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## Are We Not All Beggars?

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MICHELLE FORSTROM

## Are We Not All Beggars?

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind? (Mosiah 4.19)

The first time I saw a beggar, I was six. My mom led me by the hand through an open-air market in Lisbon. We walked past fruit and vegetable stands, past stall after stall displaying exquisite linens rippling in the salty breeze. Some had intricate patterns. Some had embroidered flowers or roosters. We stopped in front of a stall of pure white tablecloths edged in lace. It looked like a spotless canopy reaching up to heaven. But on the ground, shirtless and cross-legged in the dirt, was a man. His white eyes stared into nothing, his mouth gaped open, and his cupped hands reached up to us.

After that experience, I began to notice them. Everywhere. Some were deformed. Some were children. Some were very old, with rivers of wrinkles etched into their faces. But all

of them held their cupped hands up to us in a universal gesture of solicitation. We were taught to give food, not money, so we wouldn't be a target for theft as expat Americans. My mom would give them a sandwich or an apple. She always had something with her.

On Sundays, my mom would open up the iron gate in front of our house. She had us carry down cookie sheets filled with cheese sandwiches. "Open face" was what she called them. A slice of American cheese on a slice of Wonder Bread broiled in the oven until melted and crispy-edged. Beggars would wait on the walkway up to our house. They would hold up their hands for more until they were full. As a child, I was eye level with them. I could feel their breath on my face. Sometimes they would reach out and touch me in thanks with their callused hands.

Mom would use the opportunity to talk about King Benjamin's speech in the Book of Mormon. How we were all beggars and had the responsibility to help each other.

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish. (Mosiah 4.16)

"I have been hungry before. I come from a hungry country," she told them. "We are the same. Being hungry, or sick, or poor is not your fault. It could happen to anyone."

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The second time, it was different kind of beggar. I was in college. It was Fall Semester of 1999, a few days before Halloween, and my mom came running toward me on BYU campus.

“Michelle,” she yelled, “I’m glad I found you. Andy’s had a stroke. Hop in the car. We’re all going to go see him.”

When we got to the hospital, my brother-in-law was hanging between life and death. He had suffered two major strokes in the left side of his brain. He was twenty-five. We quietly walked into his room and disinfected our hands like he was an infant. The white floor, the antiseptic smell, and the silent TV above his bed were all wrong. Where was my energetic brother-in-law who loved to sing? I had just eaten Indian food with him that week and joked about my ridiculous assignments for my Voice and Diction class.

After Andy received a priesthood blessing, his mom asked that we all sing to him. We encircled his bed and sang, “I Am a Child of God” (Randall), and although he was unconscious, we noticed that he mouthed some of the words: “Teach me all that I must do / To live with him someday.”

We spent that week in hospital waiting rooms. Plugging our crockpots in to any available outlet. Wandering the halls in our pajamas. Brushing our teeth in public sinks. We were those desperate people who went silent—frantic for any good news or progress on Andy’s condition—whenever a doctor walked into the room.

That week I saw my sister beg. I saw her on her knees. I saw her praying out loud with her eyes wide open. I saw her praying while walking, sleeping, or driving. She concentrated with a ferocious intensity. Sleep, food, or conversation was just a distraction from her continual prayer for Andy to live. I never saw anyone beg for something harder in my life.

In the months that followed, Andy struggled to relearn how to eat, walk, and talk. At first, he would blink his eyes to answer “Yes” or “No” questions. Then he might say disjointed things like, “I’m sorry . . . I’m such . . . a yogurt.” It was *excruciatingly* slow. We had to really listen to understand him. I remember watching him cry from frustration or from the pain of

some new medication being added to his IV. It took years before Andy regained most of the skills he had lost. And some things were gone forever. He would never be able to ride a bike, use his right hand, or walk again without dragging his right side. But whether by design or the sheer will of Danielle's pleas, he did live.

It's hard to think of that time without remembering the words of my mother, "It could happen to anyone," and the words of King Benjamin.

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. (Mosiah 2:21)

Andy taught me what a gift it was just to be alive. That Heavenly Father was literally "lending" us breath. And that even though we are all beggars, He delights in blessing us.

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The third time, it was me.

I remember peeling the foreclosure notice off of our front door and looking over my shoulder to see if anyone else had seen it. I remember the weight of my shame. The shock. And the hot pulse of fear in my stomach every time the doorbell rang.

After the bills and warning notices started coming, we taped up some of the kids' pink construction paper to block

the rectangular panes of glass on either side of the front door so no one could see in. It gave a bit of a rosy glow when the sun came through it, like stained glass in a cathedral, but it also meant we couldn't see who or what was coming.

Every knock at the door meant we would freeze. And hide.

Sometimes we would peek through the window of the front room from our hiding places to see who rounded the side of the house. Then, if they were deemed safe, we'd run out the front door after them and yell out with a smile:

"Oh, hi Cindy, I was just getting out of the shower when you knocked."

"Mark! I was out in the garden and thought I heard the doorbell."

"Sorry, Brad, I was just finishing up a phone call. What can I do for you?"

There was even one time, before we had put up the pink papers, when Hyrum was in his baby walker—the kind that has a center leg you can lock in place as the baby totters around it in his chair. The doorbell rang. We froze. Dropped to the floor. And hid. And Hyrum was just toddling around, drooling, and stuffing his toys into his mouth in plain view. We had forgotten it was Sunday. I'm sure the little deacons collecting fast offerings scratched their heads and wondered where everyone was, and why a little baby was alone in the middle of the kitchen.

That was the game we played. It had been seared into our brains as the eleventh commandment. Thou shalt NOT open the door. Or answer the phone. Or open a letter. Whoever it was, whatever it was, invariably meant more bad news.

I remember being in the shower, hair foamy with suds, when all of a sudden—the water stopped. The bathroom window faced the street and I saw the white Provo City Utilities truck. I was down the stairs in an instant, chasing the utilities man up the walk. One hand holding my bathrobe closed and the other clutching my checkbook.

There was always something else to pay. Some other caller, letter, person standing there grasping an official-looking-paper with some official-looking-seal. Some stranger asking who I was. One even followed me into the garage when I pulled in before I could shut the garage door. I always numbly obeyed, never knowing who they were, what they wanted, or what this was about. Snatches of conversations with my exhausted, overwhelmed husband swirled in my head.

“Steve made unrealistic promises to the investors.”

“They never paid me for the work I did.”

“The land we spent years entitling can’t be developed now.”

“It’s a national housing market collapse.

“A crisis.”

“A recession.”

“Everyone wants their investments out.”

“The house? It’s tied up in it.”

It had all swelled to a great tidal wave of financial disaster and we were on the beach, looking up like idiots. Hands cupped above our heads in both supplication and surrender.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just. (Mosiah 4.17)

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People would call and ask to walk through our house. People from my ward or book group. They’d say something about seeing our house on a list of those in foreclosure—*There’s a list?*—and did we know that we could put it up for

short sale? Whatever that meant. And could they please have “first dibs.”

Every day it took all my strength just to move through a normal day while I berated myself in my head. *We’re fakes. We’re failures. We don’t belong here. In financial natural selection we have gone extinct. This was my dream house. But it’s gone.*

But there were others who came, too. To wrap our dishes in newspaper and move our furniture into their moving vans free of charge, while I sat on the ground cross-legged, too numb to move. They watched my boys while we went to the temple. They brought me food. They walked with me and talked with me. They told me of their own houses lost. Or lost health. Lost spouses. Lost children. Lost hopes and dreams.

And I realized something. King Benjamin is right. So incredibly right. We are all beggars. We are all dependent on that God who gave us breath. Maybe He knew how much I would love my house. Maybe that’s why He said: “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14.2).

Everything in this world is temporary. We go to the temple and covenant to give up all we have to Heavenly Father not because He needs it but because He knew we would need practice letting it all go.

So now when I see people holding up signs made out of cardboard boxes, “Out of Work,” or “Single Mother, Please Help,” or “Injured Vet, God Bless.” I stop. I hand them food that I always have with me. I see them. Everywhere. Standing in the sun, unsmiling, the heat of derision hotter than any summer day. At Walmart, Costco, or any stoplight in between. I see them. I feel the heat on my own face, the metal cart in my hands, the edges of that cardboard sign. I give them whatever I have. Because I can still smell the salty sea air, and see the shiver of Portuguese tablecloths that look like the white



cloth over the sacrament table. I can still taste those open face sandwiches or the food out of the crockpot in a hospital waiting room. I know we are all beggars. We all desperately cup our hands to heaven while we live on this planet, until we can all go home.

#### Works Cited

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