

In this Christian life,

we are called to be Christ to others.

But as we do so,

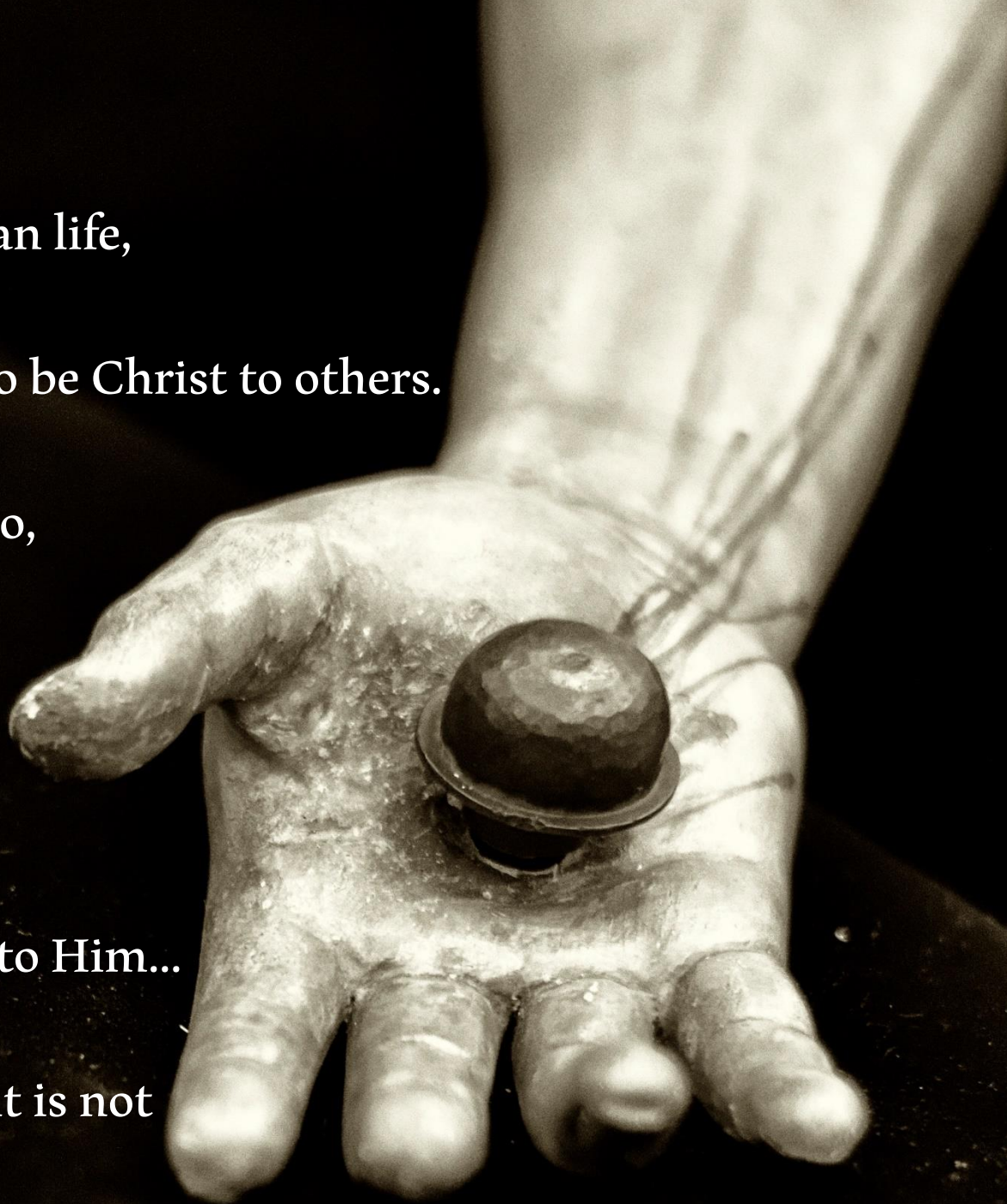
we must

remember

what they did to Him...

and the servant is not

greater than the master.



As I began writing all this out, it began as a therapeutic exercise, just getting words down on paper so I felt less alone, so I could see the situation from a different angle, so I could get these awful thoughts out of my head, in hopes that someone else could benefit from the wisdom I learned in my own naiveté. Then I wrote it more as a chronological journaling...then I began what I really wanted to see from this, which was a novelization of the events. But as I write this in 3 stages, I realized the novelization, while impressive if I could pull it off, was the least important part. Focusing on visualization, balancing dialogue with action, immersing you in the setting, is truly an art form, but unnecessary for conveying the spiritual message, which is really what I want to say. So I'll start this off with a few paragraphs of novelization, but let the wrestling with God, man, and myself be the bulk of this writing, as that's what really matters in this story.

My car rumbles softly against the pavement beneath me, guiding me into the city that I now call home. Cornfields and forest, ubiquitous across the rural landscape of northern Indiana, give way to homes, stores, and far more traffic that I care to be around. The rustic ambience fades farther and farther back in my rearview mirror, replaced by the suburban landscape of commerce and communities that welcome me home.

I have been to this city before, a few times with college friends, and just a week before that dreadful day, to begin moving into my new house. But I have yet to traverse these streets enough to know how to get to my new house, and so I have a habit of pulling aside at a gas station parking lot to pull up a GPS before going deeper into this new city.

Car rumbling, pavement standing strong, rural Indiana fully receded into the realm of recent memory, I know I can drive a little farther before I have to pull up directions. But inexplicably, as a green gas station comes into view, my gut instinct tells me, "Pull over here. This is where you should pull up directions."

I almost ignore it. Not much reason to pull over now; I can go another mile or two before I need to know where to turn. But I decide to honor the advice my gut instinct gave me. After all, what's the point of praying, "Jesus, take the wheel," if I won't change direction every now and then?

The following is an account of what ensued, what never would've happened if I never changed direction, if I never let Jesus take the wheel. What I can honestly say, coming clearer & clearer as time puts more distance betwixt myself & the pain, is simple: *I was led*. This is not the first time I've followed my gut, with negative consequences. I followed my gut with a long situation with a girl in college, that led me feel very emotionally drained, and I had to break up with her, and pretty much cut her entirely out of my life for a couple years. But through my time living with her & being there for her every day, really giving myself for someone I didn't even know that well, something positive must've happened in her life, because she got baptized shortly thereafter.

The next time my gut feeling was incredibly strong, where I literally had dreams telling me this would be amazing if I went out & did it, was to spend a year in Pittsburgh with a Franciscan volunteer program. This year involved working 40 hours a week at a non-profit...and it was the single worst job I've ever suffered through for so long. But, everything outside of work was amazing in Pittsburgh, and even if I despised the work I did, I could see from Day 1 that it I was a very positive force in an organization that provided a vital service to a community that needed it.

This time...no such consolation ever came. I never saw a change in heart with the people who exploited me. I never saw their promises to me fulfilled. While I had spiritual consolations along the way, they were few & far between the anguish of feeling used, more used than ever before.

It reminds me of something said in the fascinating documentary, *Walking the Bible*, which goes through the geography & the stories of the Torah. Abraham, of course, was mentioned in the documentary, along with his call to Ur, and his call to kill his son. The call to Ur was an act of trust in God that led to a wonderful land—the consolation after a long period of trust in God was clear. As it was for me with the girl in college, who got baptized; as it was for me in Pittsburgh, where I could see how much I was appreciated, and where I found my calling to pursue religious life. But after that, Abraham is called to sacrifice his son Isaac. As we know, an angel called off the sacrifice at the last second—but there was nothing added to the story because of it. If God never called Abraham to sacrifice his son, the story would’ve progressed perfectly well. This, as *Walking the Bible* mentioned, was an act of trust, with nothing for Abraham to gain. The call to Ur was an act of trust that led to new & bountiful land; the call to sacrifice his son was an act of trust, for sake of being an act of trust.

Perhaps that is why I was called to do all this for someone who ultimately saw me as something less than human, just a walking wallet to exploit time & time again. It was an act of trust in the words I now think of so often: *“Whatsoever you do to the least of My people, that you do unto Me.”* I did this for the girl in college, and I heard of her getting baptized, and I saw her become a more peaceful person—there was consolation that everything I did for her paid off. I have no such consolation for this person—though I sincerely hope I can go back & update this writing soon, as I pray for the conversion of heart of my exploiters every day, and I’m currently on Day 6 of a St. Joseph novena for them both to repent & live as Christ wants for them. Perhaps I’ll even be blessed enough to have one of them write a letter, with a check enclosed, as a sign that my attempt to be Christ for the world truly brought about conversion in those who needed it most. That would be beautiful. But Christ doesn’t say, *“Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, only matters if it had a good result”*....He says, *“You did it unto Me.”* If I believe what Christ says...then any consolation I can get from seeing them have a change of heart is unnecessary, because I did it for Him.

“I’ve learned how it feels to want to kill someone. I’ve learned that there are emotions I shouldn’t have. And I’ve learned the importance of having friends to pull me out of that malicious impulse. I’ve learned a lot of things from this man. He’s an awful person. But setting that aside...I feel like I ought to thank him for the things he’s taught me.” --Assasination Classroom, book 9

“God would not have led me down this path if it was only going to lead to destruction.” --A dear friend of mine who’s been through far worse situations than this

Dear reader, I must tell you a few things to start. Much of what I’m about to write will seem unwise from the start. But I ask you a question...“When in doubt, trust your gut.” Is this good advice to live by? And it begs another question...if there is much doubt, but your gut feeling is unwavering, stronger than you’ve ever felt a good gut feeling before, should you fight through the great doubts because the gut feeling is even greater? Trouble happens when someone’s gut tells them “Don’t do it!”, but the rational mind says to do it anyway. But what happens when your rational mind says, “I’m not sure about this, there’s a lot of ways this could go wrong,” but your gut says, “Do it, everything is legit”? And, the really critical question to anyone invested in theistic philosophy...suppose the strongest moments of your gut saying, “Do it”, happen in the MANY times you take this issue to prayer?

That is why I did what I did. And it did not work out as I wanted it to. It occurred to me, after the last false hope of the repayment I was promised, that if anything about this guy was legit, he would've repaid me already. But when I look at the man I am now, I am far closer to the man I've always wanted to be. I've grown in remarkable ways. I've learned what it means to pray for my enemies, even while I learn what it's like to sincerely want to pray for someone to go to hell. I've long been interested in human trafficking, and now I know what it feels like to be exploited by a mystery voice on the phone in unknown locations for someone else's profit. I now have a much deeper understanding of my own dignity that is worth defending. I instinctively put up much stronger, clearer barriers against potential threats to myself, out of love for my students & all those who care about me. I have street smarts, a much closer relationship with God, a stronger understanding of those who need someone to understand them the most...it's hard to explain, but having lived it, I can honestly ask: What more of a repayment could I ask for?

"O Lord, it is you who are my portion & cup; it is you yourself who are my prize." --Psalm 16.

This line comes up quite a bit in Night Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, and now it's one of the most significant Bible verses for me.

There are many things here that I could see myself saying, if I could do it all over again. In the last contact I've had with him, I found myself to be a man who can see through lies very quickly, can put up strong barriers in an instant, and is overall far more competent when dealing with those of ill intent, and most significantly, I have a much deeper understanding that there is something within myself worth defending.

The opening of 2 Peter says to "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge." I drove up to a beggar with faith; what I did for him was virtue; and only by adding virtue to my faith, and great self-sacrifice & humility like I've never known before, I now have a wealth of knowledge to add to my virtue. I pray that writing all this may pass on the knowledge to you, as well, that we all may ameliorate our spiritual journeys through this spiritual war-torn world, to do what we can for others, with the knowledge that we, too, have deep dignity worth protecting.

[Names have been changed throughout this story. I changed the Pastor's name to Pastor Paul, as a prayer that Pastor may have as much a conversion to Christ as St. Paul the Apostle did. And the beggar's name I changed to Jude, after the patron saint of desperate causes. And I changed the city's name to Kowalska, after St. Faustina Kowalska, through whom Jesus brought the Divine Mercy devotion to the world. The famous image of "Jesus, I trust in you" was painted, following the description that she gave in her excellent diary, and a medal that says "Jesus, I trust in you" lives in my car to this day]

When I say, "Do you trust gut feelings?", I refer back to before the situation even began. I was moving to Kowalska for my new teaching job, and needed to come to a few days' of meetings before the school year began. It was Sunday afternoon, Aug. 6, 2023. I remember the date exactly, because it was the Sunday before the first day of school (which was Aug. 9).

At this point, I knew how to get to Kowalska, but once I was in the city, I was unsure of how to get to my new house. Thus, I would drive without GPS until getting into the city, then I'd pull over to a gas station parking lot & pull up a GPS to get me the rest of the way.

There are times when I hear of people who just have a gut feeling, perhaps even a feeling in prayer, that tells someone, “Turn left—now!” And that’s what happened. I knew I could keep driving down Illinois Road for awhile before needing to get directions, and planned to..but something within me said, “That’s the gas station where you should park.” I almost ignore it..after all, I know I can drive another few miles before I have to check for directions. But what’s the point of praying, “Jesus, take the wheel,” if I won’t change direction every now and then?

It was a Lassus Handy-Dandy, a chain I used to be unfamiliar with, but now lives in infamy in the pained memories of my first few weeks in this city. Unaware of what would happen, I pull off to the strip mall parking lot nearby, walk in to use the restroom, buy a cheese stick to honor the fine custom of, “I used your bathroom, so I’ll buy something small”, and I walked back out...where I made eye contact with a beggar. From the way he acted, from the way I’ve learned to read people in the sketchy parts of the Pittsburgh metro area where I spent the past year, I could tell this man was not accustomed to having anyone make eye contact with him, let alone engage him in conversation...let alone give him a little cash when he requested it.

This man seemed genuine. He did all the way through the majority of this story, when I believe I witnessed a dramatic flux point in his life—but we’ll get to that. He said he was on house arrest, and had an ankle bracelet to prove it. He said he was a diabetic, and had the scars in his arm to prove the needles he’s had to use. People in a good life situation don’t stand outside a gas station & portray themselves as criminals with scars above their vein.

And he said his daughter was dying in the hospital.

At this point, dear reader, I knew I was looking in the face of 3 things:

--A potential risk to my wallet

--A man whose life was far harder than I could imagine

--The image of Christ

It is said, in the beginning of 2 Peter, that we should undergird our faith with virtue, and our virtue with knowledge. What happened, at this point in my life, was adding virtue onto my faith. Faith that believed Jesus’ words, “Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me”. Virtue that believed those words were incomplete if I heard them without acting upon them.

What I collected through this shitty, transformative, traumatic experience was knowledge to add to my virtue. And a major reason of why I write this is to share this knowledge...to milk any good out of my encounter with wicked evil.

Jude was the beggar’s name. And it probably was his real name, because every other police report filed against him (and the soon-to-be-mentioned Pastor Paul) had the same name. Consistency with a fake name is far less likely than consistency with a real name.

I gave Jude the change from buying my cheese stick. He wanted \$330, to be able to fix his car to go see his daughter before she died. Being on house arrest, he either had to use his own car (which wouldn’t run without the new part), or take the probation department’s ride service (which was exorbitantly expensive). Naturally, I didn’t have such a quantity of cash on me, let alone my desire to throw \$330 to the first beggar I meet in this new city. He pointed to an ATM at the strip mall across the parking lot, saying I could get him all

the cash right there...but even with a good gut feeling that brought me here in the first place, I was just here to get directions & keep going, and declined his desire for me to get him more cash. He seemed disappointed, but understanding. And he asked for my phone number.

Dear reader, understand something: In the year I spent in Pittsburgh, there were times when a beggar, including one who seemed to be dying, would ask for my phone number. They never even called me. I assumed they just appreciated the feeling of connectedness, knowing there was someone they could turn to, even if they never felt the need to. It's like feeling that your family's always there for you, and that being a good feeling, even when you're doing fine & really don't need someone there for you at the moment. I assumed this man would be the same way.

But he called.

There is an interesting addition to Jude's story: Pastor Paul. Pastor said he was out of town for a few days, out in southern Indiana, and would've helped Jude if he was able to. Jude put me in contact with Pastor, who thanked me for helping Jude, and promised full repayment of everything I gave Jude.

Dear reader, at this point, it is getting very hard to write. I have learned a great deal about what it feels like to be utterly exploited. It totaled about \$2,500 that I gave to this man, and the sheer level of self-judgement I feel at falling into this trap is incredible. I don't want to admit to my own stupidity. It's isolating to think that I can't say a word of this without people automatically yelling, "Why did you do that??" But I assure you, my reader, my friend, that the role of the positive gut feelings, unwavering through the days & weeks that my exploitation lasted, stronger in prayer than anywhere else (and do not underestimate the amount I prayed throughout this time...) I want to simply abandon the script now. Believe me when I say I wish this never happened, I want to erase these memories, I want to believe this never happened & just write about the joys of my life in this city, of which there have been many. But I did not come here to write about pleasure; I came here to write a cautionary tale, a Christian drama, a lament over living virtue in the realm of the wicked, a record of the knowledge I (and maybe you) may add to the virtue that is added onto our faith in Christ.

Many weeks after my exploitation, after going to my parents' house for the weekend, I again drove this route back into Kowalska. The very familiar gas station came into view. I drove up to it, with a wild blend of emotions as I did so...but the thing that stood out to me the most, was as if Christ Himself said to me, "You met Me here."

"Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me." That is the theme song, the battle cry, the cry of desperation that kept me going through the whole ordeal. Faith in these words; virtue to put these words into action; and now knowledge of how to do it better in the future.

But whatever downfall Jude & Pastor Paul had, that is their responsibility. Jesus' words are simple & direct. I did this for one of the least of His people, *because* I was doing it unto Him. Now that I write it as such, I realize this is ultimately a brutal love song to Christ.

But let's continue...

I suppose I should stop doing build-up & actually tell you the story.

Jude's daughter (as I was told) was dying, and he desperately wanted to see her before she died. I knew from the start I was taking a risk. But armed with a positive gut feeling, trust in Christ's words, and the fact that I previously received a surprise \$1,500 that I didn't need (for irrelevant reasons), I considered this man to be worth the risk. Little did I know that the loss of money was the least of my concerns...

Jude called. Pastor Paul called. There was a lot going on in these couple weeks, and I don't want to talk about it, nor do I even remember the details well enough to craft a narrative. This was a point of high stress, poor sleep, and about 3 months have passed since these events. Suffice it to say I went on a very unusual tour of Kowalska, following the addresses that Pastor Paul texted me to find Jude, believing this mystery voice on the phone, trying desperately to let a man see his dying daughter before it was too late, and I gave hundreds of dollars a day in the name of being Christ to a man who needed Him. I guess it doesn't sound that bad when I say it that way...and perhaps part of why I felt so compelled to write all this down was therapeutic for myself, to remind myself of what is truly important, that underneath my duress lies a God who loves & cares for me, who called me to do this sort of thing, and who kept me alive & safe through the process.

In any case...along the way, I met Jude's supervisor & a couple coworkers, I wrote a check to Pastor's niece (check cashing places were part of my exploitation), and a check to one of Jude's coworkers. There were far too many people involved for them to only ask for a few hundred at a time, without ramping it up as the days & weeks went on. I kept getting calls Pastor Paul, thanking me & praying for me, and his car issues getting him delayed in his return to Indiana. And Jude's ride service with the probation department kept having delays. Suspicion in me built...but my gut feeling (especially during prayer!) kept being very positive, and I was watching Jude's faith in humanity be restored a little more every time I drove up to give him money. He kept saying, "You don't have to do this", and offered me a chance to walk away from the situation a few times. But I said, quite honestly, that I wanted him to see his daughter. And his pastor kept promising repayment.

Left as is, I could think of them as a scam duo—one guy on the streets who's a really good actor, one guy on the phone who promises repayment without delivering. But there was a very critical point that changed my whole view of the situation—and changed their view on me.

A few times, Jude needed dropped off at the bus station downtown. Again, I must refer to my year in Pittsburgh, where I was dependent on public transit. I get it. Some people just need a bus ride home. And perhaps it was a good thing, because it gave time for this conversation to happen.

I just cashed a check for Jude...I was dropping him off at the bus stop...and I was going to Pastor's office to collect my repayment. He finally made it back in town, and offered to take me out for pizza. But, I got quite delayed at the check cashing place, and didn't have time for dinner, so we agreed a quick check-signing & sending me on my way would be fine. Perhaps this pastor would even become a friend. But I was increasingly nervous throughout this situation...every prayer I gave was met with a powerful feeling of, "I should help him anyway." Every doubt I had was not powerful enough to shake the unwavering confidence that my gut feeling gave. But I still had difficulty sleeping...I went several days in a row without being able to eat a full meal, not even an entire bagel, because my stomach was so upset from the stress. The night before the first day of school, I had an excruciating panic attack, a phenomenon I had never before experienced, where I was wracked with agony whether or not this Pastor actually existed, whether I was being swindled out of my mind, whether I was trying to follow Jesus but found my way to satan...

Jude saw my nervousness. He saw it every time I met him. And he seemed genuinely compassionate, even scared, of how I was feeling. And as I was a block away from the bus stop, on the cusp of dropping him off, collecting repayment from Pastor, and putting this agony to rest, I told Jude that I really needed to get the

repayment from Pastor. He asked, “Why?” I said, “Because I talked about this situation with one of my housemates, and he thinks I’m being swindled out of my mind. If I show up empty-handed tonight...I don’t know what they might think.” At which point, Jude looked incredibly spooked, and said, “Stop the car.” And then, he said what I believe to be a very critical line—“Pastor’s not gonna like this.”

At this point, I was scared. Why wouldn’t Pastor like this? And why would he be concerned—right before giving me the repayment? So I stopped the car, and he said he would call Pastor & tell him that I don’t believe him. The whole time, Jude had been talking in very Christian terms, so I emphasized (with honesty) that I live in a religious community, and I thought he could use more prayers. That wasn’t enough for Jude. And shortly after dropping him off, I got a very angry phone call from Pastor Paul, berating me for telling other people about “our business”, and then saying I could pick up the repayment from him later. I should tell the people I live with that he would make it all right—but he wouldn’t give me the money that day anymore.

And oddly enough...as positive as my gut feeling was, the whole way through...the single most positive feeling I had, was the feeling that I should just go to my new home, enjoy the company of my housemates, and not even worry about getting the repayment that night.

Looking back, I wonder what else Pastor would’ve done if I had shown up. Over these weeks, I learned he’s an excellent verbal manipulator, and until Jude showed fear over me telling someone else what was happening, I had no good reason to be suspicious of Pastor. Nervous about the situation overall, yes...but nothing to keep me from accepting a check from a pastor & going about my life. As awful as everything that happened was to me, I wonder just how much divine protection was at play...just how much worse things could’ve been if I hadn’t followed my gut so well. It’s like God taught me what it’s like to be in the midst of exploitation, while keeping me safe from giving money I actually needed, or perhaps giving more compromising information. It’s hard to be grateful for hypotheticals...but despite the grave risks I now realize I took along the way, I am safe, I contributed quite a bit to the police reports about these men, and I can now spot exploitation at a moment’s notice, and have much better barriers at protecting myself—not for hatred of anyone else, but out of a deeper realization that something within me is worth defending.