

What work is appropriate for the sabbath? Jesus asks the guests at the home of one of the leading Pharisees: “Who among you, if your son or ox falls into a cistern, would not immediately pull him out on the sabbath day?” We are quick to help those we know but find excuses for not reaching out to help those we don’t know as well. Jesus heals the man with swelled joints and in so doing, sets an example for each of us to follow.

A man in a suit walked out of the corner market and an unemployed veteran asked him for a handout. The wealthy man offered him a quarter. Later that evening, the veteran knocked on his door and asked if there were any odd jobs he might do. The wealthy man said ‘no’ but he started to think about the veteran.

On another trip to the corner market, the wealthy man went out of his way to ask the veteran to come to his home and help him with some yard work. He really wanted to listen to his story and understand why he was unemployed. With the yard work as a backdrop as both men worked on planting some shrubs, the veteran began to explain the difficulties he faced in coming back from the Vietnam War. It was as unpopular war with the American public. People protested against what they thought was an unjust war and when young men returned from having served their country, they often found people hostile to them. The Vietnam vet was spit upon by someone who took his anger out on an innocent soldier.

The wealthy man had a good position with a company in Los Angeles and tried to help the Vietnam vet with a job. The veteran filled out an application with the human resources office but the man in charge looked down upon the vet. He saw that he was dishonorably discharged and assumed the vet was not worth hiring. He wasn’t willing to dig a little deeper and find out the truth of the matter. The vet left disappointed. The man with the good position felt sad and tried again to help but the vet lost confidence that anything would be different if he tried again ... and he drifted away.

I am reminded of a saying my Dad tried to live by. “I shall pass through this life but once. Any good therefore that I can do, let me do it now for I shall never pass this way again” (Etienne de Grellet). In the Gospels, Jesus always seemed to notice people in passing and reached out to them right away:

- He didn’t need to go back a third and a fourth time like the wealthy man in the story.
- If someone was hurting, he noticed. He seemed to have a knack for identifying people who were long suffering and overlooked by others for many years.
- He understood the sabbath as a day of rest and worship, but that never means we rest from doing good for others.
- In doing good for others, Jesus was often attacked. He put the needs of the sick first over and above the naysayers. Jesus tried to explain his actions in a way that would encourage others to be helpful as well.
- Jesus taught “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). I think one of the reasons my Dad was always helping others is that he received a lot more than he gave. He loved to help elders and always found they had wisdom to share. It helped him in the present. In the future, sharing that wisdom helped him to be more helpful to others.

Paul’s Letter to the Philippians offers a few additional insights. Although we might not pass ‘this way again,’ we can write letters or in modern times call or text to encourage others. Paul is full of praise for the Philippians and encourages them to keep up the good work. He wrote while he was in prison in danger of death. Amidst the coronavirus, our movements may be quite limited. Even from afar and even in danger of our own deaths, we can still reach out with a helping hand and a word of encouragement. The Lord has made known the power of his works. Let us respond in-kind and pay it forward to help others.