

TWO LEMPIRAS OF INJUSTICE

I was in line at the cash register of the gas station this morning, in my usual daydreamy stupor, readying myself to fork over fifty dollars for less than a full tank of gas. There was a woman in front of me and a man behind. The woman had already opened the bottle of orange juice she was paying for when it rang up two lempiras more than she had anticipated. She had a twenty lempira bill, and the orange juice cost 22 lempiras. She looked shocked, and it occurred to me that maybe she had not brought more money with her into the store. The clerk said, "Two more lemps." I was just vaguely processing the idea of making up the difference when the lady with the orange juice looked at me and said sharply, "Give it to her for me! Give her the two lemps!" That strong sense of justice that harangues me mercilessly rose up inside, and for a tiny moment I wanted to say, "No. You should have asked the price before you started drinking the juice." Instead, I handed over the two lemps, albeit reluctantly. The clerk looked relieved, as did the guy holding the bag of ice behind me. Who wants to have their whole day held up by a nickel?

I walked to the gas pump mulling . . . "Why are gringos always supposed to 'make up the difference'?" . . . "Do I look like a bank?" . . . and "Why would it have been OK to hand it over voluntarily, but instead made me extremely grumpy that she presumptuously ordered me to do it?"

And then I thought of the child border refugees. Most of the Americans I know love to help children in need. Thousands of Americans spend millions of dollars every year traveling to other countries to help children in need. In these situations, though, the American citizen is making the plans, deciding on a budget, packing the suitcase. In the case of the child refugees, these same Americans are being ordered, albeit in a panic, "Take care of us! You! You have the resources! Help me!" It doesn't seem fair. Maybe it isn't fair. OK, it probably isn't fair.

As I drove home, still mulling, I thought of my hero, John the Baptist. He came to make crooked roads straight. He ate honey and locusts and wore animal skins. He was what people today like to call "all in." And even though Jesus was more popular and could eat anything he wanted, John wasn't resentful and even gave up some of his own disciples for the sake of God's Mission. Of course John the Baptist would not have been expected to come up with two lempiras (no pockets, no greed, no income). He wouldn't have been in a gas station in the first place (no car, environmentalist, rural missionary). He probably would have stopped the lady before she ever went inside to say, "Do you really need to spend your only dollar on an artificially flavored drink?" And if he had been in line with us for some reason, he would have surely looked at me and said, "Well? You are a spoiled capitalist. Cough it up." Never mind Jesus, who would have placed a loving hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't you have more than two lempiras that you can give this poor lady? If you can spend fifty dollars on gas, then surely you can spare a couple of dollars for her."

So I think I understand why people feel affronted by the sudden, unannounced influx of refugees. Nobody invited them. Their expectations are huge --much much much bigger than

two lempiras. The fact that most of them are children fills good people with conflicting emotions. And yet if they had asked first, would they be in the States?

It occurred to me in this morning's mulling that I have never in my whole life heard anyone say, "Boy! I wish I'd never been born in the USA! I hate being an American citizen!", even when things like this child refugee situation happen. The truth is we know we are the ones who have, and that there are billions of people out there who would like to have what we have. Most would settle for our passport, although Hondurans are always telling me how much they like my blue eyes. ☺ It's great to be in the giver's seat. Almost nobody wants to be a beggar. The catch is that the giver likes to be *asked nicely*, not presumptuously ordered to be generous.

In the end, I thought of the woman's face when she didn't have the two lempiras. She was fearful, and she had no solution of her own, no resources. She spoke to me brusquely because she needed to impress upon me the urgency of her need. She did say thank you; did I mention that? And I won't miss those two lempiras. In fact, the *thousand* lempiras I spent on gas will be long gone in about three days, and I will be back at the gas station. Never mind the many times I've come up short myself, and a kind friend (listening to the Spirit, no doubt) has strengthened my bank balance.

We need one another. Sometimes we need to be confronted with urgent need because we don't go looking for it. We don't want to see the faces of people who can't make up a difference of five cents, and we especially don't want a dozen of them in our own backyard. However, I think that both John and Jesus would say that it's good for God's people to do more than just consider the needs of others; we need to 'dig deep', gratefully acknowledging that we are also beneficiaries of grace, which we did nothing to earn. Maybe it isn't fair that they didn't ask first, but maybe it isn't exactly like Jesus, either, to insist that they do. He has "made up the difference" over and over and over for each one of us, and now He says, "Go and do likewise."