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## How Many People Have You Blessed?

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

Meeting with people in pain and distress is simultaneously one of the great privileges and responsibilities of being a priest. Quite a few people come to Immanuel seeking assistance with their rent, utilities, car expenses, or childcare needs.

Part of our calling as a Church is to meet people in those needs and try to help. Yet always in the back of my mind is the voice that says, "You know you might be getting played." There certainly are unscrupulous types who make the circuit of churches, pocketing whatever they can.

So, we take reasonable precautions – only writing checks to an entity such as a landlord, utility, or phone company. We ask questions. Sometimes we have to set limits on the number of times we can help someone within a period of time. We make referrals to our outreach partners, such as ALIVE! or West End Lazarus, and we try to connect folks to services provided by Alexandria.

I always remember an off-hand comment from a priest in New York who said that to do our job as priests, we have to be willing to get it wrong sometimes. In other words, we have to be willing to be taken advantage of, knowing that it will happen from time to time. The only other option is to wall ourselves off so thoroughly that we forgo ministering to those in genuine need. After all, if someone weren't in some sort of need, would they be seeking help from churches?

The question to my mind, is, "What would Jesus do?" Or put another way, "What would Jesus have *me* do?" This is a question all Christians routinely face.

Some folks in need want me to pray with them; some are deeply grateful for any help I can give.

I know in many cases we have made a difference. For example, the woman who came was so eager to receive money for diapers that she brought her toddler with her. With what we were able to provide, she could buy food and diapers. She said our gift would hold her over until she got her first paycheck from her new job. She was both smiling and crying as she went on her way.

And we may have been taken advantage of. We try to keep written notes of people we have helped, and when we recognize someone we can then check those notes compared to the information they give us.

Usually, we can't know for sure – only God knows.

Most of us have had similar experiences – on the street, with a colleague at work who seems always to be asking for something, or from a member of our extended family. What do we do? When do we say no? When do we set a limit?

I have found the best approach is to pray on the spot for wisdom, to get out of myself for the moment, and to consider the child of God before me.

I also try to consider how God might look upon me in my need for guidance when I turn to God for help. I try to be prudent, asking questions we have learned to ask, often checking with a landlord or the utility

company. And then I have to decide, and I have to remember I might get it wrong. Sometimes I have to say, “I just can’t help you right now,” or “This is what I can offer.”

Then I have to trust, let go, and offer the person and the situation up to God. And I have to believe that our efforts, fallible as they may be, please God’s heart of love.

This brings to mind one of those off-hand comments that lodge in your soul and find a home deep within your spirit.

I heard a priest say that the real question we need to ask, individually and as a parish, is “how many people have you blessed?” That blessing can take many forms – a friendly note, sharing a meditation such as this, a kind word, even a smile for the person living on the street.

My boys get annoyed with me when I tell them we must acknowledge someone on the street asking for help – that we must honor the dignity of the child of God before us, whether or not we give them money. This can be a brief hello or telling the person (as is often the case) that we are not carrying cash or asking that God would bless them.

Almost without fail the person responds positively and gratefully, just for having been noticed as a human being. Even when we know it is best not to give money, we can still greet them as children of God. This is a direct application of the vows we make at every Baptism, in the Baptismal Covenant:

Celebrant: “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

People: “I will, with God’s help.” Book of Common Prayer, p. 305.

Thank God it says, “with God’s help,” as that makes all the difference!

We bless others when we point towards God and meet our brothers and sisters in any sort of need, whether it be material or spiritual. To persevere in this blessing, it might help us to remember all of the people who have blessed *us* along the way, and to thank God for them.

**Let us pray:**

Lord God, we can only see the situation before us partially, at best. Give us hearts that are both wise and generous, prudent, and open. Sharpen our listening and help us take a moment to step out of our schedule and plans for the day. Help us to see all of the people before us as Your children, made in Your image, and loved by You beyond our understanding. Make us, O God, channels of your healing grace and love, and continue our healing, as well. In the name of Jesus we pray, AMEN.

Experience this inspiring anthem, “You Raise Me Up,” imagining God as the one who does the raising up – for all of us. We include two versions for you and hope you’ll agree it’s worth hearing twice, since each offers a valuable and very different experience.

[“You Raise Me Up”](#) – Sung by Susan Boyle

[“You Raise Me Up”](#) – Sung by Josh Groban