my commute, so I'd heard this story before. She would first apologize for interrupting us, and then say medical-sounding jargon about her tumor, and assure us the money was for treatment to remove it. She plied this request for alms on my train a few times a week, with the tumor as her sales pitch. I didn't believe her, but on that day, hearing her recite the speech over and over on the A train to Inwood, I felt sad for her plight. As the train pulled into our station, the last station on the line, I gave her ten dollars and she said: "Thank you. I know you heard the story before, but to tell you the truth, I'm saving up for a sleeping bag."

¹ Matthew 19:21-22

As I walked home, I thought about what it must be like to live life as that girl. Her comment about the sleeping bag reminded me of the comforts I enjoy in my own bed. Where was her family? I imagined what it must feel like to beg for a little bit of money and be met with cold stares, to feel the irritation and contempt of people who can't relate to your problems. I remembered the condescension my kind of people have towards beggars, asking why they don't get jobs, clueless to the toll of mental illness, addiction, or the insidiousness of poverty. I was taught beggars are greedy, always asking for things above their station; as if the little treats we afford ourselves day-to-day are too good for them. I am ashamed of these stingy and callous excuses and the indifference it betrays to the poor.

One of the reasons I was taught not to give to beggars was that their stories are made up. They're not really saving up for bus fare to Omaha, so to speak, and I should feel scammed because of the dishonesty. Please consider that even if a beggar is lying about the details of his life story, he is not telling you anything fundamentally untrue. The experience of begging is so humiliating that even the desperately poor and addicted view it as a last resort. It is such a dehumanizing experience that Buddhist ascetics use it to teach their novices how to shed the ego, instructing them to go out into town and live off whatever leftover food and spare change they are given. The facts of a beggar's life are plain to see if you're willing to look for them.

Being poor is expensive. Social programs are now generous enough to get about two-thirds of what you need to get by in the short term. For those living paycheck to paycheck with little savings, a car breakdown, job layoff, or hospitalization can put them into crisis, living in their cars. Once a person becomes homeless, it's difficult to get rehoused even if you have a job. Rent prices in Boston are high and landlords are discriminatory; they don't have to rent to someone who was evicted before. Bad credit prohibits acquisition of a mortgage. Banks have little incentive to offer poor people loans, so they charge them higher interest for credit cards, and impose monthly fees on customers who can't keep their checking account balance above a certain threshold. Even laundry is more expensive if you're poor. This conundrum keeps poor people in a cycle of need month by month, digs them into a deeper and deeper hole. The problem exists on a continuum, with beggars occupying a particularly low circle of desperation.

Jesus says: "Judge not, that you not be judged." When I try to talk to other people about alms, they tell me anecdotes about a character I named the beggar king, who fleeced them somehow in the past. The beggar king isn't content with peanut butter and pasta from the food bank, he's greedy and wants you to buy him fresh meat. He abuses welfare programs for a living, and his children are living in foster care. He's actually a scammer, ripping you off if you give. He stole the radio from your car and your window air conditioner to sell for drug money. He's mentally ill, addicted and might have AIDS. The beggar king is a boogeyman, a heuristic we learn so that we harden our hearts to the poor. We're prejudiced against the beggar before us, because we don't see him as a person but as a stereotype, a scion of the beggar king.

I want you to come to know a new beggar king. Not a thief out to steal from you, but one whose treasure is safe in heaven; untroubled by the baggage we carry in this life. That beggar king invites you to a sacred feast beyond belief, where a place has been saved for you. The beggar

king is a man poor in spirit, for whom the grace of God is absent. That beggar king is ill-used in this life by people just like us and at the hands of an indifferent system. I want you to know the sufferings of the beggars as an extension of Christ's agony on the cross. I want you to see Christ in the face of the mendicant beggar.

Our American culture and society trains us not to ask for help, and teaches us that doing so is a sign of weakness. We hesitate to ask someone to pray for us; asking for material support amounts to a loss of face. We are trained also to judge the homeless and the poor, supposing that they earned their poor reputation. This is a cruel myth; the just-world fallacy: everyone gets what they deserve. As Christians we know this is untrue, Christ didn't get what he deserved on the cross, he got what *we deserved*, but the claim has also been empirically disproven in the social sciences.

And yet, despite the teachings of Christ, we are trained to ignore beggars and deflect the moral responsibility we have towards them with a lot of rationalizations. I want to challenge you to see the mendicant beggar as an opportunity to enact the power of the Christ, because you are a member of the Body of Christ. By your act of charity, you acknowledge the beggar as your brother in Christ. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, both of you may imbue into this profane world an experience of the World to Come. This act of acknowledgement is far more important than the amount of money you give. Because while you may have counted him out, the beggar can bless you also.

May I preach to you a practice of not caring if the beggars are lying, and just accepting their story on its own terms, without seeking judgment? It's liberating. I know they might be lying; I just don't care. I don't worry too much about the story they tell me because I'm not carefully assessing it for dishonesty. I also don't care what the money is spent on, because this is a nominal sum I would give to any stranger to acknowledge their humanity. It is liberating indeed not to fret about whether the recipient was worthy. So what if he buys beer with it? I also drink beer, so why be stingy?

This practice of mine differs from some other, similar charities in one important detail: I want to give them money. Not a huge amount of money, mind you. Maybe it's enough money for a cup of coffee. Or a toothbrush, or a pair of socks. I am entrusting the beggar to do what he needs with it, and recognizing him as a fellow brother in Christ.

Jesus says²: "Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you." My practice is to carry small bills, ready to give alms. I hope that you might even look forward to it, as I do, as an opportunity to lift up this person. As you do, you will find that people are less greedy than you think.

I once met a man who begged me for gas on the highway, and then shut off the pump before his tank was full. More recently, I met a woman in a Chicago grocery store who needed help buying snacks for her kids, and had carefully calculated the necessary sum for me before we went to

² Matthew 5:42

the checkout. A few weeks ago I saw four Indian boys on the corner near the Dedham food bank in the baking heat, begging for alms with a sign. The oldest one thanked Jesus for me because I gave him twenty dollars.

Perhaps you disagree with my position of almsgiving. The world is harsh, and people learn to lie; what if they're really taking advantage of me? Perhaps I'm like Timon of Athens, a spendthrift throwing her money away. Perhaps I have no right to preach this doctrine to you, for I am not blameless. I've said no before, and not politely: before cultivating this practice of almsgiving I treated stray dogs better than the beggars I met, putting animals ahead of persons.

Knowing that beggars have lied to us in service of an addiction or cheated us by stealing our things makes it harder to give. A stray dog isn't responsible for its homelessness; but a beggar has dug himself into a deep hole by his own choices. I've been cursed by beggars, and even threatened when I couldn't or wouldn't give them what they really wanted. Beggars exhibit traits of selfishness and self-seekingness aware in all mankind, and are motivated by the twin whips of poverty and addiction to keep hustling. Beggars exploit what they can to get by, seeing the world as hostile and unyielding; and we see them as moral voids, unwilling to be their next mark. Sometimes, we even want to punish the beggar for what we see as unfair play; for simply receiving the same money we work hard to earn. We mistake their desperation for greed and their social immobility for laziness. My antidote to this kind of thinking is to ask: How can I be angry at or jealous of someone whose suffering is plain to see?

Consider the parable of the workers³: We servants of God are rewarded with the same salvation whether we rank among the apostles or the most recent converts. God says⁴: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Salvation is a gift by the grace of God, a redemption of all of our sinning by Christ's sacrifice for us. So while I don't disagree that some beggars are guilty of a lifetime of dishonesty and sin, I don't think it should influence my decision to give alms to them because we are all sinners equally redeemed in Christ. From our elevated position in society, as day laborers recruited in the third hour instead of the eighth, so to speak, we should welcome the chance to recognize the beggar where he is and give alms to him.

There is an immediacy and intimacy of giving alms which makes it much different from donating to the Episcopal Relief Fund or attending the Saint Mary's Gala. And as I hasten to acknowledge that these institutions are worthy and productive ministries, they also distance us from the actual beggar whom Jesus urges us to regard as an equal. Jesus gave his life not only for those alive in his present day, but for us unknown and future persons, the eighth hour workers. Jesus asks us to love one another as we love ourselves, and there is an aspect of that blessing to be found in alms-giving. To the beggar, the poor in spirit, the donation can be a spiritual lifeline. To the giver goes the blessing of the Lord. Amen.

³ Matthew 20:1-16

⁴ Matthew 20:15