

## Charity on the Rocks

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My husband grew up backpacking, and it was one of the conditions of our marriage that I would learn to backpack too. I do it now, and occasionally even enjoy it, but it's definitely a stretch to say that I'm good at it or love it as wholeheartedly as Mike does; backpacking is perpetually a challenge for me, and my favorite part is the end of the day when I collapse in our tent with my Kindle. I say this by way of prefacing a personal story so that you understand the context as I start telling you about a time when nature nearly got the best of me.

It was the end of a long day climbing mountains with a heavy backpack, and when we hit a boulder field about a mile before our planned campsite, Mike skipped over it in his usual sure-footed way, leaving me behind to pick my way across carefully, looking to identify gaps I could jump over and trying my best to not simply fall down and cry with exhaustion. Mike reached the end of the boulder field while I was still only a third of the way through, and, like the generally helpful person he is, he turned around to shout directions to me, trying to guide me the best way through the boulders—the way he had come.

The problem was, and always is while backpacking, that Mike and I are different people with different energy levels, different skills (namely, hopping between boulders or carrying a backpack through Yosemite), and different leg lengths. The best way for Mike was not the best way for me—some of those jumps were *huge*—and having him stand at the edge of the field shouting directions at me, leading me over to gaze at gaps that were way too large for my tired legs, felt like frustration, shame, and failure, not aid.

Do you ever have life experiences that are clearly a metaphor even as you're experiencing them? As I was slowly picking my way along an easier path through the boulders, I was thinking to myself, "This is going to make it into a church talk some day." (Cold comfort, that.) At the time it seemed like a perfect metaphor for how people can lead different lives and take different paths back to God, depending on their individual strengths, but how all those paths can succeed in the end. (Spoiler alert: I did eventually get to drop my pack and pick up my novel at the campsite.) This story could have prefaced a beautiful talk about diversity in the Church and the legitimacy of personal revelation as we choose our own paths.

In the many months since this experience, though, I've been reflecting on compassion and charity, and I think the story teaches that too. (Like all the best parables, this one is flexible.) Mike was trying to serve me—despite dragging me on death marches, he's generally very kind—but he was far away from me, standing at the destination already, and his vantage point and mine didn't match up. He didn't understand where I was or what I could do, and, from that distance and without that understanding, his service was useless. Poor Mike was in a situation I'm sure we all recognize: he wanted to help but didn't know how, and his best efforts, far from helping, were probably making things worse because his directions to me only emphasized how easy it was for him, leaving me feeling even more like a failure.

As dedicated disciples of Christ, we all know how essential it is for us to strive for charity, the pure love of Christ, but that doesn't mean it's immediately easy. Charity starts with understanding. Proverbs 4:7 tells us that "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding." I was a nerdy child who grew up to be a nerdy adult, and I've always thought, or at least hoped, that that referred to book learning, philosophy, and the intellect.

As I gain more life experience outside of books, however, I'm coming to find another interpretation: true wisdom means understanding people, and understanding people means having charity. Look at the people around you. Ask them questions. Listen to their answers. Understand who they are, where they're coming

from, what their strengths are, what they want, and what they need, and *that's* when you can love them, serve them effectively, and see them as children of God. (Nerds can still have hope! I think these skills can be learned in reading. Fiction, and its omniscient narrators, have blessed my life immensely in teaching me how other brains work and what other people want. I can practice walking a mile in a thousand other pairs of shoes without ever getting up off the couch.)

Christ, of course, is our ultimate exemplar for practicing charity in understanding. When a woman in a crowd touched the hem of his garment, hoping to be healed, he understood what it meant to her and why she did it and reacted with compassion rather than irritation. When the Pharisees brought him the woman taken in adultery, firmly convinced of their own rightness and their own interpretation of justice, but equally firmly rooted in a culture without much respect for women's agency, especially sexual agency, Christ modeled mercy and compassion. I like to think—though this may be reading into the story—that part of his mercy was based on understanding her. Christ could see that what she needed wasn't exacted judgment and punishment but compassion; only with that could she heal and start living anew. How often are we like the Pharisees, quick to judge someone for perceived sin but slow to understand the context for that person's choices?

Side note: I include myself in this. I work in online safety and, while I will spare you all the gory details, in the course of my job every day I see people making terrible choices that cause real pain and damage in their lives. It's sometimes tempting to dismiss those situations as entirely their fault, mostly because that way I feel less heartache over the pain of innocents and less drive to take responsibility and try to fix difficult situations. I have to constantly remind myself that I'm not seeing all the context and that I can't see what needs they have unmet, what pain they have in their hearts, what pressures they have in their heads that drove them to make those choices. As I do my job, I have to strive and pray every day for greater understanding and charity.

Christ models perfect compassion based on understanding, but we also have imperfect examples to look to in the scriptures.

In the story of Job, his friends come after his tragedies and try to comfort him. Judging by their deep conversations with each other, I think Job had probably considered these people good friends. They seem sincere in their desire to support their friend, but of course, they don't understand the real nature of Job's misfortunes (and who can blame them?) and their clumsy attempts at comfort probably hurt more than they help. "You must have done something to deserve this" isn't generally what lessens a sufferer's pain.

Like Job's friends, our own efforts to express charity are often clumsy. We feel good about ourselves when we donate our cast-off clothing to Goodwill or the Salvation Army and know that someone in need, probably someone in Africa, is going to end up with our 2005 5K run t-shirt. Look at us! We are clothing the naked, just like the scriptures say! And yet what we don't understand is that they weren't actually naked: prior to this outpouring of donated clothes, there was a sizable and productive textile industry in Africa; between 1981 and 2000, 40 percent of the decline in production and 50 percent of the jump in unemployment could be explained by clothing donations.<sup>1</sup> Which would have been better for the poor: our used, stained t-shirts or jobs? Or take disaster relief to Japan in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami: the Japanese Red Cross clearly stated that donations weren't needed<sup>2</sup>—Japan is a fairly wealthy nation with good infrastructure and preparation for disasters like earthquakes—and yet the American Red Cross received \$34 million in donations to Japan anyway. This is a hard truth, but we must face it: not all charity is helpful, and good intentions aren't everything; sometimes, in our lack of understanding, our attempted charity may be hurting the very people we want to help.

To be fair to Mike, I have to return now to my story of the boulder field. After a few minutes, he saw that shouting to me across the distance wasn't helping, and so, having dropped off his own pack at the destination, he hopped back over the boulder field, stood next to me, and, sharing my perspective with me, coached me through the boulders, step by step. This, not his directions from the sidelines, was Christlike service: he stood right next to me, understood where I was and where I wanted to go, and helped me along to the goal.

Christ's path is as much seeking to understand and empathize as seeking to solve the problem because only understanding and context and wisdom can actually solve the problem. Not practicing charity is not an option—not for us—and so we must get wisdom, and with all our getting get understanding.

One example of this that inspires me is Cécile Pelous, a French member of the Church recently featured in a Mormon.org video.<sup>3</sup> Wanting to serve, in 1986 she started spending three months every year in India. Besides the personal sacrifice on display, what most struck me about her practice of charity is the humility she took with her; she went intending to help and packed articles she thought would be useful—medicines, basic training in first aid—but, on arriving, was open to doing anything that needed doing: “Dirty clothes and sheets had to be boiled and washed, meals prepared, patients fed in night shelters and almshouses, and medical care given.” She couldn't have known about all those needs from a distance, but she was willing to bridge that distance, to get up close with the people she wanted to serve, and when she understood what needed to be done, she did it.<sup>4</sup>

This isn't easy. It's much harder than a systematic, by-the-numbers, just-donate-your-clothing or always-bring-a-casserole approach to charity. (Hence, of course, why people are still donating their t-shirts.) This is the higher law than even the golden rule: treat people how *they* want to be treated.

So what can we do with these hard truths? First, we remember them; we keep in mind that charity goes deeper than a checklist. We ask questions and listen—sincerely listen—to their responses. We learn about the people around us and let them tell their stories. We pray for it if we need to: D&C 136:32 tells us, “Let him [or her] that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself [or herself] and calling upon the Lord.” We take home and visiting teaching seriously: in its purest form, the program is designed for building this kind of understanding, if we let it, since it asks us to go into people's homes and let them into ours. Understanding starts with openness: opening our doors and welcoming people in, opening our minds and asking the right questions, and opening our hearts as we learn to empathize.

Sometimes this charity will look a little different than we expect it to. Sometimes it means taking a casserole. Sometimes it means washing sheets, preparing meals, and feeding patients. Sometimes it means tracing patterns in the dirt and having mercy on a sinner. Sometimes it means covering ourselves in sackcloth and ashes and mourning with those that mourn. Always, though, it means dropping our own heavy packs, walking back on the path to where a sister or brother stands, and, step by step, side by side, leading them along.

### Notes

1. Garth Frazer, "Used-Clothing Donations and Apparel Production in Africa," *The Economic Journal* 118 (2008): 1,764–84.

2. Stephanie Strom, "A Charitable Rush, With Little Direction," *New York Times*, March 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/16/world/asia/16charity.html>.

3. "Hi I'm Cécile," <http://www.mormon.org/cecile>.

4. Thierry Crucy, "Cécile Pelous: Love and Friendship in India," *Liahona*, March 1992, <http://www.lds.org/liahona/1992/03/ccile-pelous-love-and-friendship-in-india>.