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I have always been drawn to the ones who have known heartbreak, or known what it feels like to be an outsider; the ones who know what injustice feels like on their skin; the ones who cannot hide behind a profile picture, professional title or new outfit.

Jesus said the poor will always be with us. What exactly did he mean? I don't know, and frankly, I don't trust anyone who says they do. You can only determine how Jesus' words land in your own heart, the only heart that belongs to you. So, to me, "poor" is part of the human condition. But no one should feel poor all the time. And no one is too poor to help another person.

For a long time, I believed this predilection toward the least and the last came to me from my father, a hurt and complicated soul who somehow found time for the downtrodden while working three jobs to pay our Catholic school tuition. He was a follower of Jesus, and of Jesus found in the old people, the "crazy" people, the boat people and the "bums," a word he used with deep affection. (I categorize and otherize for your benefit, reader. Back then they were just the people in our lives.)

I realized later that not all families had a friend like George, a Vietnam veteran with schizophrenia who attended our birthday parties and called the house when he thought the government was after him. Not all kids knew the particular quietness of children who had to drink each other's urine on a boat that took them to your backyard, where they discovered the swings and played with you.

My sister and I would accompany my father to visit an old blind man named Karol. He had a strange accent and hair coming out his ears. Once, he complained about the "three legged rats" running around everywhere. Sitting on his couch, we instinctively lifted our feet off the floor. To this day we wonder what he meant. I guess that doesn't matter either. We were warned that nothing is as it seems, plus Karol got the chance to tell someone what was bothering him.

Another thing I realized later: Jesus was onto something. Do what he says, and then you get it. No belief is actually required. Just do it. Love others. Have mercy. Don't throw stones, and take that beam out of your eye before you go harping on someone else. Belief, if it comes, is a byproduct of action — not the other way around.

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We might think we are drawn to the vulnerable because we see someone else do it, or because we want to follow Jesus — and maybe this is how it starts — but we keep going back because we discover Jesus was right. The treasure is in our connection through vulnerability. "Follow me," he told the tax collector whom everyone else hated, showing us that the distinctions among us are illusions. We all need shelter, air, water, food and most importantly, love.

On Good Friday this year I went with my Community of Sant'Egidio friends to visit people living on the street. We walked through the tent encampments that multiplied during the pandemic, offering supplies people living there might need: hand sanitizer, water bottles, underwear or socks, but more importantly conversation, a listening ear and eyes that don't look away. I don't do this service very often but when I do, I always wonder: Who is really serving whom? There's a circularity to it.

A friend and I talked with a man who lived in a tent on a field of grass in the shadow of the Watergate. He served as a leader among the people living in nearby tents, directing us to who might need which supplies, and why. As the moon rose he told us his story of having once run a large nonprofit in Washington, and of the book he wrote. This was before he relapsed. I took it with a grain of salt at the time — knowing there is much mental illness among people experiencing homelessness — but later I looked him up, and found it was all true. Shame on me for not remembering we are closer to each other than we'd like to imagine.

Loving those who are "hard up" has made me sometimes disdainful of the fakers, the hypocrites, the ones who pretend they aren't suffering or know what it is to feel at odds with yourself. Who do they think they are, hiding behind titles, roles and degrees, conspicuous consumption and real estate? Don't they know that the treasure can't be stored and shouldn't be hoarded? I find myself thinking this and am struck dumb by the realization that I am thinking about myself.

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I'll never forget what a shock it was when the pastor of our parish was arrested for "soliciting a male prostitute." That's how it played out on the 6 p.m. news and on the lips of everyone at church, the word *male* emphasized for effect. I was 15 and it was the first fall from grace I had witnessed up close, Jim and Tammy Faye being just faces on magazines in the checkout line. This guy had given me Communion!

"I could understand if it was a woman, but a *male* prostitute?" I overheard a lady tell my mom. The disbelief of it. Because this was the same monsignor who had used homily time, red-faced and adamant, to rant against a local proposition to include sexual orientation in the city's anti-discrimination policies. He ruled the parish, the school and our voting practices — or so he thought.

But he had a secret; and, probably, a very lonely life. It takes a lot of energy to pretend you aren't vulnerable and hiding something. It takes a lot of energy to act like something you are not. And doing so you often end up hurting others, the same way you are hurt.

So why waste time with it? Why do we do that? Why do *I* do that? Quit with the shame, and do what Jesus did. Because if I have a motto, it might be this: in vulnerability *veritas*, and in vulnerability joy, too.