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The officer and the homeless man

Jamie Manson | Dec. 12, 2012 Grace on the Margins

They were the boots viewed round the world.

Early last week, a tourist took a photo [1] of a New York City police officer helping a homeless man put on a pair of boots. The officer, it turns out, purchased the boots for the man after seeing him barefoot on the street. It was a cold night and the man's feet were badly blistered.

As he knelt before the homeless man to help him put on the new socks and boots, the officer did not know he was being photographed. The tourist, who also worked in law enforcement in her home state of Arizona, sent the photo to the NYPD, who then posted it to their official Facebook page [2].

Within a day or two, the photo was viewed by millions, and the kind officer was identified as Larry DePrimo, a handsome, 26-year-old who lives on Long Island with his parents. The press couldn't get enough of him, and Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Ray Kelly couldn't get enough of the good press that this one photo bestowed upon the NYPD.

Having worked closely with members of New York City's homeless population for several years, the public's response to stories like this is, for me, a joy and a suffering.

On the one hand, this generous act and the response it elicited reaffirms my faith in the power and truth that dwells within the verses of Matthew 25:31-46 [3]. Even as religious commitment declines and individualism rises, people around the world can still be moved by the simple act of clothing another human being. Mercy and compassion and generosity still touch us at the core of our beings.

But at the same time, these stories make me squeamish because they often walk a fine line of objectifying the homeless person. Which is what began to happen in this case: The media were eager to know everything about DePrimo, but few questions were asked about this man lying in the street in such extreme deprivation.

That was until a curious reporter from *The New York Times* decided to find out the story [4] of the man who walked around the streets with those bare feet. When they found the homeless man, who identified himself as Jeffrey Hillman, they learned that he is a 54-year-old veteran with two adult children. And that he was barefoot, yet again.

Hillman explained that though he was grateful for the gift, he was forced to hide the boots for fear he would be killed by someone attempting to rob him. He also expressed reservations about all of the attention the photo had received, telling the *Times*, "I was put on YouTube, I was put on everything without permission. What do I get? This went around the world, and I want a piece of the pie."

And with that phrase, the media attention shifted from canonizing a cop, to demonizing a destitute man.

"A warm tale turns cold," one blogger announced [5]. And a legion of commenters unleashed their wrath on

Hillman, speculating wildly about all of the ways Hillman had abused DePrimo's gift. "He sold the boots for crack or booze," was the general assessment.

The *Daily News* took the investigation a step further, declaring [6] that the man wasn't even homeless. After years of living chronically on the street, Hillman was aided in securing an apartment in the Bronx recently, paid for with Section 8 housing vouchers and Social Security and veteran benefits.

Although I would never presume to say whether Jeffrey Hillman suffers from mental illness or chemical dependency, many women and men who live in conditions similar to his typically do suffer from these afflictions. The image of Hillman's body resting on a sidewalk is a symbol of the deeper injustices that have occurred as the result of decades of failed policies on homelessness.

The sad truth is, though many social service programs are able to secure housing for the homeless, few agencies or charities have adequate resources or staff to offer the level of intensive, long-term support necessary to protect those who suffer with severe mental illness or addiction. And most of the time, it is precisely severe mental illness and addiction that prevent homeless people from receiving the aid they need to live a life that upholds their dignity as human beings.

It was a situation I encountered frequently in my own work running a day services program for the chronically homeless. We provided socks, underwear, toiletries and snacks for anyone who came through our door. We even offered a small storage bin and took in the mail for our regular guests. And we were frequently criticized for "slapping a band-aid on a massive wound" or "making things worse for them by giving them handouts."

But I knew that for many of these men and women, "the system" of homeless services simply could not support them in their profound levels of suffering. So we filled the only role that there was to fill: honor their dignity as human beings through the basic acts of feeding them, giving them a drink, clothing them and visiting them in the hospital and in prison.

Did some of them lose or squander or lack gratitude for what we gave them? Yes. But I took these disappointments as an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the unconditional love and mercy of God. After all, how many gifts was I given every day by God that I overlooked or failed to appreciate? How many of God's invitations of grace and transformation had I refused because my own fears or self-sabotaging ways?

We disregard, disappoint and betray God all of the time. But God continues to take the great risk of loving us. Surely I could take a risk on just a few dozen of God's beloved children?

Of course, our American minds are horrified at the prospect that generous acts could be a waste of our precious time and money. Officer DePrimo's kindness, many will think, ended in failure. We want success. We want results. We want this moment to permanently alter the course of this homeless man's life forever. We want to see "Amazing Grace" played out before us.

But such thinking really is antithetical to the sacramental imagination. Jesus never promises us in Matthew 25:31-46 that giving a food, drink or clothes will give us the life-changing "measurable outcomes" we want for the those in need. He only promises us in an encounter with the God who lives within the broken and marginalized.

Most media reports about Officer DePrimo's act focused on his spending $75 of his own money to purchase the socks and boots for Jeffrey Hillman. But for me, what was most powerful about the image of the cop and the homeless man was that DePrimo got on his knees -- literally meeting Jeffrey Hillman where he was -- and dared to touch the man's body by helping him put on the new socks and boots.

The photo captures that moment when an act of generosity transforms into a sacred encounter. Jeffrey Hillman sees the God of mercy who dwells within Officer DePrimo, and Officer DePrimo sees the broken, forsaken God who dwells in Jeffrey Hillman.

It is a sacramental moment, when the God who is love, compassion and presence becomes incarnate among us. The two men have an experience of eternity, and in those moments, all worldly concerns about money, impact and outcome fade away. Like the sacraments we celebrate in church, this sacramental moment will continue to touch the lives of these men, but in ways that will ultimately remain mysterious to us all.

In an interview, Officer DePrimo says he keeps the receipt for the boots inside of his vest to remind him that "sometimes people have it much worse." But I hope he will consider keeping that photo in his pocket, too. Because it is iconic in the truest sense of the word. It is an image that invites us to look courageously into the eyes of human vulnerability, to be fully present even in the most difficult of circumstances, and to take the risk of loving one another, regardless of the how it all may turn out.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/nyregion/photo-of-officer-giving-boots-to-barefoot-man-warms-hearts-online.html?_r=0
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