

“Angels with Dirty Faces”

It was late May about ten years ago and I needed to move out of my apartment. There were several problems facing me. First, it seemed that all of my friends were out of town. They had helped me with the packing, but it was a holiday weekend and they were unavailable. Second, I was sick as a dog. I had been sick for days. In fact, I was still running a fever. I had tried to get some leeway from the landlord, but I had to vacate so that they could get it ready for the new tenant. Third, I did not have money to hire a mover. I was in a pickle.

So I did my best schlepping the boxes and smaller furnishing to a storage room a few miles away. I was making progress, slowly but surely. But as I neared the end I was faced with the problem of how to move a few pieces of furniture that were too heavy or awkward for me to move on my own.

As I was driving back from the storage center there were two men who approached me at a stop sign. These were not clean cut kids, but rather rough looking guys. They had just gotten off of the Greyhound bus and needed a ride downtown. That is the opposite direction from which I was headed. I really did not want to help. I was sick and very tired. The last thing I needed to do was get involved with these two guys, but I was also too tired to say “no” to them.

As they got into the borrowed pickup truck, they asked me what I was doing. I told them I was moving out of my apartment. They responded by asking if they could help. While this might seem to you like just what I needed I was not so sure. At the moment I was feeling more like I just wanted to get them out of the truck before something bad happened. But they persisted and I relented.

I stood watching as they got pieces of furniture and the bed out of the apartment with little effort. We took everything to the storage unit and got it unloaded and put away. I gave them a ride to the gas station where we were originally headed. I offered them some money for helping. I did not have much cash on me and offered to hit the ATM, but they were satisfied with what I had. I dropped them off and went back to the apartment for a last look around.

My parents had taught me from early on that I should never pick up a hitchhiker. They said that even hitchhikers who looked clean cut and buttoned down could be dangerous. Here I was not only breaking the rule, but breaking it to help out two men who were more than rough around the edges. These same guys, to whom I was reluctant to give a ride, would turn out to be the two guys that solved what my problem. Were they angels with dirty faces? I think so. There are too many improbabilities to chalk this up as a happy coincidence.

Today in the Letter to the Hebrews the author wrote “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unawares.” From what I could tell at the time that is exactly what happened to me.

I am not recommending that we all start picking up hitchhiking strangers. But I am reflecting on how arrogant we are to act as if we are in charge and everything depends on our actions. As I prepared to move out of my apartment I thought it was all dependent on me. I had to pull together the helpers, get a truck from friends, find the storage unit, and finally when no help was available I was going to move furniture and bedding that I simply had no way of managing. I may not have prayed for help, but I was thinking, “God what am I going to do?”

I’ve learned in some aspects of my life to rely on God, but it is not one hundred percent of the time. I think part of this reluctance to rely on God is the American attitude that we must be self-reliant. If we are not self-reliant then we are weak. If we need help then we are vulnerable. Better to tough it out than to show weakness. It is better to be like the title character in the movie “Shane” who rides off alone into the sunset, than it is to be the needy little boy who cries out as Shane rides away.

It is foolish attitude to think we can make it on our own without anyone’s help. People are made to be in community. We need others to celebrate and mourn, to nourish and to heal, to save us from our own nonsense. Even those early Christian hermits who went into the desert to escape society ended up living in community. They may each isolate in their own cave or cell, but they knew others were around. They sought each other’s advice. They shared the wisdom that they gained.

In modern society we isolate ourselves with our devices and our toys. We live lonely lives even when we are in a crowd. When we are approached by a stranger it is a time for fear. Even when that stranger turns out to be the answer to a prayer and to a problem, we are unwilling to realize it until it is almost forced down our throats.

It is hard because threats seem real. The 24-hour news cycle was Hurricane Dorian for the last several days, until another mass shooting took its place in the news cycle. We fear nature and we fear each other. Who or what is left to trust? The simple answer is God. Be aware. There are more angels passing into and through your life than you can count. Allow that the next person you meet has the potential to be that angel you have been hoping and praying for.

All angels do not have wings surrounded by glowing auras with shiny halos. Many are just plain folks like you and me, who, given the chance, might just have the message from God that you have been seeking.