

You've seen 'em. Panhandlers and bums staked out on their city corners, holding up their signs "Will work for food", or "out of work and seven kids to feed", "homeless and hungry, please help, God bless you" and an occasional dose of honesty "why lie, I need beer." We've all seen these folks and perhaps felt pity, perhaps we've given them some change or a buck or two, or perhaps we just waited for the light to change and muttered to ourselves, "if they can stand out there all day, why can't they go get a real job." And it's a fair enough question, because in reality they wouldn't be doing what they do if they weren't successful at it. Some of these people are real professionals.

Not too long ago I was at a red light with a few cars in front of me, waiting of course. And there was this middle aged, nappy haired woman with ragged jeans and a soiled shirt, imploring us with her cardboard cry for help, to give her a few bucks. As I watched, she moved toward the car in front of me, her knees buckled a little and she bent forward like she had been socked in the gut and then she looked up at the driver with tears now streaming down her face. I looked on feeling sorry for her and then the window of the car in front of me rolled down, an arm with a fist full of dollars reached toward the woman and she took them. At that moment the light changed and the traffic began to move. As her benefactor pulled away the woman's tears dried as quickly as they had been turned on, she stood up straight and began to laugh, showing to her buddy bum working the other corner the prize she had just swindled from a generous Joe.

Since that day I've often wondered if people like her are the "least ones" Christ refers to. Seems to me that the "least ones" are supposed to be those in genuine need. So are we really supposed to feed and clothe people like her? The scam she pulled all day long on that corner, Christ wouldn't expect us to support such shameful actions, would he? Now I know Christ identifies himself with the least, and the poor, and the hungry, and the sick, but people like her are liars and cheats. They prey upon a person's heartfelt pity. They take advantage of one's kindness and generosity. They just assume that someone's gonna bail them out of the squalor they've sunk themselves into. They take and take and take and take and take and give nothing in return, except to give us something to complain about.

We like to complain about people like her, don't we? We complain because we feel that they're taking advantage of good people's sympathy and because of it we all suffer some kind of injustice. Perhaps. But maybe we complain about people like her because she reminds us that we too are deceitful people. Now we may not be as blatant as her, but we are deceitful; to others, and even to ourselves. We fudge a bit on our tax returns, cheat a little on a test, we spend our dollars on clothing and apparel we know are being made for pennies in a sweatshop overseas, we pay immigrants a wage a union worker would laugh at, and we wear our masks of self-confidence, pleasantness, competence, and cheer, [even anger, bitterness, and melancholy] all just to project an image of who we really are not. When you look at it honestly, we're not all that much different than that panhandler lady. We're just better at camouflaging ourselves.

We're just as lost and strayed, poor and sick, hungry and thirsty as she is. Granted we may have a nice roof over our head and our tummies full, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the shape our souls are in, the health of our spiritual lives. In many ways we're still homeless and starving. We wander along the paths of our own choosing and expect God to take care of us, to give us a handout, spiritual or material or both. We might even put on a sorrowful mask to fool our Lord (and maybe even ourselves) that we deserve some of his pity. The window rolls down, we confess our plight, our Lord hands us a few dollars worth of grace, and we're off again on our own merry (for the time being) merry way.

I see a lot of myself in that panhandler on the corner. In her I see my brokenness, I see my hunger, I see my own deceit, my self-deceit, and my desperation. In her I see that she's made mistakes and I see that she's still making them, like me. I see her humanity and then I see mine; there is no real difference. Maybe that's why I'm upset with *her*, because it's really me that I see, and I don't like it.

I don't want to think of myself as being lost, hungry, naked, sick, and imprisoned in the hell of my own making. But I am, when I turn away from our Lord. I go hungry when I turn away from our Lord in the Eucharist. I get lost when I abandon the shepherd and follow my own path. My nakedness shows when I clothe myself with my own selfishness. I become a sick person when I infect myself with the poison of deceit and pettiness. I am imprisoned in a veritable hell when I live my life like that.

But I don't have to live that way, just like the panhandling woman doesn't have to live the way she does either. We see her and the others like her standing there on the corner with their signs, preying upon others' charity the way we prey upon God's. "Why can't she go get an honest job and live a better life", we ask. Why can't we be honest with ourselves and honest with God, and live a better life?

The short answer is: in some convoluted way, it works for us. It's easier to stay in the prison we're in than risk following the king to his palace. We're afraid the palace may turn out to be another prison, run not by us, but by the King himself. We often times think of God as that grand warden in the sky, watching us, taking notes, disciplining us, chastising us, telling us how to behave, trying to run our lives, infringing on our freedom. Compared to where we're living now, that doesn't sound like a place we'd want to move to, does it?

But I ask you, when did God say that living in his house would be like that? You can believe whatever you want to, but thus says the Lord:

“I will rescue my sheep from every place where they are scattered when it’s cloudy and dark. I myself will pasture my sheep and give them rest. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal.”

The Lord offers us, today, a new life in his kingdom here on earth, but it can only be ours if we forsake our wandering, return to the fold, and allow the King who calls himself “shepherd” to attend to us and show us the way home. We say that panhandlers don’t have to live the way they do. Well, neither do we.