

## **“The Least We Can Do”**

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Based upon Jeremiah 38: 7-13; Luke 13:10-17

Consider, if you will, the following three scenarios:

1) In a letter to the syndicated advice column “*Dear Caroline*,” a reader who signed his or her name as “Charitable” wrote: “I donated to an organization that provides wheelchairs to people who can’t afford them. I posted about this on Facebook. I wasn’t trying to brag, but wanted to give this organization some attention in case anyone I know would like to support it as well. A friend of mine posted a comment saying my donation was ‘foolish,’ because it would be much more productive to donate to organizations that research cures for disabilities so that no one needs wheelchairs at all. I was taken aback by this, and am not sure how to reply.”<sup>1</sup>

2) The federal supplemental nutrition assistance program (“SNAP”), formerly known as “Food Stamps,” provides financial assistance to those who live in poverty and are food insecure. In the past few years, multiple states have passed legislation banning SNAP recipients from spending money on certain foods, including so-called “luxury” items such as steak, or on junk food items like “soda, ice cream, cookies or cakes” or prepared foods.<sup>2</sup>

3) After inspection reports revealed that the children and families being held in detention centers in Texas were not being given access to showers, or basic hygiene products, and videos showed that many of them were without adequate blankets or shoes, people from all around the country have tried to send donations to the various centers to help the immigrants. The supplies have been rejected on the grounds that “federal detention facilities do not accept donations.” Citing the Anti-Deficiency Act, a law which prohibits federal agencies from spending funds in excess of what Congress has appropriated, authorities said that the government’s receiving of help from the private sector would raise “ethical issues.” Additionally, a lawyer with the Justice Department named Sarah Fabian has argued in court that children in custody do not need soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste and other hygiene products in order to be considered “safe and sanitary,” the standard required by a 1997 law called the Flores Agreement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “*Caroline Hax column*,” THE WASHINGTON POST, July 24, 2019, C5.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. McMillan, Tracie, “*Steak, Lobster, and Other Myths about Food Stamps*,” NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, Mar. 21, 2016, retrieved Aug. 5, 2019 from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/people-and-culture/food/the-plate/2016/03/21/steak-lobster-and-other-myths-about-food-stamps/> Gunn, Dwyer, “*Should the Government Tell SNAP Recipients What They Can Eat?*” PACIFIC STANDARD, Feb. 23, 2017, retrieved Aug. 5, 2019 from <https://psmag.com/news/should-the-government-tell-snap-recipients-what-they-can-eat>.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Arce, Julissa, “*Americans Should Be Allowed to Volunteer at the Border*,” TIME, July 14, 2019, retrieved Aug. 5, 2019 from <https://time.com/5627056/migrant-detention-centers-donations-policy>; Phifer, Donica, “*Border Patrol allegedly turning down donations of soap, diapers, toys at Texas facilities housing migrant children*,” NEWSWEEK, June 25, 2019,

All three of these situations reveal the complex and often controversial nature of helping others in this day and age. We've all heard that it is better to teach someone to fish than simply to keep giving him fish to eat. We've heard that to help those who refuse to help themselves is enabling bad behavior. We've heard and been taught that it is the job of the law to enforce what is good and right and true. But as Christians, we have also heard that we are supposed to care for "the least of these" in the world. We have heard the stories of Jesus healing the sick and calling us to become servants of others as he was; and know that the law of God that Jesus embodied commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is a caring congregation. So how do we practice our faith given the complexity of real-world problems? Should we try to serve others when secular law tells us not to, or when we aren't sure our kind of help will be helpful? What is the least we can and should do to follow Christ?

Before I begin to answer those questions, let me just offer this spoiler alert: nothing I am about to say will give you precise guidelines for every situation. As a former lawyer I know very well that when it comes to topics this complex, there are any number of hypothetical, "but what about..." arguments that can be made. My hope in taking on this topic today, therefore, is not to pick a fight, nor to do your thinking for you. It is, as your pastor, to equip you with Biblical images and teachings so that you can draw upon God's word when you strive to discern how to follow Christ faithfully.

I've been thinking about this topic ever since I reread today's wonderful story from *Jeremiah* while I was on vacation. This story is not known nearly well-enough by Christians because few of us curl up with the Prophets as bedtime reading. Jeremiah was one of the great prophets during what scholars call the "Divided Kingdom" period of Israel's history, when the original kingdom of Israel had split in two. Jeremiah began his ministry near the end of this period, after the Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been conquered by the Assyrian Empire, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was being threatened with destruction by the Babylonian Empire. In the beginning of his ministry, Jeremiah prophesied that if the people would change their idolatrous ways, God would intervene to save them and their kingdom. But after about 23 years of his words falling on deaf ears, Jeremiah changed his message. He started prophesying that exile was an inevitable consequence of the people's sins. He told them to save their lives by surrendering to Babylon, to learn their lesson while in captivity, and to trust that God would redeem the faithful eventually.

Needless to say, Jeremiah's message was not well-received. The leaders he spoke to wanted to hear that God would spare them suffering, not help them learn from it. So, a bunch of princes, who had the most to lose if Jerusalem was destroyed, decided that Jeremiah and all his negativity had to go. They convinced King Zedekiah, who was a very weak and ineffectual king,

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retrieved from

<https://www.newsweek.com/border-patrol-allegedly-turning-down-donations-soap-diapers-toys-texas-facilities-housing-1445660>  
; Poppe, Ryan, "People Are Trying to Donate To Detained Migrants. Border Patrol Won't Accept It," NPR.org, June 26, 2019,

retrieved from

<https://www.npr.org/2019/06/26/736207447/people-are-trying-to-donate-to-detained-migrants-border-patrol-wont-accept-it>.

that Jeremiah needed to be killed. The sentence was death by cistern. That would have been bad enough. But to make matters worse, the princes decided that instead of pushing Jeremiah to a painful, but quick death, they would have him lowered down into the empty cistern by ropes, so that he would die slowly and painfully of starvation in the mud below. They wanted him to suffer.

Once they thought they were rid of the trouble-making prophet, the princes left. That's when a servant of the king, an Ethiopian eunuch called "Ebed-melech" in the text, heard what had happened and persuaded King Zedekiah, who at that point was just agreeing to whatever his latest advisor said, to let him rescue Jeremiah and keep him in the court of guard instead. Today's text describes that rescue in remarkable detail. Ebed-melech had three men to help him pull up Jeremiah with ropes. But before they did that, he went to the trouble of running around the king's palace to collect rags and old clothes, so that Jeremiah could pad the ropes and protect his skin from chafing while he was being raised.

It's such a funny and beautiful thing that this detail was included in the story. The text could have simply reported that Jeremiah was rescued from the pit and moved on. The fact that it doesn't, that it takes the time to recount the rag-gathering and everything, makes it all the more plausible that Jeremiah really did write the book that bears his name; he or someone else was clearly touched by the rescuer's concern for his comfort as well as his life. But Jeremiah wasn't the only one who appreciated the Ethiopian servant's actions. According to the next chapter, God was so pleased by Ebed-melech's faithfulness that God promised to protect him during the siege on Jerusalem so that he would not die by the sword. (Jer.39:15-18). Two Jewish legends then expand upon this promise further. One says that Jeremiah gave Ebed-melech a basket of figs and told him to sit outside the walls of the city to feed the remnant of the people after it was all over. Then God made him fall into a deep sleep, so, like Rip Van Winkle, he awoke 70 years later when the exile was over. The figs were still ripe and ready to distribute. The second legend says that Ebed-melech wasn't spared death just during the siege, but always. He was one of a handful of people in the Bible, like Elijah, who never died. This had led some to question whether the Ethiopian eunuch that Philip encountered after Jesus ascended (approximately 550 years after Jeremiah was rescued) might have been him.<sup>4</sup>

We don't have to believe the fantastic extra-biblical legends to learn from Ebed-melech's story, however. His bravery in challenging the king he was supposed to serve, and his compassion in worrying about Jeremiah's immediate discomfort, as well as long-term health, give us a powerful example of faithful service in action. Jesus' treatment of the crippled woman in today's gospel lesson from *Luke* does as well. The woman Jesus healed had been bent over for 18 years. I had a neighbor growing up who also had some kind of horrible spine-bending disease— I think it was something more than osteoporosis. She was almost bent in half, and had to look at people by twisting her head and looking up. It was painful to see. I imagine the woman in this story the same way. No one cared about her; no one looked at her until that day when

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<sup>4</sup> See "Ebed-Melech," Sefaria.org, retrieved Aug. 5, 2019 from <https://www.sefaria.org/search?q=Ebed-Melech&tab=text&tvar=1&tsort=relevance&svar=1&ssort=relevance>

Jesus did. He really saw her. I picture him squatting down to meet her gaze, before enabling her to stand up straight with him, and look him in the eye from a position of wholeness and joy instead of pain.

It was a triumphant moment for her, a life-changing moment. But the Pharisees who witnessed it couldn't see that. All they could see was a man violating *their* legal interpretation of God's 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment to keep the Sabbath, an interpretation which prohibited all work including healing. The Law was God in their eyes. So, in their minds, Jesus could have waited a day to heal the woman; she had been living with the problem for 18 years, after all. But Jesus saw the situation very differently. He saw a woman who had already suffered more than enough. He saw a woman whom he could make whole. He also saw the Pharisees as hypocrites because, as he said, they would care of their animals on the Sabbath. Surely a fellow human being, a daughter of Abraham was due no less care? She wasn't trapped in a cistern, but she was still imprisoned by her suffering. In Jesus' eyes, the law of love trumped the laws of the establishment. The woman needed to be set free.

What can we glean from these stories about how to help in our day and time? At the very least, I think we can glean some useful images and parameters to guide our discernment process. We are called to provide both "rag" and "rope" assistance, in other words to address both the short-term and long-term problems that hurt our neighbors, both the small harms and the life-threatening harms. This will look different in different contexts. In the *Dear Caroline* situation, I think a "rag and rope" approach would say both wheelchairs and medical research are worth supporting, not either-or. Yes, it is good to invest in medical research, but in the meantime, people need mobility.

As far as the food stamps issue goes, I think that if we could truly see people as Jesus does, then we would not begrudge them either the occasional steak or the cookies. The statistics show that vast majority of SNAP recipients do not waste their food money. They don't get enough assistance to live on, only to supplement what they already have; in 2017, the average assistance per person was \$1.32 per meal. The statistics also show that there is a double standard in our society when it comes to food.<sup>5</sup> If a person "of means" buys organic fruits and vegetables and healthy protein he or she is considered virtuous and admirable. If a poor person buys the identical items, he or she is seen as a profligate cheat. We're so judgmental that people are less likely to give to a charity if it serves organic food; and few consider the emotional healing that comes from enabling a recipient who has lost his job to serve the occasional meal of "normal food," instead of having to live exclusively on cheap hot dogs, canned beans, and tuna casserole.<sup>6</sup> Food is the rope; freedom of choice in what food to provide one's family is the rags.

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<sup>5</sup>Olson, Jenny G., McFerran, Brent, Morales, Andrea C., and Dahl, Darren W., "*Wealth and Welfare: Divergent Moral Reactions to Ethical Consumer Choices*," JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH, Vol. 42, Is. 6, April 2016, 879–896, retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv096>.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Fisher, Simcha, "*The Day I Bought Steak with My Food Stamps*," Patheos.com, April 17, 2015, retrieved Aug. 5, 2019 from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/simchafisher/2015/04/17/the-day-i-bought-steak-with-my-food-stamps/>

As far as the last scenario goes, I don't think it's hard to guess what Jesus would have to say to someone who cites the law and supposed "ethical concerns" as excuses *not* to give needy children toothpaste, soap, blankets and shoes. That scenario flies in the face of both of today's lessons. But the fact that our laws are being misused in this way does highlight a useful point. According to our legal system, there is a difference between law and equity. When someone files a legal claim and wins, the remedy they win is money damages. For example, if someone totals your car, according to the law you would be entitled to the monetary equivalent of the value of the car. But that doesn't mean getting that money will necessarily make you whole again. The depreciated value of your car may not be enough to buy a new one. The money might or might not address the emotional trauma caused by the accident or work days lost because you had no transportation.

In an equity case, in contrast, the remedy is "to be made whole." Equitable remedies focus on the total circumstances of the victim, not just the pocketbook. Accordingly, in addition to providing money damages, remedies may also include injunctions requiring people to do or refrain from doing certain things to address the harm. One of the reasons I left the practice of law is that I kept seeing that enforcing the law did not produce wholeness. Sometimes enforcing the law caused injustice instead of promoting justice. I really wanted equity for my clients and the world: justice-based wholeness, not simply money trading hands. Our legal system doesn't grant equity often, but God's does. God's law, which requires us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, is grounded in the idea that when we treat others as we would want to be treated, we all move closer to being made whole. God's commission in Christ is for us to be instruments of healing and hope, focusing less on whether "the system" says a person deserves help, and more on making the person whole and free.

In Jewish tradition, Ebed-melech is the name of a hero, a faithful servant of God so worthy of honor according to God, that he did not have to give his life to go to heaven. But technically, Ebed-melech isn't really a name, it's actually a title which in Hebrew simply means "servant of the King." So, for all we know, the brave and thoughtful man who saved Jeremiah with both rags and rope was named the ancient Jewish equivalent of Bob or Frank or Sam. I am so glad of that because that makes it easier for us to see that his shoes are ours to fill. We, too, are called to be servants of our King. Jesus our King healed those society wouldn't touch and didn't see, those who were considered unclean and undeserving. He helped children and old people, Jews and foreigners, those born with problems and those who developed them later in life, even when the authorities would have let them suffer. I can't tell you how best to help everyone when there is so much need in our world and the problems are so complicated. I can't promise you that if you help someone in faith, he or she will never take advantage of you. But I can tell you that if you truly see those who are suffering, and strive to ease their pain with rags and ropes, and equitable remedies, not just legal ones, you will be serving and honoring our King. May the grace of God equip us with the courage and compassion to be instruments of liberation and wholeness, now and always. Amen