

Love and Charity

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – October 7, 2012

My job seldom takes me to the big city these days, unless I'm travelling. But, in college and later working downtown in the 80s and 90s, I was a regular on the streets of Atlanta. Encounters with panhandlers were part of the daily routine. You got used to it, but I was never comfortable.

If you have any heart at all, it's hard to turn away from need. And, yet, there could be no end. Each small gift only attracted more asks. Sometimes, I'd give spare change or a few small bills; other times, I'd avert my eye, quicken my gait, and pretend not to hear. I wasn't fearful, but the experience was troubling if you gave it much thought.

One day, headed to lunch in the food court, I was approached by an elderly black man on the sidewalk behind Peachtree Center. In his late 60s or 70s, with a gray beard and hair, he wore the tattered clothes and shoes of someone living homeless on the streets. I felt I'd seen him before, as he asked me for money to buy food.

For reasons I can't explain, I responded: "If you need to eat, come with me and I'll buy you lunch."

My unexpected answer puzzled the man. "Let's go upstairs," I said, "and I'll buy whatever you want." Realizing I was serious, he replied "I can't go in there!" I asked why, and he said he'd be arrested.

I assured him that wouldn't happen, but offered to walk someplace he would be comfortable. Realizing, I wouldn't give him money, the man suggested a Church's Fried Chicken near Central City Park, so away went. Along the way, he warmed to me. Putting an arm around me as we walked, he shared his life story – interspersed with angry outbursts at passersby. His stories were disconnected and rambling, suggesting a touch of mental illness. But, true or not, the tales were genuine in his telling, and it clearly meant something to him for me to listen. I still recall one vivid story about the war and a hill in Korea.

Reaching Church's, the man settled on a bench outside, so I sat beside him. He asked again for money. "Let's go inside," I said. He stalled, talked a while longer, and finally looked me in the eye: He didn't want food; it was liquor he was after, and there was a store around the corner.

I sat quiet and uncertain, weighing the circumstances. Liquor was killing this man, but food would keep him alive. It seemed wrong to give him the money. Yet, honesty told me food alone was not enough. Nourishment was a means to prolong a life so far off track I couldn't begin to fathom how to save it. I didn't know what was right then, and I still don't know today.

But, I gave him the money. He thanked me, and I watched him walk into the liquor store before staring my slow, troubled walk back.

I wasn't sure if giving him money was right or wrong, but I knew sharing my genuine attention was important -- for him and for me. I had looked beyond the circumstances to see this man as a fellow human being worthy of the respect we all deserve. We had related.

I wish I could say it was a turning point that changed forever how I treat those asking for help. But, that would be untrue. Perhaps I care a little more and make a greater effort to see others as people. But, there's a reason true saints are rare.

This story came to mind this week as my wife's stepfather discussed the Sunday school lesson he was preparing on representations of "Love" in the Bible. He spoke of 1 Corinthians 13 and how various translations have interchanged "Love" and "Charity" for the Greek word "*Agape*" used in Paul's ancient text on faith, hope, and charity/love.

I'm no biblical scholar, nor even a regular churchgoer, but linking "Love" and "Charity" strikes me as profound in our time. If charity is an act of love, then charitable acts are impossible without seeing humanity in others. Regardless of political persuasion, when we fight over "the 47%" -- or any other catchphrase to wage political battle -- we rob those we purport to help of their identity and their dignity. It's easy to generalize aspersions like laziness or greed on an abstract group of people; it's another thing altogether to experience another's reality. I know.