

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

There was a very raggedy, old, sad, homeless-looking mess of a man on the ground beneath the sweltering Phoenix sun. He looked as though he had not had a haircut or shave for at least 6 months. His clothes were tattered and dirty. His body swayed back and forth. His tattooed hands shook uncontrollably. He never looked up or around. He was outside among people but seemed lost in a world of his own.

Watching this, I was transfixed for over an hour. It was one of the most eye-opening experiences of my life.



He sat on the dirt in the blazing heat of a sunny Summer Arizona day. There were no clouds to provide respite. The 90+ degree temperatures were accompanied by unusual humidity for Phoenix. The heat reflecting off the ground made it nearly impossible to stand in one place for long without feeling scorched. Yet there he sat in a growing pool of his own sweat on this heat island surrounded by an army of very small brown ants who seemed slightly annoyed that something that big and messy was in their midst.

His hair was so long it covered his ears, eyes, and went down the back of his torn shirt. The beard that covered his face was also long and scraggly. Underneath that unkempt mass of greying hair were unseen eyes covered by very dark and scratched sunglasses.

And those clothes, or what was left of them, were so sad. A very torn and ripped shirt with gaping holes and paint or dirt splotches. His hands were barely covered with old, mud-stained gloves. There were no coverings for his fingers that protruded from the long ago ripped and ragged tips. The rest of the cheap old gloves had tears and gaping holes from former battles and times past.

A small portion of his arms were visible where one could see several strange tattoos. One looked like a large snake crawling up his left arm but with a dragon's head at the top. The right arm had a scarier long snake crawling up a very sharp dagger that formed a cross at the handle. On his wrist was a non-descript tattoo that looked as though it could have been a gang symbol, but it was hard to see given how his hands shook.



His sweat-stained and dirty long pants were horribly out of place in this baking heat. They were ragged, faded, and thin. The very old shells of some kind of foot covering, if they could be called shoes, provided absolutely no padding. The dirt on them blended perfectly with the dirty ground on which this cross-legged man sat.

He could not sit still. He rocked back and forth and side to side, but with no set pattern. It seemed totally random and unpredictable. The tremors in both hands were uncontrolled. Clearly, something appeared to be wrong with him.

Hundreds of people walked by him on their way to an outdoor breakfast feast. This beggar seemed planted into the ground just outside a beautifully manicured lawn in a high-end resort. How this shadowy wreck of a person snuck onto these premises was a mystery.

I later learned that several guests called security to have him removed. After all, he was sitting at the edge of this elegant event with many tables featuring a cornucopia of great food and beverages. The guests were feasting in the shaded comfort of wide umbrellas for over an hour. Not so for our beggar.

During that time, about 650 people passed him by, not once, but twice. First to get to the beautiful, shaded area where their wonderful food and each other's joyous company awaited them. These blessed humans passed him a second time as they re-entered the airconditioned comfort of this expensive resort in order to work on a wonderful service project filling food boxes for the homeless! Ironically, the homeless-looking beggar was left where he apparently belonged. Outside looking in.

I had a bird's eye view of this spectacle and wondered about a lot of things. I especially wondered how many people actually spend their lives outside looking in.

During the entire event, almost no one stopped when they passed him even though they couldn't miss his obvious, and perhaps uncomfortable, presence. I say almost because there were a few amazing exceptions. He had a dirty and beat-up baseball hat in front of him, to accept whatever spare change and scraps from the table of abundance anyone wanted to toss down to him. Out of the hundreds who passed, only 8 stopped to give this man any financial support. One dollar each. \$8 total in 75+ minutes.

The first one surprised me the most. It wasn't any of the successful guests staying at this exclusive resort where the room rates were several hundred dollars a night and where a cup of coffee was \$3. It was one of the servers. A nondescript laborer who was himself sweating in his clean hotel uniform as he cleaned tables and replenished the trays of abundant food for the guests.

He was the first to show generosity and hospitality. And his gift equaled the most generous of the other seven who gave the homeless man any money. It was only \$1, but for this working man, it was significant.

Because his exemplary generosity fascinated me so much, I later tracked him down and asked him his story. He had spent a lot of his life outside looking in. He was an immigrant from Serbia. He was an Orthodox Christian! He didn't have much, but he and his family had been through a lot. He said he saw in this huddled man someone who looked like him and others he knew. They just needed a little help. So, he did what he could. And what he did was substantially more than the many hundreds of people who were richly blessed and merely passed by.

There were seven others who each dropped a dollar in the hat. What was fascinating was that all of the 618 young adults in their 20's attending this conference were given a crisp \$1 bill in a sealed baggie when they registered. There was no explanation. There was a lot of speculation and more than one comment about it being a stimulus payment. Doesn't that say a lot about the times. Yet only three dropped the bagged dollar in the dirty hat of the beggar. I'm not sure what the other 600+ did with their gift.



What was striking as I watched in awe for the entire time, was the parade of high-end, fashionable clothes and shoes being worn by the guests passing this beggar. Imagine what it was like for a man who never looked up, and only looking at the very ground on which he was planted, to see this onslaught of expensive footwear parading by. Outside looking in once again. Except this time, he was looking down. And perhaps, he was also being looked down upon.

The small amount of money contributed was one thing, but what was more uplifting was the generosity of three young adults who stopped and gave him something to eat or drink from the abundant meal spread before them. One young man shared a bottle of juice, another a small bottle of cold milk.

But there was one young man that was more amazing. I later learned that his name was Bob. I don't know where he was from or anything about him or his background. But by his actions, I know something about his heart and his upbringing.

Bob actually stopped and stooped down and tried to talk to the ragged beggar who never looked up at him. Bob carefully placed a small croissant egg sandwich inside his gloved hand. He gave him two small baked goods wrapped in plastic bags for later. He gave him a bottle of cold water. I even overheard Bob ask him if he needed anything else.

What was even more amazing as I leaned in to listen was that Bob asked the beggar a very personal question. He asked him his name. Why did he want to know this poor man's name? I will never know.

Perhaps Bob was raised right, and he wanted to address this poor man with some dignity by using his name. Perhaps Bob wanted to add this soul to his daily prayers. Perhaps he thought "there but for the grace of God go I." And maybe, just maybe, Bob didn't see a mass of sweat, and hair, and dirt and ragged clothes. Perhaps Bob saw another person. A human made in the image and likeness of the same God in whose image and likeness Bob was made. In the same image and likeness as you and I were made. As all of humanity was made.

I don't know what Bob was thinking, but I'd like to think Bob recognized a child of God. And he treated him as such, not like an unworthy random collection of cells to be shunned and avoided.

I wonder *what* Bob's story is. But I don't wonder *who* Bob is. I know. Bob is a truly generous son of the most high God. I know this because in that moment, when no one was watching but his Creator (and unbeknownst to him, me), Bob treated the least among us as if he was the first among us. God bless Bob. He treated this outsider as if he were inside. He apparently was actually inside Bob's heart.

There was another beautiful person who stopped and shared a moment with this wretched soul. A young priest. There were other priests who passed by like the many hundreds of others who paid no attention to the huddled man on the side of their path forward.

This special priest approached the man from the side, perhaps not to startle him any more than his troubled soul was already impacted given his shaking. This clergyman placed a comforting hand very softly on his shoulder. If you watched carefully, you could tell he was speaking to him as he handed a cup of cold water to drink in order to quench what had to be a burning thirst in the scorching sun of the now 94+ degree blazing sun.

I heard what this priest asked this victim of abandonment. This man of God asked this lowly servant of God if he had a safe place to stay. Imagine that. He was extending hospitality to make sure the beggar would be safe someplace when he laid down his head.

Right at that moment, something else amazing happened. There was a professional photographer hired by the sponsor of this event, who happened to be nearby. While he had been shooting groups of conference attendees enjoying their meals and each other's company, this great photographer saw something you don't see every day. So, he stopped and discretely snapped a photo of the moment that the priest was tending to this vagabond. What happened next was fascinating to me as a student of psychology.

This young priest pulled the photographer aside and respectfully questioned him about capturing this tender act of service, humility, and humanity in a photo. He wasn't sure what this photographer would do with this moment of time, but the priest did not want this private exchange publicized or exploited for profit.

Tenderness and caring are what this priest extended because it was the right thing to do, the human thing to do, the Godly thing to do. But certainly not for any recognition or reward for himself. And he also did not want the homeless man exploited. What compassion and love!



I did not record this Man of God's name in this account. He knows who he is. I know who he is. People seeing him do this, or that see the uncensored picture memorializing his generosity, know who he is.

He knew this act of kindness was not about him. It was about helping someone in need. His momma would have been so proud to see this behavior. I know his Father in Heaven certainly was. His name is properly recorded as a "good and faithful servant." May he receive the rich blessings to which he is deserving, and may his example inspire us all.

As the heat and glaring sun grew more intense, the homeless man seemed to melt even closer to the ground as if to extract any coolness from the wet soil underneath him. And then it happened. I didn't know what it was at first. But it was striking and unsettling once it began. All of a sudden, he began to convulse and slap at his hands, arms, and feet, and even roll to his side as he swatted vigorously.

It took a while to realize what was happening. He had been sitting on the ground surrounded by what looked like hundreds of extremely small brown ants that didn't seem to bother him. It's as if the ants recognized him as part of the same earth that was their home.

But after he rolled over and was swatting so vigorously, one could see that a swarm of large black ants had converged on the ground where he sat. Apparently, as he tried to eat that piece of bread given to him by Bob, scraps of food fell from his trembling hands and heavily bearded mouth. These bread scraps had attracted a swarm of very aggressive and hungry black ants. These hungry predators apparently chose not to differentiate between the real food scraps and the flesh of this humble human.

The biting and swatting continued for about 5 minutes even after he rolled over to a patch of sun-drenched ground slightly farther away from the crumbs. He used his fingertips that protruded from his torn gloves to pick off the biting ants from his hands, arms, and legs.

Eventually, the predators abandoned their human meal, but I could see that the bites on his arms were starting to swell and itch. He scratched them or pressed on them to relieve the irritation and pain they caused.

He may not have been smart enough to prevent what happened to him in his life, but he was wise enough to place on the ground, about a foot away, a small broken piece of the bread he had been eating. This "bait" seemed to attract all of the predators so that he could remain on this new patch of ground relatively undisturbed. He only had a small scrap of food left, but he shared it with other of God's creatures.

I am not sure how homeless people treat bites or other injuries. There was no medicine or urgent care facility nearby or telemedicine visit available. No doctor stopped by to tend to him, although I was told there were medical professionals in attendance. So perhaps it is left to the human body to defend and protect as best it can. Or maybe God protects even his most broken looking people that are outside looking in on the very blessed life most people have in this great country.

This saga unfolded over about 75 minutes. That's not a long time in the scheme of life. We often wait that long for a restaurant reservation, or a favorite concert, program, or sporting event to begin. It certainly takes us that long to enjoy a good breakfast, as it did that day for those blessed young adults, older folks, and clergy.

But during this time in our beggar's life, while I was on the outside looking in, I started to wonder. I wondered about this man's life. His long gray beard showed he must have endured many decades. What was his story? What had he seen? Who had he loved? Who had loved him? What had he lost? Who had he lost? What great things had he done? What horrible things had occurred that brought him to the point where he sat in rags, in the extreme heat, begging for whatever scraps would be tossed his (and the ant's) way by those walking by him in shoes that cost hundreds of dollars? What trauma had he seen? What depression had he experienced? What was causing his hands and body to tremble? Why did he never look up? How long had he been on the outside looking in?

There was an amazing story happening right before everyone's eyes and I wondered who had observed it? I was transfixed and mesmerized. I wondered how many times a day in how many places throughout the world, this exact scene is replicated? I wondered what happened to those people? I wondered why more of those who passed by either didn't see him or didn't stop to offer help? I wondered if we sometimes even see the world around us, or the needs of others? I wondered if we all are sometimes outside looking in, but not really seeing? I wondered if any of us CAN make a difference, if not for the whole world, perhaps at least for the world of one person at a time? I wondered what did this true story say about our humanity and our love and care for each other?

In a period of just more than an hour I was outside trying to look in. And in that time, I finally understood Matthew 25:35-40.

Later that afternoon, I had the opportunity to address all 618 young adults, and 50+ older adults, most of whom had ignored the beggar who was on the outside looking in. I asked them a paraphrased question from Matthew 25:35-40:

I was hungry...did you give me something to eat?

I was thirsty... did you give me something to drink?

I was a stranger... did you invite me in?

I needed clothes... you clothe me?

I looked sick... did you care for me?

I was in my prison...did you visit me?

**Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters
of mine, you did for Me.**

Yes, I asked everyone the above questions. Because, on that day, I was that beggar.

I was also the keynote speaker at this conference of faithful Christian young adult leaders. I was charged with opening their eyes to “Find Their WHY, Share the Love and Be the Light of the World as they became Disciples of Jesus Christ in the Jerusalem in which they lived.”



For six months I neither shaved nor cut my hair. I scoured and found the worst and most ragged clothes I could find. I applied scary fake tattoos on my arms. For weeks preceding this teachable moment, I tried to prepare myself for this small act of ministry.

This was hard because I am very blessed. I am blessed well beyond how much this sinful and unworthy servant deserves to be blessed. I am blessed enough to easily give each of the 618 young adults \$1 in their swag bags. For much of my early life I too was on the outside looking in. But no more. Now I am (almost) always inside, but not looking outside carefully enough.

No matter how hard I prepared my mind for this brief role, I could not anticipate how I would feel. I did not appreciate the complete loneliness I would experience even though I was surrounded by many people and much beauty. I did not anticipate how hot, dehydrated, and hungry I would be. I did not anticipate how it would feel to only see very expensive shoes walk by as those who wore them ignored someone without nice shoes. I did not anticipate the ants. I did not anticipate how much their bites would hurt and how long the welts would last on my skin. But none of that was as bad as the pain of feeling totally ignored and neglected. Completely outside, trying to look in.

For me, it was only 75 minutes after many months of preparation. For others, it is their life. And in that moment of realization, my heart broke.

When have you been on the outside looking in? Do you feel that way now, in the divisive times in which we live? Are you suffering from depression or anxiety or a loss? Do you sometimes feel like you are too far outside and can't even begin to know where to look in?

COVID is a serious disease, but there are vaccines and therapeutics that can treat it. For many of the diseases around us, illnesses we experience, or mistakes we make in our lives, there are now fixes, treatments, or support groups.

But there is one miracle cure and treatment option that you possess. Everyone possesses it. And when you share it, you get even more in return.

You are a child of a loving God. You are and made in His image and likeness. And you possess your humanity and free will. The exercise of your humanity and free will as you share the love with one person at a time is one of the most effective medicines one could ever offer or receive. You CAN make a difference by serving and extending love, even if only to one person.

I met all these wonderful people I addressed after my keynote address. They are truly fantastic. I felt so blessed to be in their presence. They will do great things.

Many were moved to tears. Others seemed ashamed. I lost count of how many told me they were “convicted” by what they had just experienced. Yet others didn't know how to process or express what had just happened. But they seemed to get it! I hope they never forget it. I know I won't. How about you?

I discovered that these people who saw and heard me that day were wonderful and beautiful and caring souls. Good Orthodox Christians from all over, with many stories of their own. Some happy, some tragic and heart breaking. Some of them shared their stories of sorrow with me. My heart broke again and again.

They are good people. Truly, good people. It's just that on that morning, their eyes were not fully open to see what was right before them: something ugly and unpleasant. A wreck of a person on the outside, trying to look in.

I was an alone, homeless-looking person for just 75 minutes. But during that time, the beautiful warmth of that Serbian worker, Bob, the humble Greek Orthodox priest, and the generosity of a few people was a powerful anecdote to the bug bites, sweltering heat, hunger, thirst, and the loneliness of being in a personal prison on the outside looking in.

What I learned, that I tried to share in my keynote address a few hours later was that you, indeed every one of us, really CAN share the Love of Christ and be the Light of the World as we live our Stewardship Calling: what we are called to do with all of our gifts. When you do those things, especially to the least among us, you bring those who are stuck outside, into the warmth and joy of a loving faithful community of believers.

You can always show your humanity and love to all of God's creatures and creation. And when you do, you will one day hear: "well done good and faithful servant." In serving the "least of your brothers and sisters," you allow them to no longer be on the outside looking in. Because YOU are the light of the world!

All glory to God!



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The keynote presentation can be found at:

[https:// stewardshipcalling.com/yal-conference-2021-exclaim-your-faith/](https://stewardshipcalling.com/yal-conference-2021-exclaim-your-faith/).