

Encountering the Panhandler: An Approach Grounded in Faith
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When I was young, I went to Washington, D.C. on our 8th-grade field trip. A lot about that trip made me uncomfortable and anxious. I didn't have any friends in 8th grade. What room would I be assigned to for sleeping? Would the other kids be neutral, or mean?

Also, I felt like I was in drag. My mother had bought me "outfits." She made me wear one on the bus trip down and take the other for the next day. I was comfortable in jeans and a sweatshirt. I didn't want to wear "outfits." She had even bought me a pair of real shoes to match. I felt like a dressed up clown.

She gave me a little carry purse, and some money for the trip. I had never carried a purse, and I felt awkward holding it. The whole way down, I sat in my seat and looked out the bus window. I didn't talk to anybody.

When we arrived at our first stop in Washington, we all piled off the bus. There was a great deal of milling around on the sidewalk while the adults did a head-count and got us organized. A scraggly guy came up to me and asked me for a dollar. I opened my little change purse, and gave him one. He moved on.

Some kids near me had witnessed this, and they berated me and made fun of me. Word spread down the sidewalk. More kids made fun of me. I was confused - - wasn't it good to share what you had with someone in need? If someone asked you for a dollar and you gave it, wasn't that okay? Wasn't it kind? Why was I facing this derision? I felt embarrassed and shamed.

I suppose on our 8th grade field trip we saw a few big landmarks. The White House and Washington Monument, maybe. The Mall. Maybe the Lincoln Memorial. I don't remember anything about what I saw on that trip. I remember that I was friendless. I remember that I felt uncomfortable in my clothes. And I remember that everyone made fun of me because I gave a dollar to a man on the street.

SERMON: Encountering the Panhandler: An Approach Grounded in Faith

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Most of us have probably been approached by someone asking for a handout. It can generate mixed feelings, or make us uncomfortable. After my 8th grade experience, I wasn't panhandled again until I was well into adulthood.

I was in Chicago, on business. My company had put me up in a hotel near the lake, and the next morning I had about 6 blocks to walk to get to the office. Before I got to the first corner, I was approached by a woman who said she needed money to buy milk for her baby.

I felt terrible for her! No money? No food for the baby? I gave her twenty bucks.

As I rounded that corner, I saw a number of people panhandling up and down the next block. I didn't want to be accosted by people asking for money every few feet on my way to work. I felt like I was about to run a gauntlet.

I thought about all these people panhandling, each with their own story to tell. Were the stories true, or just used to gain the sympathy of passers-by? What about the lady who needed to buy milk for her baby? Was that just a made-up sob story? Did I just get ripped off?

Perhaps you've heard the rumors. The people making hundreds of dollars a day panhandling. The guy driving into the city in his Mercedes and putting on tattered clothes because he can make an easy living just asking for handouts.

Can one make a comfortable living panhandling? Estimates of income range wildly from a few dollars a day on the low side to as much as \$300 a day at the high end. There probably are cases where someone makes a comfortable living by panhandling, but it's certainly not common. When we move from anecdotal evidence to actual studies, a much harsher picture emerges.

Studies across the U.S. and Canada have shown monthly income from panhandling to be between 200 and 300 dollars per month. Even at the upper range, that's less than \$4,000 dollars a year. Some supplement panhandling income by working odd jobs, scavenging for recyclables or other materials to sell, and selling plasma. This isn't an easy way to earn a living. My advice? Don't give up the day job.

So, what about the case where somebody is trying to gain sympathy with a story that turns out to be obviously untrue. Maybe you've seen this. I know I have. I was on Marta one time, coming back from the airport. A guy was going down the train, asking for money. When he got close to me, I heard him tell a couple that he had just gotten a job but his first paycheck wouldn't be issued until the end of the week. He almost had enough to get a room for the night, he just needed seven dollars more. The couple turned him down, and he moved on. The lady across the aisle from me snorted, and our eyes met. "Just as well they didn't give him anything," she said. "I was riding this train last week, and I saw that same guy telling the same story."

Or how about this one. Somebody is holding a sign that says "Hungry. Please help." You stop and hold out the bag you're carrying, with a chicken sandwich and an apple in it. The person gives you a disgusted look and doesn't take it. Obviously, she doesn't want food. She just wants money.

Nobody likes to be played. It's clear that some panhandlers are telling a story that's not true. But I ask you to consider - - if you were soliciting handouts, what story would you tell? Would you say you'd made some really bad decisions, dropped out of high school, haven't been able to keep a job, and need money to get a sandwich and maybe a couple of beers? What if you're under-employed and don't make enough for rent and basic necessities? Would you say you need money for the light bill? Just because the story is a lie doesn't mean there isn't a real need. So someone wants money instead of food. You can't run your clothes through the Laundromat with a sandwich. You can't buy a box of tampons with a sandwich.

Then there's the worry that someone will not use the money for food or other necessities, but will instead squander it on drink or drugs. There are different thoughts about this. Some people will not give cash, but they will buy food. Others give to homeless shelters but not to the person on the street. Some people give cash, but let go of the outcome, figuring that it's up to the person how to spend it.

A post by EMIG on the White Bear Blog describes a TV comedian years ago who related riding with a friend one day. They rolled up an off ramp, and the comedian's buddy pulled a \$5 bill out to give it to a panhandler standing on the off ramp with a sign. The comedian yelled at his buddy, "What're you giving him money for? He's just going to spend it on booze or drugs!" The buddy looked at him and said, "Well... that what I was going to spend it on."

The joke helps us to realize that while homeless people have needs specific to their circumstances, say, wanting to rent a hotel room once in a while to get a restful night's sleep and a nice, long, hot shower, they also have needs just like the rest of the population. If they're smokers, they'll buy cigarettes. If they drink, they'll buy beer. If they're addicted to drugs or alcohol, that will certainly be on their list of purchases. A 2002 study in Toronto showed 15% of panhandling income, on average, went to alcohol or illegal drugs.

At least one youth advocate points out that an addict will do whatever it takes to get his next fix. If he can't get cash by panhandling, he may resort to robbing people. Or to selling his body. Some people think that giving even an addict money is better than the realistic alternatives.

It's easy to make judgments about someone panhandling. Let's look at who these people are. First, let me be upfront about something. It's difficult to find objective information about panhandling. Advice is all over the map. Give...don't give... give only to a shelter... When I looked for information on panhandling and homelessness, I tried to rely on national homeless advocacy organizations, government information, and academic studies. Here is what I learned.

First, not everybody who panhandles is homeless, although many are. People who are homeless make up about 75% of those who panhandle.

The public perception of a homelessness person is a single, white, working-age man. However, the majority of homeless people are families, mostly single mothers with children. Between 2.5 and 3.5 million people are homeless in the U.S. in a given year. 40% of them are children under 6. In most cities, there isn't enough shelter space for everyone.

Also, most people don't realize that 80% of homeless people are homeless only temporarily – they return to stable housing within a few months. 20% are chronically homeless, and almost universally have a disabling condition, like a physical disability, mental illness, or addiction.

At its most basic level, homelessness is caused by a lack of affordable housing along with high unemployment or inadequate income. Consider current welfare benefits for a woman with two children: 282 dollars a month, most often without a housing subsidy. Could you find an apartment to rent on that? A single person living on Supplemental Security Income can receive a maximum of 698 dollars a month, or just over \$8,000 a year. That's only 74% of the federal poverty level. Even full-time work at a low-wage job may not provide sufficient income for basic necessities. It is worth noting that 40% of homeless people are employed.

Other people at a high risk of homelessness are kids aging out of the foster care system, people with a criminal record, and women, sometimes with children, who have left a home to escape domestic violence or sexual abuse.

Now, these are just a lot of trends and statistics. What is the experience of homeless people or others who panhandle? A common theme is feeling invisible, feeling like someone who's been thrown away.

The National Coalition for the Homeless has a speaker's bureau through which homeless people can share their stories. John Harrison offers this thought before telling his story: Almost anyone can become homeless, and people should be nice to those who are. Harrison says homelessness snuck up on him. He came from a good family and had a good job, but a series of unfortunate events and some bad decisions set off a downward spiral. He lost his job in a merger. He didn't have a college degree, so he had trouble finding another job. Then his house burned down. He didn't have insurance. He lived in a shed behind a friend's house for a while, and then in his car until it broke down. After that, he was on the streets.

He says it was the kindness of others that helped him survive. He says. "You know, we don't have to empty our pockets every time we see a homeless person. But to offer a word of cheerful encouragement instead of a hurtful comment - - how hard is that?"

Steve Thompson says that, like many homeless people, he had a job: washing dishes in a restaurant. He said he'd bring out food in the evenings, and share with other homeless people he knew. Government workers walking from their nearby offices complimented him, saying he was doing a great job with "those people." Then he got laid off, and started looking a little shabby. Steve says, "and those people who used to walk by and say 'hey Steve' every day just stopped speaking, or even looking in my direction. And that kinda hurt."

So how are we to respond when we encounter a panhandler, or a homeless person? Ultimately, the decision about whether to give is a personal one. However, we can look to our UU faith for guidance in the encounter.

Our first UU principle affirms the worth and dignity of every person. I've checked... it doesn't say just those people who have decent jobs. It doesn't say just those people who live the way we do. It says every person. To me, that means the ex-con, the person with mental illness, the drug user, the homeless person, the person panhandling. Our first principle says we affirm the worth and dignity of EVERY person.

It's easy to think of the panhandler, or the homeless person, as the "other." It's understandable to be annoyed when you're hit up for money again and again in a day. Some people act aggressively, or talk to themselves, and that can feel unpredictable and scary.

Are you obligated to give money to every panhandler you encounter? Of course not. But I would hope we would understand the panhandler to be a person, a person with inherent value, a person whose basic human dignity allows them to make decisions for themselves even if they aren't the ones we would make for them.

A buddy of mine described an encounter with a panhandler. She told him she wouldn't give him money, but would buy him something to eat, and asked what he wanted. He asked for a slice of pizza. She bought him a vegetarian patty instead. She said to me, "He shouldn't be eating that junk."

Well, maybe he shouldn't. But how much worth would *you* feel you have, how much dignity would *you* retain, if someone asked you what you wanted to eat but then provided something different – as if your opinion, your desires -- even though solicited -- didn't even matter?

A professor of mine told a story of encountering a panhandler on a New York subway. A guy was working his way down the train, looking for spare change. My professor took out a \$5 bill and held it up, keeping his head down. The panhandler took the other end of the bill, but did not pull it away. My professor looked up and into the man's eyes. The man said "Thank you," and then took the bill.

My professor said this sparked a life-changing realization for him. Panhandlers can ask over and over for money and not even be acknowledged. Their personhood is constantly being ignored, if not attacked. As my professor indicated about his encounter, that might have been the first time that day that anyone looked into that man's eyes and acknowledged him. Maybe the first time that week.

Marty and I took the train to Boston for Christmas a couple of years ago. On the way home, we were delayed waiting for a connecting train in New York's Penn Station. A guy with ragged clothing and missing teeth approached me and asked if I could spare a dollar. I told him no, but told him I hoped he would have a good New Year. He brightened immediately. "You have a good New Year too," he said. We exchanged a few pleasantries. He was smiling broadly. "A lot of times, people don't give me money," he said. "But people almost never talk to me. What does it hurt to tell someone 'have a nice day?'" Our conversation deepened, and he was quite animated as he told me about his life on the street. After 15 minutes, Marty let me know she'd heard our train called. I said goodbye to my new buddy, and he bounced away. It occurred to me how starved he was for conversation. For connection. For someone to see him as a person, and engage with him.

Personally, I keep a five dollar bill in the car and will give it to anyone who asks. If I go downtown, I take a few ones so I can give them out if I'm asked for money. I always provide it with a smile and a comment, like "I hope you have a good day" or "I hope it warms up or quits raining" or whatever. Of course, I'm not panhandled often. It might be different if it happened every day. I developed a system for when I traveled to Chicago, where multiple panhandlers ask

for money every time I walk on the street. I would decide in advance if I were going to give any money out, and how much. Then I would give until it was gone, and when the next person asked for money, I'd smile and tell them no.

I'm not saying you should give to a panhandler. That's up to you. If you do, that's fine. If you don't, that's fine too. What I'm saying, is that you should treat panhandlers as people, not as objects of scorn or nuisances unworthy of acknowledgement.

Many years ago at UUMAN, I spoke to someone whose brother was homeless and had resisted efforts by the family to get him off the streets. He had moved to another city and disappeared, and my UUMAN friend was worried about him. "I hope people are treating him kindly," he said.

Each one of these people is somebody's son or daughter, somebody's brother or friend. Like us, each is a child of the universe, whose membership in the human race imparts inherent worth and dignity. Maybe we are better off not approaching someone who seems dangerous or is acting crazy. But for the average panhandler, our faith tells us how to be in relationship with others and with the world. It's not that hard to look someone in the eye, or to say hello. Our panhandling brothers and sisters get a lot of grief from the rest of the world. Let's not add to it.

Blessed be.