

A Bird in the Hand

If a bird in the hand versus two in the bush means the choice between a present opportunity or future possibilities, a homeless person wisely chooses the present.

When well-meaning but misguided – and in my view, disrespectful – church groups bring a load of used clothes to dump on a street frequented by homeless people, this pile always draws a crowd. People gather to paw through the clothes because they believe they will never have access to clothes in the future. These clothes piled up on this street are all the clothes there are or ever will be. The fact that there will be another pile tomorrow or the day after and the day after that, as there has been for years on end, makes no difference. This is the only pile that will ever be.

When Loaves & Fishes furnishes 40 pounds of sugar every morning for the Friendship Park coffee breakfast program, at the end of the two-hour coffee period all the sugar is gone. If 50 pounds of sugar are provided, that amount will be used. The same is true if 75 pounds were put on the table. It is all gone, for the simple reason that there will never be any sugar ever provided again, despite the fact that sugar has been provided for 10 consecutive years for this coffee breakfast program. The sugar provided this morning is all the sugar there is or ever will be.

The same is true for the noontime free hot meal provided every day of the year in the Loaves & Fishes dining room, now in its 21st year. This is all the food there is. If enough food is prepared to serve seconds, all the food will be gone. If there is enough for thirds, all the food will be gone. If two hours are permitted for the noon meal, when the time is up, people will still be eating. If three hours or even four are allowed, it will be the same result. Never again will there be a hot meal served by Loaves & Fishes. This is all the food there is or will ever be.

Ten years ago, as the director of Loaves, I decided to confront and break this never-again-will-there-be cycle. A semi-trailer of candy had been donated, creating a nearly inexhaustible supply of candy for the thousand or so people who gathered each day in Friendship Park. I ordered ten large buckets of candy to be placed in different park locations without any signs of restrictions.

People would help themselves. With candy available every day, there would come a point when people would take only what they needed.

Ten large buckets were more than enough candy to satisfy every homeless person who might come to the park that day. Understandably, at first all of the buckets came back empty - and the next day, and the next, the next day, too. Two weeks later, the same story. After two months, I threw in the towel. It made no difference how much candy a group of homeless people could (or could not) eat; whatever the amount of candy provided, that was the amount taken. Again, the simple explanation is that this candy is the only candy there is; there will never be any candy again.

Upon my retirement from Loaves & Fishes, I had occasion to reflect about this homeless state of mind during the course of the pilgrimage I made to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Beginning in the Pyrenees village of St. Jean Pied de Port, I walked an average of 16 miles a day for 28 days to reach the cathedral that marks the end of the pilgrimage route. Each morning, hopefully by 7 a.m., with an orange or banana in my backpack, I was on the road, walking. I planned to pick up morning coffee and something to eat en route. Rarely did it work the way I had hoped.

The restaurant bar would not be open when I arrived at a village. The guidebook showed another village a few miles further along, but this village had no food services of any kind. I had to push on. It might be noontime before I came upon a place for coffee and food. Or the opposite would happen. After only 30 minutes of walking, I would come to a bar that had just opened for the day, but it was too early for me to stop. I had just begun the day's journey, and sometimes the planned walk for the day would be close to 20 miles. I needed to cover some serious ground while I was still fresh and before the weather got too hot, but above all, I reminded myself, I needed to make the prescribed destination before nightfall. Not a good plan. Noontime would come and go, and I still had not come to a place where I could get coffee or food. After nearly three weeks of this sink-or-swim routine, I learned to think as a homeless person does. Wherever, whenever, or however the coffee-food opportunity presented itself, I chose to stop. I said to myself, this is the only opportunity I will ever have, there will never be another.

Even today, years later, I think twice before passing up present opportunities for the sake of unknown future possibilities. Perhaps because of my advanced age I am naturally inclined to do this, but I doubt it. I prefer to believe that homeless people have much to teach us, and I learned this lesson from them.

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