

Dear Class Member,

Our lesson this week focuses on how our faith helps us find our way through difficulties even when we can't at first see any path at all. It draws on the story of one of the most successful homeless employment programs in the country.

During this time of physical separation forced on us all by efforts to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.



A Creative Solution Gives Warmth, Jobs to Homeless

The Wired Word for the Week of March 29, 2020

In the News

Around Detroit, Veronika Scott is known as "the coat lady." That's because she's the founder of Empowerment Plan, which provides jobs for homeless people who make a special kind of coat for people living on the streets.

As *The Guardian* reports, "In 2010, as an undergrad at Detroit's College for Creative Studies, Scott received a class assignment that went on to change her life -- and the lives of countless others in the Motor City. The project called on students to design a product that filled a tangible need in the community. The then-21-year-old junior immediately gravitated toward helping the homeless."

Her idea was to design special coats and teach the homeless how to make them. And as CNN reports, "These are not your typical coats. They transform into storage totes and full-length sleeping bags to protect against frostbite or death."

The Guardian explains, "Designed to withstand brutally cold temperatures, the insulated hybrid jacket is not only durable and water-resistant, it transforms into a sleeping bag, too. When not in use, the garment rolls up neatly into an over-the-shoulder bag for easy transport." In other words, they are coats that multitask.

But Scott was not some rich-kid do-gooder. She says poverty and homelessness are issues that are "deeply personal" because she grew up in poverty and her parents struggled with unemployment issues and drug addiction.

To discover the need for the versatile coat she invented, Scott went to the streets and learned from homeless people about their true conditions and what they needed to overcome them. Yes, they needed warm coats, totes and sleeping bags, but they also needed jobs and the dignity that comes from honest work for fair pay.

This story may resonate with Christians not just because it's about helping the people Jesus asked us to help but also because it teaches us not to assume we know exactly what poor and homeless people need. Rather, it teaches us to go to them, learn from them and only then begin to think about how we can respond in helpful ways that don't further degrade people. The primary guide here is this core idea that Christianity teaches: Each human being is of inestimable value because each is a creation of -- and thus a child of -- God.

Robert D. Lupton writes in his book *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*, "While we (Americans) are very generous in charitable giving, much of that money is either wasted or actually harms the people it is targeted to help." It appears that Veronika Scott has figured out a way to avoid toxic charity by first learning from people in need.

More on this story can be found at these links:

This Coat Design Isn't Just Saving Lives. It's Launching New Careers for Homeless People. *CNN* (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/21/us/detroit-empowerment-plan-homeless-program/index.html>) Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness Through Employment. *Empowerment Plan* (<https://www.empowermentplan.org/>) Meet the Founder Who's Creating Warm Coats -- and Big Opportunities -- for Detroit's Homeless. *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/personal-investments/ng-interactive/2019/apr/02/empowerment-plan-detroit-coats-jobs-for-homeless>)

Applying the News Story

If the Veronika Scott coat-making story from Detroit stirs you to ask questions about the extent of homelessness where you live and across the nation, one place to start gathering information is the National Health Care for the Homeless Council (<https://nhchc.org/understanding-homelessness/faq/>).

The Big Questions

1. What can you learn from the Veronika Scott story about problem solving and from Christianity's teachings about the preciousness of every human being?
2. While engaging in social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic, how can we be the hands and feet of Jesus to do good for others? Would you, for instance, think about ordering some of the special coats made in Detroit to distribute to people in need where you live? Would you do that before finding out what homeless people near you say is their highest need now?
3. If, as sometimes is said, the Holy Spirit is the God of possibilities, how do we connect with what the Spirit is telling us as we work to solve seemingly intractable problems?
4. When do the problems others face, such as homelessness and unemployment, become our personal problems requiring an individual response? When do we simply rely on government, structured charities or the institutional church to solve those issues?
5. Did you ever have a major problem that others helped you solve when you couldn't see the way forward? How did they do that?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 10:33-34

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. (For context, read 10:29-37.)

In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, we find an example of three people who confront a disaster. But only one of the three is willing to find an answer to the problems faced by the man whom robbers had beaten up. The Samaritan ministers to the man's physical needs and then gets him to a place where he can recuperate.

Questions: How did the Good Samaritan overcome fear of getting involved so he was willing to act? Does fear ever prevent you from doing what you know you should do? Explain.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (For context, read 6:1-8.)

This oft-quoted passage from one of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible provides essential rules for living a life of faith. The simple requirements listed here are in contrast to the questions Micah asks just beforehand. Those questions raise the possibility that what God really wants are sacrifices of rams and oil and even firstborn children. But Micah rejects all those.

Questions: Was Micah right to reject the list of possible sacrifices? Which of the three real requirements that Micah ends up listing does Veronika Scott seem to be following in her coat business? Which one of the three do you find most difficult to follow?

Isaiah 42:16

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them. (No context needed.)

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, prophets attempt to provide a picture of God, which is to say a list of God's attributes. In this passage from Isaiah, we find a God who recognizes that people will at times be lost, confused, in trouble. Then it says that God will be the one to lead such people and not forsake them.

Questions: Does God's promise in this passage to take charge relieve humanity of any responsibility for leading "the blind"? If not, how do we meet our responsibility for coming up with creative solutions in harmony with what God wants for humanity? What kind of checklist do you think Veronika Scott used to make sure her solutions to homelessness and unemployment were ones of which God would approve?

Galatians 6:9-10

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (For context, read 6:1-10.)

The apostle Paul exhorts the Galatian Jesus-followers to be faithful and persistent as they live in community. In some ways his admonitions here are in harmony with what South Africans call "ubuntu theology," which argues that the whole community is sick if even one of its members is not well (an important idea in this time of pandemic). One of the phrases used to express that idea is this: "I am because we are." The idea that each of us bears a responsibility not just for ourselves but for the whole community is found time and again in both testaments of the Bible.

Questions: How does the coat-making business in Detroit incarnate the biblical idea of responsibility - both the individual's to the community and the community's to the individual? What can we, individually or as a faith community, do to help communal responsibility and personal responsibility exist in creative but healthy tension?

For Further Discussion

1. Have you seen examples of what author Robert D. Lupton calls "toxic charity"? If you were somehow involved in it, were you able to make changes that would fix that approach to be something more generative?
2. Sometimes good ideas seem just to strike us out of the blue. But many sociologists, theologians and others say that, as a rule, there's more wisdom in a group than in any single individual, and an African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." In fact, this idea also can be found in Proverbs 11:14: "Where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety."

Can you think of and share an example of a brilliant idea that came from just one source, as well as an example of when a group helped discover and refine an approach to a problem?

3. In this time of social distancing and stay-at-home orders because of the coronavirus pandemic, how are you finding ways to be community with people you'd normally be close to physically but can't be now? Which of those new techniques do you think will last for you once this crisis has run its course?

Responding to the News

This might be an excellent time to think about the most vulnerable among the population where you live and to put your heads together with others via electronic communication to gather possible solutions to allow them a better chance of surviving this pandemic.

Prayer

Eternal God in Christ, we come before you in this frightening time to ask for wisdom to help us imagine ways to react and help -- ways we ourselves can't see at the moment. Teach us to be open to the movement of your Holy Spirit so we can be channels of your grace and deep wells from which others may draw comfort. We pray this in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

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