

History repeats itself on street corners of Portland



Sally Martin

Sally Martin is a student at Portland State University, and a former pastoral assistant for The Downtown Chapel of St. Vincent DePaul Catholic Parish.

Imagine this: You are out of money, can't find work and need a few bucks to get you through the end of this month. Even though it's the last thing you want to do, you decide to stand on the corner and ask passersby for spare change. You start out, and as people walk by and ignore you, you decide to give up. But, in the distance, you see someone coming toward you. You dare to get your hopes up, they look directly in your eyes, they reach in to their pocket, and they pull out a ticket! Don't you know you can't ask for money on this corner? Don't you know that since you appear able-bodied, you really aren't supposed to be asking for money at all? You move along. Just another day in fifteenth-century England.

One of the most eye opening realizations I've had since starting my courses in social work this fall, is just how much history repeats itself. Early in the quarter, I was heading home from class, where we had just learned about the very beginnings of social welfare policy: a collection of laws that regulated where people living in poverty could live, work, and beg in England during the middle ages. I decided to cut through the south park blocks. As I approached city hall, I saw the protesters settling in for the night. I stopped to talk with them and thank them for their work to raise awareness of the need for safe, legal places for folks

experiencing homelessness to sleep outside. As we parted ways, I couldn't help but think of the other brave group of protesters who not too long ago took a similar action against the Sit Lie Ordinance. I thought again of the laws in Queen Elizabeth's England that restricted the activities of the poor three hundreds of years ago. Sitting in class, or in the library reading about these things, it seemed like we have come along way since then, but have we?

The Elizabethan Poor Law stipulated that the state had a responsibility to relieve want and suffering in society. It defined who the truly "helpless poor" were and guaranteed their legal right to assistance. This structure of early social welfare policy was later adapted in our own 13 colonies. Obviously, we do not have laws on the books today spelling out who the "deserving poor" are. But, public perceptions of people living in poverty, even in 2009 right here in Portland, do make similar distinctions.

People often talk of not wanting the things that they have earned shared with those who have less. Oftentimes we are critical of someone paying with food stamps ahead of us in the checkout line. We all do this. Just the other night I was asked for change while walking to dinner. I reached in my pocket and gave the gentleman the change I had. He wished us a good evening.

My companion, knowing that I usually don't give money when approached, shot me a questioning look. I stammered and sheepishly admitted that he "looked like he really needed it." Thinking of this now, I am ashamed- who am I to decide who needs what? Furthermore, what makes any of us qualified to determine what others deserve?

If I could go back to the moment in which I made a very quick judgement about the man on the corner who asked me for change, I would do things differently. I would slow down, take the time to ask about his day, and really hear about the challenges he is facing. I would share more of myself with him, instead of making myself feel better by hurriedly placing a few coins in his hand. If I was feeling extra brave, I would tell him that I hate the fact that in one of the richest countries in the world, he must stand in the cold and ask strangers for money.

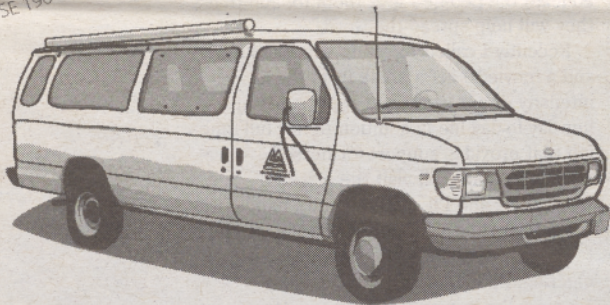
Dorothy Day once said, "God help us all if we just got what we deserved." I think she was on to something, and I hope that next time I am challenged to do so I can give the person I find in front of me so much more than they expect, and in doing so, help us both to become a little more human, a little more of who we are called to be.

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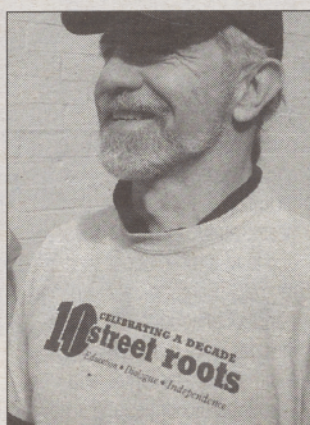
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