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## *One Pearl of Great Value*

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I stopped by my favorite coffee shop last Sunday intending to treat myself. I was on my way to church, and wearing my black suit and white collar. But, as I walked in, I was greeted not by the friendly faces I have come to know over time, but the tense words of the young woman who works behind the counter.

She was talking to an older man who appeared to be a day or two from his last shower. "I'm sorry sir," she told him, "but the restrooms are only for customers."

As she turned back to her work, the man began to look around the room. And I saw the anxiety on the faces of the other customers, as they turned back to their laptops and newspapers. I knew what would happen next.

"Hello preacher," the man exclaimed as he broke into a broad smile. "How're you doing?"

"I am well," I said as we shook hands. "How are you?"

"I'm having a hard time," the man replied. And then he began to tell me about a fight he had had the night before. "I had to hit him," he kept saying. "I had to defend myself. A man's got to defend himself."

I looked quickly at the woman behind the counter - a signal that I would eventually want my usual order - and suggested that the man go outside with me and tell me about his ordeal.

As we walked down the street away from the coffee shop, he told me again about the fight and I tried to listen without looking at my watch. Finally, he asked me the question I had been waiting for him to ask. "Say, preacher, could you give me a couple of bucks?"

"I'm not going to give you any money," I told him, "but I will buy you a cup of coffee."

"Now, preacher," he said. "You know I don't want no coffee."

"I know," I told him, "and that's why I'm not going to give you any money."

Then the old man smiled and offered his hand for one of those complicated handshakes I can never quite figure out. "I really appreciate your listening to me," he said. "People don't usually listen to me."

"I'll tell you what," he offered. "I'll pray for you. I know people are always asking you to pray for them. But, I'll pray for you."

The offer surprised me. Sometimes these conversations end with my offering advice - suggestions about where to find food, or directions to the nearest shelter or hospital. Sometimes, they end in angry attacks on my sense of Christian virtue, or judgmental litanies of scriptural prescriptions to care for the poor. Sometimes, they just end as if the last of the air had escaped from a balloon.

I can't remember a time when the conversation ended with an offer to do something for me. I can't remember a time when my refusal to buy a man his next drink put me on his prayer list. He offered to do for me what I spend my life offering to do for other people. It made me stop and think.

It made me feel an unexpected kinship with the man - a sense that we were more alike than we were different. I don't pretend to understand all of his motivations, or even to know the truth of anything he told me. But, I suddenly wondered what I would do if I had to walk in his shoes? I was suddenly aware of how similar our deepest needs must be.

We all seem to want to be connected with someone and to have someone who is connected with us. And it is not just human relationships that we crave. Human relationships and the imperfect love they offer only seem to whet our appetites. We all seem to be looking for the perfect, reconciling love that only God can provide. We all seem to be looking for the at-one-ment promised by the kingdom of heaven that Jesus describes.

I think God gives us glimpses of the kingdom to guide us in our search. Sometimes they are in the holy places, and we have to go far enough to find them. Sometimes they are in the ordinary places, and we have to stay long enough to see them.

But, they are there, if we know what to look for and how to look.

As I turned to leave the man last Sunday, he reached out with both of his arms and hugged me. I reached around and patted him on the back, but he didn't let go. Finally, I hugged him back and we just stood there for a moment.

That moment was, for me, one of those glimpses.

It was one pearl of great value.

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