

During internship in Dallas, Texas, I went with our youth group on their mission trip to Los Angeles, California. Now, these particular young people came from relatively wealthy families, to say the least, growing up in nice neighborhoods north of Dallas; but they were about to venture into some of the not-so-nicest parts of LA, to see unquestionable poverty first-hand.

One of the so-called “missions,” one morning, was to find a homeless person and take them out to breakfast. So I went with a few of our youth into downtown Los Angeles, and we found a man who was sifting through the garbage looking for pop cans. One of our youth, somewhat-hesitantly, went up and invited him to join us for a meal, our treat to him. We went into a diner down the street. All of us made our orders, we had conversations, the youth listened intently to him, we paid for the meal, and all of us went on with the rest of the day.

I will be the first to admit to you I do not remember hardly anything the man said that morning. I just remember what he didn't do. He did say, “thank you,” many times, but he didn't treat us as if we were angels. He didn't bow down and thank God for us. He didn't make us feel like we were miracle workers, that we should somehow be praised for going out of our way to take

someone like him out for breakfast. There wasn't this holy heart-overwhelming feeling as we sat in that diner. It was as if...it was just another meal, with just another person. As if it was just...normal. What he also didn't do was beg us for more. He didn't ask us for more money. He didn't see if we could take him out for another meal later. It was quite...what we did *not* expect. But maybe that's exactly what we needed.

You see, the Psalmist reminds us this morning, "the Lord does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty; neither is the Lord's face hidden from them; but when they cry out, the Lord hears them." The Psalmist was trying to let a world that was convinced that the poor were poor because of their own doing; the Psalmist was telling the world they were undoubtedly wrong. And, let's face it, plenty of those young people from Dallas, Texas, will grow up hearing that the homeless no longer have homes because of bad choices those people made. They didn't apply themselves hard enough. They didn't plan for the future well enough. They didn't trust the right people. They didn't pull themselves up by their own bootstraps hard enough. They made their own homeless bed.

Yet we know full well not all things that happen in this life are under our complete control. Stock markets crash. Housing markets collapse. CEO's corrupt. Corporations lay off thousands without any notice for the almighty dollar. Awful circumstances happen to all of us and to people just like us, including a man sifting through pop cans on a random street in LA.

So, what if the Psalmist is onto something? What if God's face is not only not hidden from those in poverty; what if that very man's face that day revealed the face of God? For the God incarnate who made a life into being right beside those digging through the dirt and grime of awful circumstances rut-amuck in Galilee? What if God was trying to minister to *us* that day in Los Angeles, not the other way around, as we had planned?

What if, deep-down, we were under the impression with this whole mission trip mindset that we had this God inside of *us* with our own gifts and talents, not to mention wealthy circumstances, that we could beautifully share with those didn't have as much and who, perhaps, didn't have God as much? And yet, what if God was as much with that man in his poverty, empowering him throughout his day, throughout his whole life? What if God was as much with him as God was with us, no matter how much we were

convinced we had so much to share when we made the trip? What if that man ministered us more than we did for him? What if not only did God never hide the divine face of hope from him, but that God also showed up in the face of a man who was immersed into a trash can? What if we need a little bit of a holy humbling, putting ourselves in our place, that we so richly deserve?

After all, this journey of Lent, is not just about our own spiritual journey of feeling closer to Jesus. It's also about a journey into a still-broken world that God still loves, to realize not only the journey Christ made to a cross long, long ago, but a journey that Christ is still making now, including on the streets, somehow convincing people to not allow awful circumstances to define them no matter how much the rest of the world may say otherwise. They have a story too. They have just as much to offer as we do. They have as much God in their very faces as our own. There are no limits to where this God can go, from all the awful circumstances this life can throw at any of us and even into death itself and beyond. The life-saving journey continues for Jesus Christ in all of us, and for that, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen.