

## A homily on hunger and humanity

By KEN LESLIE

Forty hungry teenagers, my wife, and I were in the museum basement of the Toledo Zoo. Before we knew it, the room turned into a church.

The Zoo-Teens, a program designed to foster young people's interest in the zoo, animals, and service to others, had invited me to help the teens extract lessons from the 30-hour fast they were completing.

Kids usually learn from this experience only that it sucks to be hungry and poor. But this time would be different. I had brought a black bag.

I walked into the center of the room and told the teens I empathized with their hunger. Then I unpacked the bag, removing a breakfast sandwich and three large orders of French fries.

Universal moans and groans. I heard: "You are so mean!"

With elitist disdain, I asked: "What do you mean? I've worked hard for the ability to get food. I earned it, it's all mine, so tough crap."

I walked around the room, waving the French fries under each teenager's nose. "How do you like it?" I taunted them. "I got it -- you don't."

I took a huge bite of the sandwich. With my mouth full, I asked: "So what did you all learn from the fast?"

Silence.

Another huge bite. "Seriously, what did you learn?"

Glares.

"What are you feeling now?" I said. "It's OK -- you can be honest."

After one more gluttonous bite, I finally heard: "Jealousy."

"Envy," said another. "Anger," said a third.

Then a boy behind me said: "I want to just take it from you."

I let that sink in.

"What does that mean?" I asked the teens. "His anger and jealousy grew to the point of considering robbery. Was it because I had so much, or because I was flaunting it?"

Before they could answer, I told them: "I feel bad about your hunger. Let me share my bounty."

My wife, who was helping me teach the teens how we sometimes see poor people treated, invited them to the center of the room. She ordered them to line up in single file, prodding them when they didn't move fast enough.

She demanded obedience. She sent one student to the end of the line "just because." She told another teen whose path had been blocked by a pillar that she would get no food.

When the teen complained, my wife retorted: "You weren't in line. No exceptions."

Finally, I began to donate my bounty: one French fry apiece.

The teens just looked at what I had given them.

"Why aren't you eating?" I asked. Their reaction was one I have seen many times on the streets, but didn't anticipate from this exercise.

A quiet response: "I want to give this to someone else who needs it."

Another teen added: "We don't want to break our fast. We would rather give these to the student who thinks he's going to pass out."

Now the students understood why our friends on the streets take the cigarette butt they find and share it with another.

Why one of our friends who lives at St. Paul's Community Center gave his only pair of gloves to another resident whose hands were freezing, because he said he "wanted to help the homeless."

Why our friend Jimmy, after he was given a much-needed change of clothes, stopped, turned around, and said: "I'm going to go pass this on."

Why those with the least give the most: It's called humanity.

I had come to teach the students. They became my teachers.

There is much hope for our future.

Church dismissed.

*Ken Leslie is a founding member of the Toledo-Lucas County Homelessness Board and the advocacy groups IMatters and Tent City.*

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