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Who Merits our Respect and Love?

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

Jesus answered, “. . . go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” (Matthew 19:21)

I spend half of my working week in a neighborhood clinic in the area nicknamed “Chirilagua,” the barrio next to Del Ray here in Alexandria.

Doctoring the poor has been a rewarding part of my professional life for more than twenty years. Getting to know the poor from all over the world with their varied languages and cultures has enriched my life immensely. I don’t expect treasures stored for me in heaven, but I feel like I’ve already been richly rewarded in this life.

The vast majority of my patients are industrious, kind, and honest. They often are working two or three jobs to support themselves and their

families, particularly during these difficult times. Helping them, knowing them, and especially knowing their stories is a reward in itself.

Often when I enter the exam room, and even before I can ask the patient why they have come to the clinic, the patient asks how I am doing. "How is your health, doctor? How is your family?"

And there are gifts for me at the holidays and often warm, home-baked bread. When they return from Egypt or Honduras, they bring me small pieces of folk art, little figurines, or wall-hangings from their countries.

When a younger patient, whom I've previously seen, brings an older patient and I comment that I didn't know they were related, the answer is, "We're not related; she is my neighbor."

These little things are my rewards; they make the burden light.

What is not as rewarding is the occasional unpleasant patient – the addict patient who goes from doctor to doctor seeking drugs to feed their addictions or to sell to other addicts.

Or the patient who wants me to falsify the medical record so they can stay on disability payments or in subsidized housing even though they are capable of working. Or the threatening patient who turns on her cell phone to record our conversation so she can "report me for my horrible care" when she does not get what she wants.

These patients are not industrious; they are not kind; and they often are not honest. For me, they are the "undeserving poor."

They remind me of the character Alfred P. Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, the stage musical and film, based on the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. Doolittle offers to sell his daughter Eliza to Henry Higgins for fifty pounds.

As Doolittle says, "I ain't pretending to be deserving. I'm undeserving. "(Morals) I can't afford them. I'm one of the undeserving poor, that's what I am..."

And yet. . . .

And yet, these patients do need my help. They do need to eat and somewhere to sleep. They do need encouragement, indeed they need respect and even love, as hard as it is to respect and love them.

And this has set me to thinking about how we as a society are going to climb out of the predicament in which we find ourselves. How are we going to simultaneously address the issues of the pandemic, economic recession, and racial injustice when our political process, the only real tool we have to ultimately face these challenges, seems hopelessly broken?

I wonder how we are to proceed if we think the “other side” consists of people who are not kind, who are not honest, who are not even informed about the issues? What if we think they only care about their own personal well-being or their own neighborhood, or their own kind of people and do not care about the bigger problems that I see?

Perhaps one of the answers to this vexed question is forgiveness. Could it be that we need in our hearts the capacity to look beyond our own internalized values, often deeply held, of who is kind, and who is honest, and who merits our respect and love?

As C. S. Lewis said in his essay *On Forgiveness*, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

By this light, we are called not to judge but to love, to see in the other a brother or sister in God. We are called to serve, not because we agree or approve, but because if we have been given gifts, they need to be shared.

And perhaps we are even called, at times, to look past our own values and to seek out and work with those with whom we fundamentally disagree. And yes, this is one of those times. It is clear to me that

building the Kingdom requires us, now more than ever, to construct it
brick by brick and to do it together.