

Give to Everyone Who Asks

Luke 6:27-36

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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²⁷ “But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; ²⁸ bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. ³⁶ Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Today, I want to talk together about one of the most spiritually-important questions of all: “*can you spare some change?*” You might have heard other variations. “Spare a dime?” “Money for food?” Sometimes it’s a petition: “*anything* will help.” The person asking you might be White or Black, young or old, any gender.

These questions are always asked of you when you’re in the middle of something else—which is exactly why they are so deeply spiritual. You are walking to work, or shopping for groceries, or on a date at the square... and someone interrupts your life with this question, this *imposition*. It’s happening more and more on the campus of NDPC. When we were in conversation with the folks at Free99Fridge about whether to put the fridge on our campus, the organizer, Ms. Latisha Springer said, straight up, “Rev. Lewicki, you know this fridge is going to bring homeless people to your church? *Are you OK with that?*” I wished I could have introduced her to you all. Of course, we’re OK with that. It’s what we’re here for.

Now “they” are here. Our neighbors who are unhoused are on our campus—or should I say, they are here, at Christ’s church? Sometimes these neighbors are unkempt. Sometimes they are unwell. Sometimes they might ask you for money.

Every one of you knows that Jesus had a thing or two to say about giving things away. From Matthew

if anyone wants to take your shirt, give your coat as well, ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile willingly.

Then, later on in Matthew, when the disciples ask, “Lord, when did we take care of you,” Jesus says:

I was person who was hungry and you gave me food, I was the thirsty person and you gave me something to drink, I was the stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing,

And here in Luke, Jesus says, quite directly and unambiguously:

Give to everyone who asks of you.

There could hardly be a clearer teaching in the gospels than that you are to give things away to those who need them more than you do. Why, then, when we find ourselves being asked for change, are we racked with uncertainty, quibbling, and doubt?

Let's talk about the experience of being asked for money. Let's talk about it as a spiritual experience. Let's find out what God is doing in these encounters.

I want to begin by naming a few of the obstacles you may face in these situations. The first obstacle you might face is revulsion.

- All of us have built-in “purity” alarms that go off when we see someone we think is not “clean.” These alarms tell us to stay away.
- When you live with no access to bathroom facilities or regular hygiene or even a change of clothes, you are probably going to smell, you might have soiled themselves, your teeth, and hair and hands and feet are going to be rough.
- We can remember a story Jesus told about two men saw a man bleeding out in a ditch and passed by to maintain their sense of purity. It was the Samaritan who came close enough see the man's wounds and begin to give care, to show him mercy.
- In order to see the Beloved Child of God in front of you, you have to be willing to ignore your purity alarm—purity is not from God. Get over it.

The second thing that you might sometimes feel when someone asks for money is fear.

- You may be alone. We always have to be aware of risks and judge them properly.
- The idea that unhoused people pose a risk to you is at the very least exaggerated. Assaults by unhoused people are extremely rare. The truth is that poor and unhoused people have a lot more to fear from you than you do from them. Homeless folks are assaulted every day, all of the time. Demeaned, spit on, kicked, threatened with weapons, and subject to imprisonment by the police for the crime of not having money. They always have more to fear from you than you do from them.
- Yet many of us continue to be afraid of unhoused people. Why? Our fear of beggars is likely more about us, than them. You recognize, on a basic level, that you have what that they need. You see that imbalance. You're afraid they will take what you have.
- That fear is understandable, but it's not good. 1 John says: “perfect love casts out all fear.” I think you have a moment at the very beginning of these encounters where you can either give in to the fear, or you can choose to let love cast out fear. If you look at someone with love, it pre-emptively establishes a foundation for mutual care and concern—I think the gaze of love and concern also establishes a healthy boundary of respect. Don't be afraid.

The third thing we sometimes experience when someone asks for money is anger

- I've felt this. You're just walking along living your life, when you get interrupted.
- Nobody likes getting interrupted, especially when you're in a hurry, or doing something that feels important. But I suspect—this is based on my own self-reflection, that it's not

the interruption that causes anger. The anger comes because this person is drawing you into a morally precarious position against your will. That person asking you for change is making a moral claim on you. They're pointing out the imbalance between us—you have what you need, probably more than you need—they do not. They're asking you to address that. All of a sudden, you can't ignore what is easier and more comfortable to ignore. You're not on the spot, morally, and Jesus is watching. That's why we get angry.

- There is so much anger directed at the moral claims by people who are unhoused. It's why so many people want to criminalize homelessness. Making sleeping outside a crime, making asking for money a crime, making sitting on a bench too long a crime.
- In the latest GA legislative session, SB 535—the “Reducing Street Homelessness Act” was basically a bill by a bunch of suburban legislators who were uncomfortable about seeing homeless people around the capitol. The bill would have rounded up homeless people and sent them to camps--literally. And it would have stripped state funding from cities that didn't comply.
- That kind of anger is deep. People hate the visible presence of homeless people—because they know that those folks have a legitimate moral claim on them. They'd rather put them in prison than find a way to help.
- We have to be able to name the anger—and the source of the anger, so that we respond with love.

The last reaction that I want to call out because I don't think it's helpful is helplessness.

- Drive down Ponce or Peachtree any day of the week and you'll see so many unhoused folks you begin to think that there's nothing you can do to help.
- Some Christians have helplessness about poverty part of their theology—they take one of the most beautiful lines from the gospels, from Matthew 26, which says, “The poor will always be with you” and take it to mean there's nothing we need to do because there will always be poor people. My friend and seminary classmate, Liz Theoharis, who is now the coordinator of the poor people's campaign, wrote her entire dissertation on the phrase, “the poor will always be with you” because she was sick and tired of people invoke it as a lame excuse for inaction. Jesus says “the poor will always be with you” because you, the followers of Jesus are always taking care of those who are poor!

So enough of the “what shouldn't I do?”—you shouldn't be revulsed, you shouldn't be afraid, you shouldn't be angry, and you shouldn't be indifferent. What should you do? I can offer a few suggestions.

1. You must treat every person like a Beloved Child of God, *which they are*. Look at people with love in your eyes. Say hello to them. Give them respect. Even if you say, “sorry, I can't share anything with you today,” you can always give respect and an unconditional positive regard.
2. Acknowledge you are being inconvenienced and that's OK. Give thanks to God for the inconvenience, because God is doing something in bringing you two together. You might even take the time to get to know this person. That's the hard thing, right? Giving time. Ask them about themselves. Where are you from? Where do you sleep at night? How

do you eat? You'll learn a lot, but most of all, you'll be creating a relationship based on dignity, which is healthy for you and healthy for them.

3. Give money. I know people hate to give money, because they're just going to get drunk. I want to tell you that I give away a lot of money. Why? One because people need money. Money fixes a lot of problems. No, I don't know what they're going to use the money for. But I can tell you 100% of the time that the \$2 or \$5 or \$10 is worth more to them in that moment than it is to me. But even if you don't want to give money, carry granola bars or fruit. Put water in your car. Carry a toothbrush and toothpaste or tampons. Buy Walmart cards so people can get new underwear. Get them lunch. Do something. I decided long ago that the cost of walking away, the cost of closing off my life, the cost of ignoring the moral claim this person has on my life—that was, in the end, costlier, than the risk they might buy a beer to numb the pain of being unhoused.
4. The most important thing of all is that you can do in response to this deep spiritual question, "can you spare some change" is let it be the foundation for a relationship. Let there be a relationship. Look for the person again. Take them to lunch. Listen to their story. Unhoused people have so much to teach you. They know all of the ways the safety net breaks down. This is where you're going to hear the stories that underscore the larger struggles about where our public policy fails.

- You will hear about their health problems that they couldn't get treatment for. 2/3 of folks who are homeless have a chronic health condition. That's why we fight for access to healthcare... especially mental healthcare... affordable healthcare is foundational to keeping people in their homes.
- Almost always you'll hear stories of trauma. 4 of 5 people who are unhoused have been abused. Their stories, if you have the stomach for them, are powerful. Almost always, folks who are homeless are in need of therapeutic opportunities to process trauma and loss.
- Most often, you're going to hear about how hard it is to find affordable housing... I just don't think most of us realize how expensive housing is, and how little of it there is if you're not making money
- There is no state, county or city in the country where a full-time, minimum-wage worker working 40 hours a week can afford a two-bedroom rental. A \$20.40 "housing wage" would be needed for a one-bedroom; another way to think about that is if you make minimum wage of \$7.25, you have to work almost 3 full-time jobs to afford rent.
- You all have probably heard me talk about affordable housing and how important it is to individuals and communities. In the North Dekalb Mall project, they're building 1700—how many are affordable? 15.
- Once you lose housing, it's so hard to get it back; once you get an eviction on your record, it's that much harder, it becomes harder to earn enough to make a security deposit and first month's rent; you end up on a spiral of \$350/week extended-stay hotels, which end up being far more than a month's rent, but you can never make enough to get out...; it's why we're working with PBG to change

Georgia's eviction laws because it's easy and cheap for landlords to file for eviction in Georgia than almost anywhere else in the country and it flat out is a cause of homelessness.

Here's the truth. Every one of these encounters is a gift from God. You are given the opportunity to open a relationship with a beloved child of God, in the vast majority of cases, that person's life has been stripped of caring relationships.

You can be part of that mending. It doesn't mean you're responsible for fixing their situation. Healthy boundaries are part of love. You can be part of mending their life back together.

There's a reason Jesus gives these outlandish instructions to the disciples: give to anyone who asks, go the second mile, love your enemies. Jesus came among us not to make sure everyone abides by the rules of success and failure defined by capitalism.

Jesus came to gather us together as One Body. We are knit together by God in such a way that there will always be greater and lesser members, and the lesser members are clothed with greater honor; when one suffers, the whole body suffers.

When we care for each other, we become the body of God, we become beloved community?

"Can you afford to spare some change?" We can't afford not to.