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A dollar can make a difference

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It's not hard to spot the drug addicts at the public transit center: They all wear the same uniform of dark, dank and disheveled. So I knew, as I headed toward a group of four men and one woman a few weeks ago, that someone would ask me for money. But I walked over anyway, because the other bench was occupied by a 40-something man who, depending on his mood, either makes inappropriately friendly comments or rants on and on about Democrats. On this particular day, I felt I could tolerate the addicts better.

I sat next to the woman and pulled a newspaper out of my backpack. This action, similar to ear buds in your ears and a distant gaze on your face, is a common cultural signal meaning, "I'm otherwise engaged and not interested in conversation." But the woman, dressed in a baggy black tank-top, torn basketball shorts and flip flops in spite of the chilly weather, wasn't reading cultural signs. She needed \$1.50 to get back to the East side and asked if I had some change.

I said I didn't because I was mentally wrestling with the command in Matthew 25, Pope Francis' words and actions in favor of the poor, and the reality that money given to any panhandler in my U.S. city has a 99.999 percent chance of being shot into a vein, snorted into a nasal cavity or poured down a throat on a river of alcohol.

When I didn't give her money, the woman walked away. My guilt over both the money in my wallet and lying about it took her place on the bench, condemning me. So, when the woman's friend came over about 10 minutes later with two dollar bills dangling from his hand, I knew I wouldn't lie again. I was already having to figure out a confession schedule for the first instance. (Bless me Father, for I have sinned. I am not Mother Teresa. I am the antithesis of Pope Francis.)

"Hi, ma'am," the man said, "would you have a dollar to make bus fare for me and my girlfriend?"

"Maybe," I said, digging into my backpack. I pulled a dollar out my wallet and asked as casually as if I were chatting to someone at a party, "What do you do for a living?"

When he said he was unemployed (no surprise), I asked if he was using.

"I'm not going to lie ma'am. I am."

"Well," I said, pointing at the bill I'd just handed over, "it will really, really, *really* piss me off if you use that money to buy drugs."

"This?" he waved the money in the air "will be for fare, I promise you. But, just telling the truth ma'am, when we get back to the East side, we're probably going to go looking for drugs." He sat down with a thud next to me on the bench and shook his head. "I wish it wasn't so, but it is."

"It doesn't have to be," I persisted. "You can make a different choice. Addicts get clean every day. You could decide right now that when you get back to the East side, instead of going to get drugs, you could go to the Salvation Army for help."

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"I could," he said. "I know I *could*. I just don't think I *can*. They separate you in rehab and my girlfriend won't make it out on the street without me. We have to do it together, ma'am, and she's not ready."

I appreciated his honesty and admired his concern for another, but was angry at his abdication to the addiction and angry at myself that I'd given him money. It was only going to help him get transportation to his dealer.

Their bus pulled up and he offered his hand. "I'm Eric. What's your name?"

"Renée," I said, shaking his hand. The voice of caution in my head whispered warnings: Be careful. This battled with the voice of my better angel: Be compassionate. I wondered briefly if Pope Francis ever felt this way riding public transportation. Did he question where he sat and to whom he spoke? Did he ever feel like hitting someone upside the head and screaming, "Get it together, man!"

"That's my daughter's middle name," Eric said, releasing my hand and heading toward his bus. "Thanks again for the fare. I won't forget what you said."

I watched them board their bus and a few minutes later I boarded mine, my irritation at the whole situation walking down the aisle with me. I decided, then and there, that I was done giving money away at the bus stop. My city is awash with social services for addicts. If someone chooses to stay in his/her addiction, it isn't my job to give them fare to get closer to it.

Two days later, a different bus, a different route, I saw Eric and his girlfriend again and they looked completely different. They were dressed in simple but clean clothes, their hair combed, their eyes clear. They were smiling and she was filing out some forms. My first thought was that their healthy look came from getting a fix; my second was that my first thought was pretty snotty.

I didn't want any confrontation, so I choose a bench pretty distant from where they were to wait for my bus. But Eric saw me and came over. He thanked me again for the fare and told me that they'd spent that past couple days getting ID cards, which apparently had something to do with getting signed up for subsidized housing and methadone treatments to wean them off the heroin.

?It ain't a cure, ma'am. But it's a start. I just want you to know I remembered all the stuff you said the other day. And maybe we're on our way.? His girlfriend walked over and took his hand. Then they walked off together toward whatever awaited them. I haven't seen them since. Last week, when asked again by another suffering soul trapped in the clutches of addiction for money toward fare, I said no. Instead, when I got home, I wrote a check to a recovery center. It may be spitting in the wind, but I hope it is not.

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