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When you see a Panhandler ...

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When you see a panhandler on the street corner, what do you see? Someone worthy of a helping hand? Or someone hustling to make a buck?

What you see determines how you act, so think carefully: What do you see? A neighbor? A scam artist? Or do you see, perhaps, a fellow beggar? Do you remember that you, too, are helpless, destitute and completely dependent upon God's mercy, a lowly steward of the gifts God has given in abundance? Do you recognize a fellow sinner and realize that you are no more worthy of God's grace than they are?

If this is what you see, then you are ready to engage and serve a fellow human being created in the image of God, to understand and help to meet both physical and spiritual needs.

I should know. In 2015, one of our LCMS homeless ministries invited me to spend a night at a makeshift homeless camp in the Overthe-Rhine neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. The homeless community embraced us being among them, and they appreciated that we cared enough to embed ourselves to walk in their shoes for the day. It was a humbling experience, and one that profoundly changed me both as a person and as a pastor. That night, for the first time in my life, I learned what it was to be

treated like a homeless man. Mothers would grab their children by the arm to scurry to the other side of the park to avoid me; shop owners either spoke to me rudely or asked me outright to leave their establishments.

Then, after an evening of feeling like refuse tossed to the side of the road, a young Christian man came to me with a plate of food. He called me "sir," and he spoke to me about the love of Christ.

I can't even begin to explain what it felt like to be on the receiving end of this kind of grace.

In my job as the director of LCMS Urban & Inner-City Mission, I spend much of my time in a world of brokenness and human suffering, and I have pretty much seen it all. I've seen those who are the most marginalized and written off by the world, and I've seen scam artists galore. (Sometimes there's a fine line — or no line at all — between the two.) In this world, there is no shortage of scam artists, but there is also a never-ending supply of those in need.

Think of a mother so desperate to provide for her kids that she would completely humiliate herself by begging. You know this woman. She was there with Jesus, begging like a dog for scraps from His table — a social outcast moved by deep love for her daughter and great faith in

her Lord. And Jesus responds to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” Christ meets her immediate need and heals her daughter (Matt. 15:21–28) — and then He goes to the cross to die for her.

Can those of us who live in Christ do any differently?

Whatever other needs they may have — food, shelter, mental health care, recovery from addiction, employment services and more — what professional beggars need most is the Gospel. Only Christ can change their hearts and heal their souls. Knowing this simple truth can liberate us to serve in Christian love whether the person in front of us seems to deserve our help or not.

So if you hear a story from a grifter that sounds suspect, you are free in Christ to “err” on the side of grace. You can say that you are helping to fill that tank of gas or buy that sandwich not because they — or you — are deserving, but because God shows mercy. He gives generously even knowing that we, as sinners, have a natural tendency to misuse His gifts. In His Name, we also can give generously from the abundance of His unconditional love.

When you look at panhandlers, you may see sinners. You may suspect their motives and wonder if they really need and deserve your help. But ask yourself: does Christ love them? Look to the cross, and you will find the answer.

NEXT STEPS

READ: “My Night of Living Homeless” by Steven D. Schave. Visit witness.lcms.org and search keyword “living homeless.”

DO: Fill plastic bags with non-perishable snacks, hygiene items, gift cards and Bible verses and keep them handy in your car or bag, so that you can always be “generous and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:18) at a moment’s notice.

GIVE: Consider supporting an LCMS organization that focuses on serving the poor like LCMS Urban and Inner-City Ministry. Visit lcms.org/givenow/citymission.



PHOTO: LCMS/ERIK M. LUNSFORD

“We are beggars”

Martin Luther, known for his hospitality and care for the poor, often struggled to know what to do with professional beggars. He spoke of “scoundrels” abusing the generosity of pious Christians and even went so far as to refer to them as criminal “squire filth” who grifted across the country, using up scarce resources meant for those who were truly in need.

Yet Luther also said in his Large Catechism, regarding the Fifth Commandment:

If, therefore, you send away one that is naked when you could clothe him, you have caused him to freeze to death; if you see one suffer hunger and do not give him food, you have caused him to starve. ... You have withheld your love from him and deprived him of the benefit whereby his life would have been saved.

Luther sometimes resented beggars, yet he cared for them anyway. And on his death bed, he declared himself to be one of their number, saying:

“We are beggars. This is true.”

