

Blessed indeed are these poor in spirit. The Kingdom of God is for *them*.

“Maria, mija! You tell you fren no to be afraid . . . **God walk with him**”

That’s what it’s all about, Alfie. And “my fren”, **our** friends, will know it when we all pull them into our lives as part of **Us**, and walk with them.

Us, UN-NAMED

Who Am I? . . . Who Do People Say I Am?

Jesus isn’t the only one who ever wondered this. *Who am I, anyway? What are they thinking?*

Who are we, the Un-named **Us**? The nameless mass of **Us** on our own streets, we haven’t even taken time to know.

We remain for a lifetime unnecessarily unnamed Strangers.

Some of us have permission to write on each other’s walls. iPod in ear, cell phone in hand, we stride right past the un-named rest of **Us**, frantically finding connectedness in the tiny little wifi Bluetooth *MyFi* world **we** control.

We seek connectedness incessantly because we have no clue how deeply a part of each other we already are.

WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Immigrants, for example. What do *they* say about **Us**?

They know what we think of them – when we think of them. Mostly, urbanites are indifferent unless we feel personally or economically threatened, and then we’re judgmental. Righteous. Harsh. At best, we turn our eyes away.

Way too many new and first-generation immigrants are outsiders way too long – and we let them be.

For them, poverty is a natural consequence of having given up everything to grasp a straw of hope for relief. Leaving everything behind, one expects to rebuild.

Unearned poverty, though, is the prolonged unexpected consequence of something as remediable as language and a little patience from others. It is not about brains or moral character. Not “laziness”.

Way too many immigrants see **Us** through disillusioned eyes because of the way we see *them*.

Why can't we admire their courage, give them a small boost to survive each day hoping for better times? We think they should close the gap on their own, and make it to where we are all in a few years. It will take generations.

And it *always* has taken help from strangers – not just the depersonalized help from agencies of government spending our taxes, but involved, caring, home-sharing, meal-sharing, tool-sharing, job-sharing, skill-sharing *flesh-and-blood, one-on-one* help. From **Us**.

“**WHAT GOOD IS IT ?** . . . if someone says he has faith . . . if a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘God bless you. Peace. Keep warm. Have a good night. Enjoy that pizza crust from the trash can’. . . but you do not give them the necessities of the body . . . what good is it”?

And YOU? . . . Who do You think I am?

I can tell you what a few immigrants showed *me*, what *they* thought of me, a total stranger:

- **John at the self-serve BP gas station on 125th.** “*Watch out for him*”, the gypsy cab driver muttered as I pulled up to the pump. “*He’s homeless. He made himself a hole in the chain link fence at the back of the gas station. He wants you to pay him to pump your gas*”.

It was 2:00 a.m. Pumping gas wasn't the only action on that street corner. I quickly slipped my credit card into the slot on the pump, reached out and shook hands with the approaching entrepreneur. “Thanks, Friend”, I said, “I'm OK”. He shrugged and smiled – but it wasn't over. I wasn't OK. I had moved so fast that I'd shoved my card into the slot for the receipt, NOT the pay slot.

stars”. I recited his sweet words over and over to myself in spanish all the way home. I will never forget him.

I learned later that Miguel and his brothers were relative newcomers, making deliveries, bagging garbage, cleaning restrooms, controlling the basement rats population for several of our local restaurants, waiting for their turn to move up to dishwasher and other inside jobs.

Miguel is now a Bus Boy. Learning a little English each day, he waits to wait on table. He and his wife together already have moved out of shelters and doorways to an apartment. Their baby boy probably will grouse like the rest of kids because his parents “don't understand” what it's like for him to not have the things his friends have. May he grow up to be half the man his Dad is !

So . . . WHO ARE THEY?

They are immigrants. Dreamers. One-day-at-a-timers. Survivors.

They worked hard. They held onto hope for a long time. And then, for John and Patricia, daily bruising and failures and isolation became too hard.

Luis and Miguel? They're still working their dreams. They've already cleared the path for their families to be *insiders*. They won't have to live for much longer on the fringe.

They're all my friends. My brothers and sisters. Part of me. Bruised. Hurting. Scorned. Dismissed. Trying to get beyond Yesterday's sorrow to live Today, to take a chance at making Tomorrow's possibilities reachable for those they love.

WHO DO THEY SAY I AM?

To them, I'm “That woman, Mary”. Someone they care for. They, who have nothing, give to me from what little they have.

One holiday, Patricia didn't show up. I asked for her. The neighborhood regulars said they had not seen her for a while. That's often their way of shielding me from a friend's death from violence or overdose. I somewhat sadly presumed Patricia had finished suffering, at least.

A few months later, I was startled to see "Patricia" walking across the street to our Thanksgiving table. But it wasn't Patricia, as I could see on a second glance. The thin, drawn young woman stopped and spoke to a group of volunteers. I saw them point my way. I walked toward her, my arms open. "Are you Mary", she asked. "I don't know if you remember my sister. Her name was Patricia. She died two weeks ago. Just before she died, she pulled me down to her and whispered to me, 'Promise me you will go to Thanksgiving on 125th Street and find that woman, Mary, and tell her I love her'."

However much her afflictions kept her from achieving, Patricia never forgot to care for those around her.

Just one more:

- **Miguel.** He looked like a baby. He was so young. Too young. Far from home. Sleeping with three other men on the icy steps of the cathedral. Were they brothers? Is the older man their father? Where do they live/work when they're not here?

Miguel wakened while I was spreading new blankets and fleece jackets over the four of them. That January 4th was so frigid cold that I had already told myself to go home, as I was shivering constantly. Then, I saw a movement in the shadows of the doorway. A white, white moon helped. I made this one more stop.

As I smiled at him and whispered, "Sleep warm, my brother", he sat up, rubbed his eyes, took my hand, and prayed spontaneously and simply, "Mamita, may God walk with you in the clouds until you are safe at home in his

I gulped in dismay as I watched it fall behind the roll of paper. I was not about to leave it there overnight, as the cloistered attendant in the locked kiosk suggested, saying he didn't have the key to the pump. John held back – until I walked back to the pump, looked him in the eyes, and said, "I'm in a pickle, Bro!"

Reluctantly, I told him what I'd done. I was prepared to camp out at that pump for the rest of the night if I had to. I didn't have to.

John smiled broadly. It was frigidly cold. It was February. His clothes were meager and torn. He pulled a screwdriver out of his waistband and a pliers out of his back pocket. He wedged the screwdriver behind the plastic face of the Receipt compartment and skillfully worked the pliers down a little bit at a time. In less than 20 seconds, he had popped the plastic face AND the still-locked barrel lock AND the entire receipt box off the pump. Not a crack in the plastic.

He reached in, retrieved my card, looked at my name on it, smiled, and handed it to me with a flourish. "Pleased to meet you, Mary. Private First Class John F. Carter, US Army Infantry, 40 years. Retired".

Wait. That's not all. He reinstalled the lock box, even re-threading the roll of receipt paper through the rollers. That was harder than removing the box to begin with.

It was February 13th. We talked as he worked. I offered him a heavy fleece jacket that my sister had given me a day earlier for just such an opportunity. I also gave him the only cash I had with me, a \$20 bill. He fished in the hole beneath the knee of his jeans, pulled out a small satin purse, opened it, took out a gold-colored plastic lady's hair barrette with fake glittery stones on it, and handed it to me. "It's Valentines", he smiled. "You are one beautiful Angel. Please be my Valentine, Mary."

What ever prompted John to salvage that broken hair barrette to begin with? What softer possibility made him save it?

What broke John's spirit after he retired from 40 years of service in the Army, I will never know. He said he lives where he can, with a bunch of brothers. He said he gets by. And no, he was not on drugs or alcohol when I met him.

- **Luis at a Downtown Hartford Parking Lot.** I was covering a friend's trial in federal district court. I slipped and slid on the ice between my car on the uphill and his ticket booth at the sidewalk. Luis moved stiffly, holding my arm firmly. He was bundled in layers of shabby jackets, scarves, and gloves with the finger tips cut off. His knit caps were pulled down to his eyes. "So, Mary, you drive up here today? You work here now?"

I was dumbfounded. How did he know me? I asked him that. He was surprised, too. "Mary! You no remember me? I Luis! Sanicoli. Sanicoli".

It took me a moment. Then, I remembered – St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, a block from where my StreetCorner Gourmets share Thanksgiving Dinner and other holiday meals on the street with people who get by in doorways and basements there.

I grinned triumphantly. "No, Luis", I said. "No Sanicoli. Morningside Avenue". He threw his arms around me jubilantly. "Sansgeebing!", he said exuberantly. "Sansgeebing".

Luis, I learned that day, had come to my Thanksgiving dinners with a colony of his friends for 12 years. All that time, he was working 3 jobs every day to support his immigrant family. There wasn't enough time to go home, wherever home was. He slept on the steps of the cathedral of St. John the Divine, and often was one of the

sleepers I covered with fresh blankets and jackets in the wee hours on a cold night.

Luis, too, had given 2 tours of duty to the U.S. Army after high school. He has a son and a daughter each on their second tour in Iraq. He has another son and daughter in college in Boston. He lives in a basement apartment in Hartford now, and supports himself and his family with ONE job, now, as a parking lot attendant. For the whole month that I covered the trial, he insisted on paying my parking every day. He showed me the cash and my stamped receipt so that I would know he was not slipping me through at the owner's expense.

In the first 2 minutes of our rediscovery of each other, Luis used his cell phone to call Roberto, Miguel, and Antonio. They all arrived in seconds, hugging me, wide-eyed, triumphantly employed now at other vest pocket parking lots in this not-yet-restored part of the city.

After I'd tried in limping espanol to explain why I was in Hartford, to support a friend who was wrongly accused of criminal acts, Roberto looked deep into my soul with gentle understanding. "Maria, mija", he called after me, "you tell you fren no to worry. God walk with him".

- **Patricia, Volunteer Holiday Hostess on the Street.** She was a 30-Something, a struggling drug addict. She holed up in empty buildings. Wasted. Sick. Her warm, lyrical Haitian *patois* welcomed me every time we passed on the street.

Patricia fell off the employment merry-go-round about a decade before I met her. She spent hours at each of our holiday meals waiting on line, filling dishes, carrying them to friends who were unable to walk to us or to stand on line. She asked me each trip if she might take one more plate to someone else. She was as much a part of our team as any of my long-term volunteers.