

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 17, 2019  
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“Blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of God

One of the important jobs of a deacon is to be an ambassador for the church between one culture and another. Most of the time that means helping the **church** understand what is going on in a marginalized group and helping the marginalized understand what the church is trying to say and do. One of the most difficult challenges a deacon has as an ambassador for the church is getting the middle class and those in poverty to understand and appreciate the wisdom that both groups have to offer each other. The job is made even more difficult if the deacon is in the middle of a spiritual journey of their own trying to figure out what really is wise and wonderful. Sometimes God has plans for you that you did not expect.

As director of Genesis House for 10 years I had many contacts with people in poverty and I faithfully brought my middle-class values and wisdom to each situation hoping that somehow or another something I said or did might help someone rise up out of poverty. There were times it helped, usually with those who I had seen for a long time and a certain amount of trust had been built up between the two of us. Money certainly helps, especially in the immediate emergency, but to deal with a poverty culture it requires a long-term trusting relationship. Most people would rather hand out charity and send the person on their way. Still, trusting relationships are risky business. When you enter someone’s life to change a cultural value you might end up having one of your own changed instead. You run the risk of finding that they **are** truly blessed.

I must confess to you something. Of the homeless who became homeless due to some tragic event and those who were homeless because they were just a kind of wandering soul, I found the wandering soul, so much more interesting to work with. Don’t get me wrong. My heart went out to everyone who walked through the doors no matter what their circumstances were. But the wandering soul always had some interesting adventures to talk about. When you are stuck in a bureaucratic world of paperwork, policies, and volumes of standards that must be met, to hear some of their stories kind of took me away from it all. I kept hearing words from that old song in the back of my head, “Freedom is just another word for nothing else to lose.” There were, of course, stories that were painful to hear and made me angry with their injustices but there were others that made me feel like I was in the presence of God. That brings me to “Michael”.

Michael was one of those wandering souls who I had seen since the first day we opened the doors of Genesis House. He would be there to find relief for a few days and then would disappear only to show up 6 months or a year later. When he came back through it was always like seeing an old friend. We would spend so much time catching up with each other. On one of his visits he told me about a dog who had befriended him. Together they made their way out to Los Angeles. Along the way Michael would share what he found to eat with his dog. In return, the dog made him feel less alone in the world. They were companions. In Los Angeles they found an underpass for shelter and set up home among all the other homeless of the city. During the night the police came through to do their nightly security searches and during the search the police shot his dog. We sat at the table in silence for a long time, out of respect. Michael of course disappeared again, without any notice. I mentioned him in my prayers for a while and a year later he walked through the door again. I noticed this time that he looked really beaten up by life. In fact, his first words to me were, "Gary, I am getting to old for this." I sensed a teachable moment. In my office we worked out a plan. He was to take a temporary day job that I had available and then he was to bring the cash back to Genesis House and we would have a conversation about how this money should be spent. I had planned to give to him a major middle-class value, that of saving money for a specific goal and the joy of reaching your goals. He eagerly accepted the job. The next day he came into Genesis House eyes to the floor. In my office he said, "I am sorry Gary. You are going to be disappointed in me. I don't have any money." "What happened?" I asked and, yes, he could hear the disappointment in my voice. It betrayed the thought that was in my mind, "Michael, how are we ever going to get you out of homelessness if you can't hang on to one day's pay." Michael began to explain, "I did the work and I got paid in cash, just like you said. But I was walking through the Walmart parking lot on my way here and I saw a car that had a man and a woman and three kids running around it." He instinctively knew they were homeless, so he went over to strike up a conversation. During the conversation he discovered that the man had lost his job and they were headed to a relative's home somewhere in California and had not eaten for a while. So, Michael went into Walmart, bought food for everyone and they all sat in the car to eat their feast together. Michael pleaded his case, "What was I to do? I can't let kids go hungry and I had a way for us to eat. It was the only right thing to do. If you have got it, you have to share it." Michael's face turned to the floor. I sat there speechless. I am certain God's attention turned to me patiently waiting for my response. He probably sensed a teachable moment. I said the only thing I could think of, "Michael, Jesus is proud of you." He looked up smiling from ear to ear. Whether he knew or not Michael fulfilled what Jesus was talking about when he preached, "What so ever you do to the least of these my brothers and sister, you have done it unto me." And I am

not referring to the family, he fed. As was his practice Michael once again disappeared, and I have never seen him again. I remember him in prayers from time to time.

I wonder if Jesus once proclaimed, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" because they are the ones most likely to recognize it when they see it. As for me, I **probably** have a way to go yet. You see, strangely, just I was ready to put the last period on the page of this homily I got a robocall on my phone letting me know that my credit rating was just fine and in fact they had a new credit card they would like for me to sign up for. Coincidence? Or is it, that somewhere up there in the vast universe, God is still laughing?