

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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The Beggar

The Rev. Frank E. Wismer III

I had just stepped out of my car and hurdled a two-foot snow bank and was standing at a parking meter searching my pockets for enough quarters to pay for the two hours of parking. I was to meet with a dozen or so seminarians from the Berkeley Center at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. I hadn't quite finished plugging the change into the meter when a sad-looking fellow, who wasn't dressed properly for winter, came walking down the sidewalk, spied me, and approached to ask if I would buy him a sandwich at the Subway shop nearby.

I was in a hurry to get to my meeting, so the first words out of my mouth were, "I can't help you." But, just as the words left my lips and this poor soul was starting off down the street, I asked him, "Where is the Subway?" He explained that it was just two blocks away and on the same street. "Wait a minute," I said, "I'll go with you and help you get something to eat." As we walked, he explained that he was only asking for me to buy a small sandwich for him, but after we arrived at Subway I encouraged him to get a footlong meatball sub along with chips and a drink. I'm not certain what compelled me to accompany him. Perhaps it was his sad estate or the lightweight clothing he was wearing against the cold New England weather. Or, perhaps for a moment he reminded me of another beggar I'd encountered in the early years of my priesthood.

The little town of Northfield, Vermont, is a typical quaint New England village. And like many New England communities, it had its share of characters. One of these characters was a fellow who went begging from door to door on a regular basis. He too was a sad-looking soul, but he was also hampered by mental infirmities. By and large, the goodly people of Northfield were patient and gentle with him and assisted when he came knocking at the door. That is, with one exception. Sometimes he would become demanding. I remember him coming to our door on any number of occasions. One time, however, it was for a bar of soap.

The most confounding thing about this fellow is that he was very specific in his begging. I searched the linen closet and finally found a bar of Dial soap that I thought would suit his needs. When I handed it to him at the door, however, he didn't respond

with a “thank you” but with a demand that I give him a bar of Ivory soap. “That’s not what I need; it’s got to be Ivory soap. Give me Ivory soap.” Another day when he came to the door I gave him a box of cereal, but it too was the incorrect brand, and he pressed me for the right kind of cereal. I remember telling him kindly that I didn’t have what he was asking for and that was all I had to give him. As you might well imagine, others in our town weren’t quite as patient as I was when he became demanding and would tell him to “get lost” or “drop dead” or get off their property. After all, here was a guy who begged at one’s door and then had the gall to demand a particular brand name product. Unbelievable! What an outrageous sense of entitlement! Who in the world did this fellow think he was? It’s one thing to beg; it’s quite another thing to be demanding of those who are generous. How does the saying go, “Beggars can’t be choosers”?

What no one in the town knew and what he was unable to tell anyone because of his mental problems is that he lived with a couple in their early thirties who sent him out to beg each day. They prepared his “shopping list” and expected him to come back with the exact items they required. When he appeared without an item or an item that was not the brand they demanded, they would beat him.

One day he returned home without a particular item on the list, and the couple beat him to death. The news of his murder shocked and sickened everyone in Northfield. Had we only known, had we only been more aware of the situation, had he only been able to tell us, we would have been more than happy to give him exactly what he requested. More than thirty years later, it still grieves me to recall his tragic death.

I am not certain what compelled me to accompany the fellow who begged from me in New Haven as I was attempting to fill the parking meter with quarters. And, I’m not certain what prompted me, as we stood in line at the Subway shop, to hand him my card and encourage him to call me for suitable clothing. Perhaps it was his look of desperation and despair, or perhaps it was seeing him shiver against a harsh winter day. Most probably, however, it was the fact that he reminded me of that fellow in Northfield, Vermont, many years earlier who used to come begging door to door.



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