

The Guy with the Sign

A Christmas Story

Amanda texted various members of a board she served on as the line of vehicles inched forward. Once she got too involved and the car behind her honked. She quickly looked up and saw she had left a big gap. She put down her phone, waved guiltily into the rear-view mirror and pulled ahead. Nearly to the school door now. Finally her ten year-old daughter Kaitlynn bounced up and hopped in. She was starting to look and act like a teenager, and any more she did not always want to chat with her mother. Today, however, she smiled and said, "Hi!" This did not fool Amanda. She knew the source of the good mood: they were going shopping with the hundred dollar bill her grandparents had given Kaitlynn for Christmas. For a dress for the Father-Daughter Dance. Fortunately, she was still a bit of a daddy's girl.

As they drove across the town they talked about the school day and little brother Asa, who had ridden the bus home with a friend. Taking him clothes shopping usually went very poorly, indeed. They pulled into the parking lot outside the big box store with all the clothes and home accessories you could imagine existed. Kaitlynn almost skipped inside, causing a smile from her mother. The only hint of difficulty the two experienced in the following ninety minutes came from Kaitlynn's preference for a neckline lower than Amanda would accept, and a hemline too high. Finally they found a dress both loved. After Kaitlynn handed the clerk her hundred dollar bill and gravely

received \$11 in change, she insisted on carrying the dress bag herself. They got in the car and drove up to the red light. Amanda said, “Damn!”, almost under her breath. Kaitlynn looked at her wide-eyed and said, “What?”

It was the Guy with the Sign. Walking toward them on the raised median between the entrance and exit lanes. He wore jeans with holes at the knees—not the fashionably distressed kind, but the kind he had worn holes in through hard living. His orange parka had tobacco juice stains across its front. His ancient tennis shoes looked ready to fall apart. He had no hat or gloves. His facial hair looked days old, not a proper beard but a failure to shave. His sign read, “Please help. Down on my luck.” He carried an empty coffee can. Amanda never knew what to do about the Guy with the Sign. She strongly suspected he used whatever people gave him to buy whatever substance or substances he abused. She wondered why he didn't just get a job. Street signs and radio commercials were begging people to apply for work. On the other hand, how far do you have to fall to stand out here all day, publicly begging? As he drew near she fixed her eyes on the license plate on the pickup ahead of her.

“Mom?” Kaitlynn said, “Aren't you going to give him some money?”

Amanda closed her eyes. She dreaded this conversation. “No, honey,” she said. “I think he should earn his own money.”

“How do you know he hasn't tried?”

Amanda turned to look at her daughter, who wore a surprised expression. She said, "This doesn't make me happy either. I honestly don't know the right thing to do."

"Didn't Jesus tell us to take care of poor people?" Amanda sighed and nodded. The light turned green. She had just started forward when she heard Kaitlynn's door open. She hit the breaks, which forced her daughter to collide with the front of the door frame. She straightened right up and ran across the front of the van. She fished the \$11 in change out of her coat pocket and put it in the Guy with the Sign's can. He smiled—which actually scared her a little because he was missing a couple of teeth, and the remaining ones were almost black. "Thank you kindly young lady," he said. "Welcome," she said, and ran back around the van.

Amanda did not know whether to vent her anger at Kaitlynn for having jumped out of a moving vehicle, or to reprimand her for going against her decision not to give the Guy with the Sign money, or to feel guilty her daughter had been the one to act charitably. After pulling up to the now red light, she turned to face Kaitlynn. "I am so very proud of you," she said. "You have a good heart. You did the right thing. ***But don't you ever jump out of a moving vehicle again.***"

"But it had hardly started going!"

"Don't do it again. But it is just as important for you to hear how proud I am of you. You are right. Jesus does tell us to help the poor. It's just that once you've

grown up you'll know it's complicated. But I understand that from where you are, you thought it was an easy choice.”

“All I know is I saw a very sad man and I feel really good about helping him.”

Amanda smiled, leaned over and hugged her daughter, who hugged her back. The last time that had happened was more than a year before, when Amanda's grandfather died. They kept hugging until they heard a gentle beep from the car behind them. The light had turned green. “Second time today,” Amanda said. And they went to pick up Asa, then to home.

As a Matthew 25 church we have spent months examining Jesus words about feeding the poor, clothing the naked and all the rest of it. In one Sunday school class we specifically discussed how complicated it is deciding whether to give money to the Guy with the Sign. I wrote this short story not to state that the right answer is *always* to put some cash in the can. I have in mind rather the good heart of a child who listened in Sunday school and sympathizes with another human being. The story has its roots in an argument ten year-old me had with my father in a park in Philadelphia. A down-and-out man had sat on a bench right next to me. He asked me for money before either of my parents could get to me—though they were moving pretty fast. I wanted to give him some money. I honestly don't remember whether I did, but I do remember that argument. My parents were telling me I had to be more careful with people I did not know. I should have walked away. I understood, but I wanted to help the man.

To sixty-three year-old me it seems that the child whose birth we celebrate this evening would want us at least to ask ourselves how to help the last and the least. Work through the complexities, maybe extend ourselves a little beyond our comfort zones. Each of us may make a different calculation and act accordingly. So be it. Remember, we worship the God of love who asks us to act out of love. Just as God did by consenting to become one of us, born in Bethlehem.