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Man and a mirror

Jamie Manson | Jul. 30, 2009

After my last essay about Michael Jackson was published, I received a number of interesting follow-up messages by phone, e-mail and Web posting. But I wasn?t prepared for an indirect response that I received after our soup kitchen one night in early July.

I had heard from our social worker that one of our most mentally unstable, physically ill, and drug-addicted homeless men (I?ll call him Clinton) had saved all of his money to purchase a Michael Jackson memorial t-shirt. Nearly two hours after our dinner ended, Clinton stopped by, operating on his typical schedule. I was tired and a little annoyed, so I slouched toward the call to never send anyone away hungry. It had been raining very hard that evening, so he was changing into dry clothes that we gave him. After Clinton finished eating, I told him amusedly that I had heard about his fantastic new shirt. He quickly pulled it out of his bag and held it up for me. I told him it was the most beautiful version of a Jackson memento that I?d seen (and I?d seen many versions by then). Without a thought, he folded it up and said, ?Just let it dry, and then wear it proudly.? I was dumbstruck. When my speech returned, I protested heavily, begging him to take it back. He would not hear of it, and headed into the street.

I?m not sure why I was so shocked. Such selfless acts of generosity are common among the poor. More often than not, when our guests come to us for clothing or food or toiletries, they plan to share at least half, sometimes all of it, with one or two poor friends. Encountering Clinton?s pure, immediate generosity at once inspired and humbled me. He held up a mirror that forced me to see my goodness and my limitations -- both of which are pretty difficult to look at. The experience reminded me of how much church folk, that is, the comfortable people who sit in the pews on Sundays or feast days, have to learn from the poor.

The soup kitchen that we were hosting that night was not supposed to be held at our site. Two weeks earlier, a neighboring congregation cancelled its summer dinner program with ten days notice. Though they said publicly that the closure was due to maintenance issues in the kitchen, several congregants came forward to tell me that the church had a conservative new pastor and that the congregation had embraced a strong Evangelical ideology. There were concerns about a soup kitchen that simply fed bodies but did not feed the soul through mandatory proselytizing and attendance at worship.

I?m not sure what the real story is, but the fact remained that many people would be sent away empty as a result. Though we did not have enough funding to open our doors for an additional eight nights through the summer, we had enough food for a substantive beginning. So I took the leap of faith and asked the appropriate powers to open our door for an additional night. Not unlike our poor guests, I went to our neighboring churches begging for small grants or food and supply donations. With the exception of one congregation, my pleas fell on deaf ears, even though our soup kitchen is located in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the country.

The experience reminded me of why I choose to use my Master of Divinity degree by working among the poor, rather than in traditional church ministry. I do not do this work to ?do good? or ?reach out? or ?give back,? but in order to encounter a God who is fully alive in the bodies of those who are ailing, addicted, needy, desperate

and desolate.

In Matthew 25:34-46, Jesus tells us that whenever we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner, we do this *to* God. Jesus doesn?t say that God is pleased, or that through these works one can become a better Christian. The experience is far more radical and authentic: we actually touch God in a real, physical encounter. I am far from a biblical fundamentalist, but I do, consistently and without contradiction, find absolute truth in this teaching.

Members of more than one religious community that I have served in one way or another have criticized me for not attending worship services more often. I believe that I go to worship everyday. Each day I encounter the broken, I see bread broken in front of me. Each time I feed someone, I feel I am given Eucharist. It is the poor who give me bread for the journey. When I am made vulnerable or sent away hungry by rejections from churches or wealthy individuals, it is our poor guests who feed me and clothe me with their awesome and inspiring support and generosity. One might say I am a daily communicant.

The next time I saw Clinton, he was very upset. He told me that he had tried to help a pregnant woman who was carrying very heavy packages. She nervously ignored him and hurried away. Of course, I cannot blame her. How could she know that, under his strange, intimidating exterior longed a man only wishing to be kind? Not unlike Michael Jackson, Clinton and so many of the homeless and poor suffer greatly in mind and body, they are powerless against drugs that medicated their pain, and they struggle passionately with loneliness. Feelings of being judged and misunderstood besiege them, while peace and a sense of home always elude them.

Now and then a few ?bad seeds? fall into the mix, and try to take advantage of our services. But I remain convinced that there are far fewer bad seeds among the poor than there are among the comfortable or the wealthy. How many participants in corporate greed are constantly benefiting from unjust systems? How many functioning addicts and untreated mentally ill people are teaching our children, running our businesses and government offices, and leading our religious communities? Even when our guests sadden me by relapsing into alcohol and drugs, returning to abusive partners, or refusing to take opportunities to better their lives, there is no change in my love and respect for them, or my desire to honor their dignity as beloved creations of God. If God is merciful in the face of all of our limitations and failures, why shouldn?t I try to be as patient and forgiving with the neediest?

Generous acts emerge out of poor people effortlessly because of their profound understanding of vulnerability. We avoid the poor because they are embodiments of our own vulnerabilities; they are mirror images of the hidden sufferings of our present and the potential deprivations of our future. Clinton?s loving act was truly a giving of self, a giving from out of his need, and it compelled me to look at my own strengths and weaknesses.

My greatest frustration with church folk is the frequency and ease with which so many of them avoid the poor and the stranger. If church communities seek to live out the gospel and honor the life of Jesus, the embodiment of God, they should be founded and grounded on working with the poor and the marginalized. It isn?t easy or simple, but if they take the risk, they could learn a lot about Jesus from guys like Clinton. By pushing women and men like him away, we push away our own vulnerability. But we also push away the God who is reaching out to us.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, *and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City?s homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women?s Ordination Conference.*

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