

“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”
a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
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I have often marveled at my own dithering in the presence of a panhandler. Countless Oxford-style debates about what to do have commenced in my head. What quick judgment can I make about this person? What will he really do with the money? How credible is his story? Don't I feel some compassion for someone so obviously down and out? What are these emotions I feel welling up? What on earth am I afraid of, in the presence of this powerless person? Why should I give to this one, when I didn't give to the previous one? And on and on.

The variety of themes in the UU sermons available online is rich, but there is almost nothing on panhandling. I finally did find one, though, from one of our leading churches not too far from here, in which the minister actually tried to work through his own dithering about it. Alluding to studies on the subject, he offered a profile of panhandlers: Unemployed, unmarried males in their 30s and 40s with few family or community ties, low education and job skills, not typically homeless, uninterested in regular employment, panhandling to feed drug or alcohol or tobacco addiction. He described the income of panhandlers as ranging from a few dollars to a few hundred dollars a day.

Based on this profile, the minister offered his personal policy on panhandling. Occasionally, he uses his ministerial discretionary fund to buy essentials for those who beg – a public transit ticket, basic personal necessities like soap or toothpaste, a meal coupon for a fast food restaurant. But not to make a direct payment of cash, because cash can be used to buy drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. He acknowledges that not all panhandlers are addicts, but says that since he lacks the information to tell which ones are and aren't, giving cash would run the risk of subsidizing a destructive illness. He worries that even in-kind support could be sold for cash to buy drugs, alcohol, or tobacco.

Even though he sets out to talk about panhandlers, the frank sharing of this minister provides a valuable panhandlee profile too – the liberal panhandlee, in particular. I could see myself in it. I could see the emotions running just beneath the surface of his posture toward the subject.

The first is guilt, a feeling that he should be doing something he isn't doing -- by not giving. The second is also guilt, but this one is a feeling that he is about to do something he shouldn't -- by giving.

The third is anger, and this one is more subtle. I believe the anger reflects what most of us have had to do to make money, including things that amount to a self-betrayal or self-violation – such as sacrificing time with our families, taking care of our bodies, or going along with what we feel is unfair or worse. The panhandler presents the possibility of someone making

money without having to play by those harsh rules. This reminds us of our own scars from the wounding battles with moneymaking, and anger is the natural response.

The fourth is fear. A panhandler who wanted to connect with a constituency of biblically literate religious people would do well to put this famous passage from Ecclesiastes on his hand-lettered cardboard sign: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” (chapter 9, verse 11) In fact, since most of us have heard this essential truth in one form or another, the panhandler’s very presence is likely to trigger at least an unconscious connection to it. If time and chance is part of what accounts for poverty, then surely our own lives of comfort and abundance are not entirely of our own making either. And if we have allowed our conception of self-worth to become tangled up with material success, as our culture is constantly encouraging us to do, then fear is the natural reaction – fear that our success might not say very much at all about our self-worth; fear that we and the panhandler might not be so different after all.

These emotions can be heard speaking in code in the rationalizations evident in this recent sermon. The sole source for its generalizations about panhandlers is a U.S. Department of Justice publication intended for use by local law enforcement officials. Of the fifty-eight sources cited in the publication, only two are sociological studies of panhandling. Most are law enforcement publications like Police Chief Magazine, law review articles, or daily newspaper articles. The law enforcement perspective of the publication is not illegitimate. But when an intelligent, highly educated spiritual leader gets his facts from sources like this, I get a strong sense that there is some emotional disturbance at work.

Contrary to the sermon’s profile, there is evidence that homelessness is common among panhandlers. This is the finding of recently published peer-reviewed sociological studies. The only contrary evidence I could find was from one of the two sociological sources cited in the Department of Justice publication – evidence that’s more than twenty years old.

Most panhandlers also do not fit the profile of being uninterested in regular employment. The recent studies conclude that most panhandlers make a persistent effort to find work and have strong work histories. Their employment difficulties have a “can’t win for losing” quality. Without a job, obviously it’s difficult to get housing. And without housing, it’s difficult to get a job. What do you write on the home address line of the application? What phone number do you put down for a callback after an interview? Where do you clean up to make yourself presentable to an employer?

As for the sermon’s profile of panhandler income, there is no solid basis for stories of panhandlers making several hundred dollars a day. The current studies report amounts more like a few dollars a day. If he looks too poor, some people will find the panhandler repugnant, avoiding any contact. If he looks too nice, some people will conclude that he either already has a job or could easily get one. It’s a pretty narrow bandwidth for making money.

Finally, on the sermon’s characterization of panhandlers as drug or alcohol addicted, the source cited by the Department of Justice publication simply doesn’t say that. Significant

numbers of panhandlers do use tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. So do many millions of people among the nonpanhandling population. For most panhandlers, the number one expenditure is for food. The recent studies conclude that previous high estimates of amounts panhandlers spend on alcohol and drugs – like those relied on in the Department of Justice publication -- were exaggerated.

I wouldn't cite the current panhandling studies as establishing a rock-solid set of facts. I do see them as revealing how willing we can be to select sources of information that will help us gloss over factual complexity and rationalize the difficult emotions we have about panhandling.

Unless there is somewhere else to turn, this leaves us swinging back and forth between conflicting sources of information or conflicting emotions. After putting up with my own dithering and rationalizing for a long time, I did finally find somewhere else to turn – to an inward place of natural wisdom.

I think the most basic step in this turning was to begin to see panhandling as something more than a logistical problem of how to arrange the social safety net. I began to get a sense of something even more profound at stake – the possibilities for spiritual growth on both sides of the encounter. This shift resulted from an increasing sense of the importance of seeing others and being seen by them, as a basic spiritual value.

When I am able to put aside all the social conditioning that presses all of us to characterize and judge the worthiness of others, I can see them for what they are, with nothing added and nothing left out. I can distinguish their humanity from their circumstances, from all the choices they have made. I can distinguish the judgments I have to make about actions taken by others from the judgments I'm never entitled to make about the humanity of others. When I step back from these judgments, I'm finding that something remarkable happens. With the humanity of the other in full view, I discover a natural knowing of how to relate. I can sense the deep self of the other, the part below all the layers of positive and negative history. This recognition awakens me to the presence of my own deep self, unifying compassion for the other and compassion for myself in one posture.

As an experience, rather than merely an idea, I think seeing others and being seen by them in this way has given my encounters with panhandlers a quality of seeing double -- a beggar in front of me and a beggar within me, vying for my attention. One is struggling to survive and wants me to give money, or at least to show regard. The other has strong emotions like guilt and anger and fear about this panhandler, and he also wants me to play it safe or at least reassure him. In the middle of these competing needinesses, I feel able, at least sometimes, to show regard for both beggars; to say, I see you both and accept you for what you are. There's room here for both of you.

When I am in this open-hearted place, my hopelessly limited knowledge of the facts no longer feels like an obstacle. The part of me that is fixated on "getting it exactly right" is no longer in charge. What other people might think of me recedes into unimportance. I don't vex over whether I might tarnish my image by supporting or condoning something I'm not supposed to.

This doesn't mean I always give money to panhandlers. It does mean I usually am satisfied with my response to the situation, imperfect though it is, without struggling to engineer that response analytically.

Finally, in this open-hearted place I can see the panhandler striving for more than his animal survival. The current studies of panhandling have identified a fairly consistent code of ethics among panhandlers – about how to treat those they ask for money and each other, about sharing with those in their street life communities who have even less. Even a panhandler reaches out for community.

That Justice Department publication says that the more we are panhandled, the less sympathetic we are to panhandlers. This sounds like that old saying about familiarity breeding contempt, doesn't it? But it's not that simple. The current studies indicate that panhandlers often are able to cultivate a group of regular donors, with whom they establish a routine. Greetings are exchanged. Money changes hands. There is some small talk about how it's going. Not being in the usual place at the usual time prompts concern about whether something bad might have happened. A panhandler interviewed in one of the current studies said of his regulars, "they're all I have. They really don't know that. They are my friends, my family, because I really don't have a family. They don't realize how much they mean to me. It's more than just the change."

Other panhandlers in these studies express this same impulse toward connection. "Sometimes people just walk past you like you're nobody, like you're a piece of garbage," said one. "I prefer people swearing at me to being ignored," said another. "At least it's a response."

Far from breeding contempt, the familiarity between panhandlers and their regulars seems to breed connection. Being asked for money fifty times a day by fifty different people would tax anyone's sympathy. Being asked for money by the same person, with whom one has spent small chunks of time over time, apparently can be a very different matter.

Asking for money must be like undergoing a kind of public defrocking. There you are, naked to the world. What everyone fears at least just a little has happened to you: you have "gone to the dogs." It must take courage to reach out. Witnessing the panhandler's striving reminds me of how my own spiritual growth depends on having a community deeper than the mere flocking together of birds of a feather. It intensifies my desire for that deeper community and my conviction that it can be had.

That minister who shared his struggle with panhandling ended his sermon by declaring that "if our goal is to truly help others . . . we must have the courage, the strength to set limits." That sounds right: a community where anything goes isn't much of a community. For me, though, a community in which asking for money from strangers casts one beyond the circle of blessing isn't much of a community either. I don't see how my own heart could continue to get bigger if the heart of my community were that small.

I still don't have a personal policy on panhandling, but these days I usually give a panhandler something when he asks. If I don't have a small bill or if I'm in a terrible hurry I

might say, "I don't have any money for you today, but I hope you have a good day." I make eye contact. I haven't yet mastered The Hug, but I'm working on it. And I don't worry too much about whether this fellow is one of those storied \$300 a day panhandlers who's supposedly shoving fifty grand a year up his nose. None of this makes me feel superior to others who deal with panhandling differently; but it does make me feel more like who I really am, and less like I have to worry about letting my guard down.

I can't tell you what to do about your encounters with panhandlers, such as you may occasionally find. And I don't really have any plans to lead a movement to import panhandlers into Williamsburg, much as the idea tantalizes me. I can tell you that getting to where you can open your heart to the one who is scorned, the one who triggers all those telltale emotions in you, might be the best investment you ever made -- in yourself.

Amen.