

The Power of the Works of Mercy

by Raymond Langford

Tiny Tim may be one of the best-known characters in “A Christmas Carol,” the nineteenth-century novella by Charles Dickens.

It’s Tim, the dying, crippled son of underpaid clerk Bob Cratchit, who utters the famous tagline: “God bless us, everyone.” And it’s Tim who, in a somewhat miraculous turn of events, recovers. But the story, as anyone who turned on a television during Christmas surely knows, isn’t about Tim.

It’s about Ebenezer Scrooge, the elderly, cold-hearted financier who employs Tim’s father. Scrooge’s heart is opened when he has a chance to observe how gentle and good-natured Tim is despite his failing health—a chance provided by one of three spirits sent to warn Scrooge of the eternal consequences of his callous behavior.

While Tim is saved, it’s Scrooge who is redeemed through the time he spends with the sick child, ultimately paying for the medical care that saves his life.

From a miserable miser with a kind word for no one and a frown for all, one who callously suggests that the dying poor should get on with the process and “decrease the surplus population,” he becomes a joyful, benevolent soul who finds happiness in virtually every encounter he has.

Such is the power of works of mercy. The redemption they bring isn’t just for the beneficiary, although visiting friends of family who are sick may boost the spirit of the one who is ill and aid in his or her recovery.

The grace of these encounters also is for those who perform the work. “It is in giving that we receive,” St. Francis of Assisi notes. And visiting the sick, quite often, is a gift. It’s a labor of love, emphasis on the word “labor.”

Visiting the sick isn’t fun. Hospitals, let alone nursing homes, are places most of us don’t want to visit. The smell of illness, disinfectant, and decay hangs heavy in the air, something I learned in elementary school, when I’d go with my mom to visit my great-grandmother, who was bedridden in a nursing home after several strokes.

These weren’t occasions I looked forward to: I had only the vaguest memories of her as a functioning adult, and I was more than a little frightened.

When I recall those visits now, though, I can remember her smile. I realize what it must have meant to be with people who loved her.

Decades later, as an adult, I visited one of my dad’s aging sisters in a nursing home. It was still a daunting experience—watching a once-active woman who loved long walks struggle to put one foot in front of the other was painful—but it included unexpected moments of grace.

I could see her eyes dance with merriment as she recalled stories from her past, telling me tidbits of family lore I would never have known otherwise.



I'm not proud of the discomfort I felt during those visits, discomfort I never managed to dispel altogether, but I have come to understand that such emotions are part of humanity. This thanks to the clergy of my church in lower Manhattan, I hasten to add, not an epiphany of my own.

Life, we are reminded, is messy. And so is love. It's not a rarefied, stained-glass state of mind.

And that's the kind of love I believe Christ calls us to express if we are to be his hands and feet in the

world, especially when it comes to the sick, and to anyone who needs healing. In the words of the golden rule: treat others as we want to be treated.

We start by offering what we have, in the place where we are. We feel the discomfort, the fear, the inconvenience of someone who may not be feeling well physically or otherwise, and we reach out anyway.

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