

Judge Not

By the Rev. Edwin Chinery

At about 12:30 p.m., I collected my god-daughter and her roommate from Penn Station and deposited them at my flat downtown, then chugged back to the train for the rest of my day in the office. At stop three of my four-stop ride on the F train heading back uptown, a panhandler began his pitch. Looking to be middle-aged and African-American, he was almost cheerily barking at our fellow passengers about how he was hoping to get something to eat. He didn't sound like most panhandlers. He used words like distraught and economical. When he came to the end of the car where I was sitting, I thought about giving him some change. I had about forty-five cents left on me. I decided to pass since I'd already given away the lone dollar bill I'd had on my way to Penn Station.

And then a man sitting across from me spoke up as loudly as the panhandler had been speaking. It had been a bit longer a ride than usual between Broadway-Lafayette and West 4th, so he had time to develop what turned out to be a rant. He told the standing man that he really wanted to help him. That he had money to give him. But he wouldn't because he didn't want him to use it for alcohol. The standing man kind of whispered a denial, but the seated man drove hard, pointing out that he could see a liquor bottle in his bag. He assumed a lofty air. Shaming. Righteousness swelled into taunting. After about three or four verbal exchanges the panhandler bobbed twice quickly and excused himself saying, "Well...thank you very much..." He headed through the door into the next car, the train still moving. The righteous man continued to invite whoever in our midst could be drawn into agreeing with him. He chuckled about how stupid some drunks are and what a waste it would be to give him anything.

It was then a wave of remembrance swamped me. I thought of my late sister Terry. I'm five years older now than she was when she died on the bathroom floor of a single-wide in the mountains of Georgia. Alcohol, prescriptions and street drugs finally took her, after forty years of what many of us who loved her had sadly thought of as her "trying to die." I pictured Terry being in the same kind of need as the man panhandling. I imagined her begging on a subway train or in the street, desperately gambling on how to project a ray of positivity that might justify a pittance from a stranger. I began to feel her hunger in my churning stomach. I saw her curled up on a cot in a shelter unable to escape a mountain of self-loathing. And I tried desperately not to think of what must have gone on in her mind and heart as she prepared to do any number of unsavory things in order to get...what?

In the time it takes to blink, a lifetime of the tenderest feelings flooded my insides. Terry's whole life passed before my eyes. The black and white photos from family vacations at Cranberry Lake. Christmases and Easters in Bayonne. My goose bumps and the lump in my throat when I sneaked into her room during her high school years and read a piece she'd written that year about having seen The Doors and Janis Joplin in concert. Her beautiful smile. Her eyes and the way she'd cry if you were mean to her or she'd reached the weepy stage of drunkenness. She's dead eight years now. This day, the very day I write this, is the anniversary of her death. And I'm not sure I'll ever understand what it is she was trying to get.

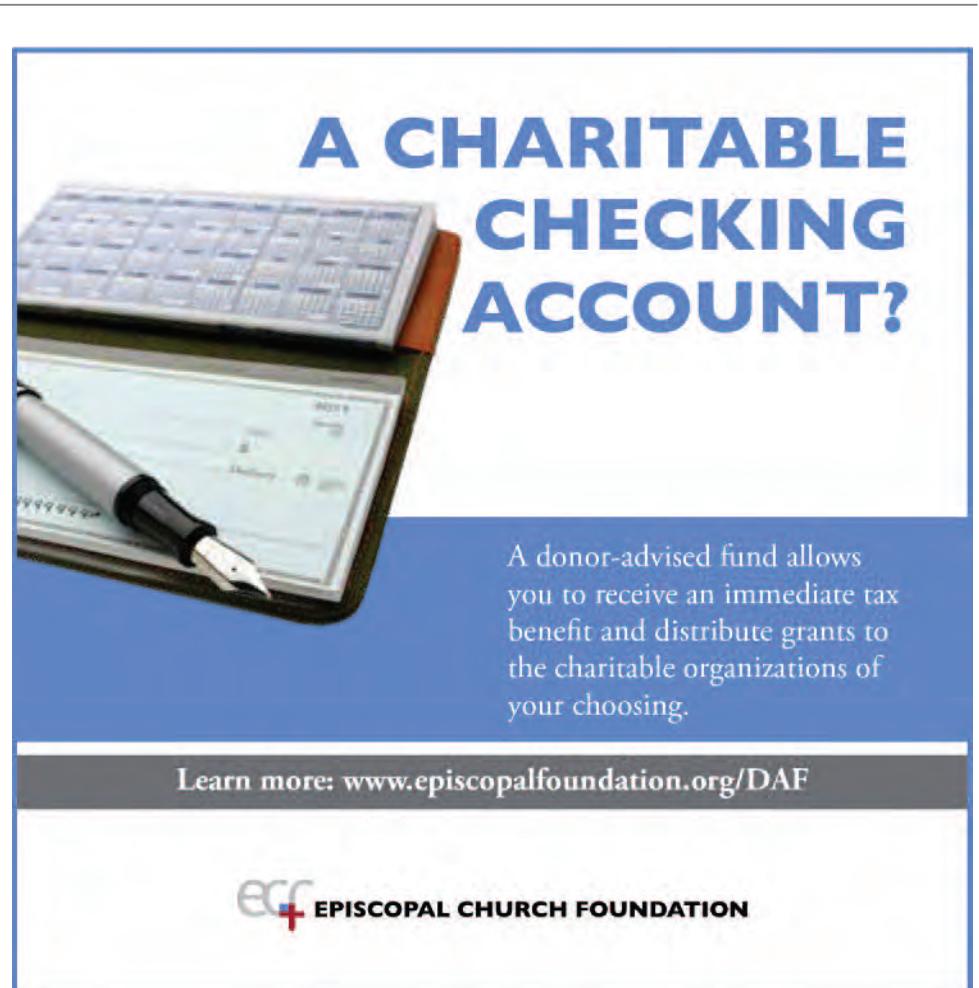
At West 4th, I hurried out of the subway car and looked in the direction of the one into which the panhandler had escaped. I almost ran smack into

him. His face was clenched into a fist of fury. Lips poked out. Countenance like a thunderstorm. Cloudy eyes foreboding. Everything about him said, "stay the f... away from me." But I walked almost beside him, a little behind. It felt like I was being pushed gently. Seven steps later, he turned. It seemed like he didn't know which way to go. I spoke to him, barely able to get the words out. "Excuse me sir. I heard what that man said to you and I'm sorry." I handed him my pathetic forty-five cents and said, "No one should judge you. I don't judge you. I wish I had more to give you right now." It's possible I imagined it, but I think his expression softened a tiny bit.

As I climbed to street level, I knew I was going to "lose it." Behind my stinging eyes and lumpy throat, those long-forgotten emotions swelled inside me once more. Slowly. Strangely delicious. They reminded me how much I still wish I could offer Terry even a tiny bit of comfort instead of having banished her from my life for so many years. Reminded me how the love that still exists is what matters most. I knew that from then on, when I give to a panhandler, I'm giving to Terry.

I cried tears of... what? Relief? Maybe. It doesn't matter. Each one a pearl, they briefly adorned the sidewalks, here and there, all the way to my office.

The author is assisting priest at the Church of the Incarnation in Manhattan.



A CHARITABLE CHECKING ACCOUNT?

A donor-advised fund allows you to receive an immediate tax benefit and distribute grants to the charitable organizations of your choosing.

Learn more: www.episcopalchurchfoundation.org/DAF

ecf EPISCOPAL CHURCH FOUNDATION