

The Homeless Man Who Came to Dinner

by Cammie Corlas Quinn

One day while volunteering at a food pantry, I met a homeless man who has been criss-crossing the United States on foot for twenty-five years. When I met him, his big dog accompanied him everywhere even though the dog hindered Dale from being invited into homeless shelters.

In most ways, Dale is like other homeless folks I've met. He climbs in and out of dumpsters seeking food, and he holds up an "I'm hungry" sign on an exit ramp. He camps in the woods on the outskirts of town in summer sun and winter snow. He wears the same stained gray sweatshirt and baggy camouflage pants every day of the week. He bathes in creeks with a bar of soap. He's in frequent need of a dentist, and his beard droops from his chin like an icicle, tangled from decades of wind and weather.



In other ways, Dale is unique. Despite his poverty, he is one of the happiest men I have ever met. His love tumbles out upon his dog like a child's glee. No wonder—he is unencumbered by possessions, technology, and schedules. Whenever Dale sees me, he steps towards me like a mutual friend and calls me by my name. He accepts me on the spot even though middle-class people like me shun him every day. Once, when he thought he was leaving town, he asked permission for a hug. There is no guard up in Dale's eyes. His walls are down.

One winter night our pantry directors picked Dale up at his campsite, secured his dog in the pantry garage, and drove Dale to Christmas dinner. The home of volunteers Barb and Larry was brand new, the dinner table resplendent with fine Christmas china, the meal sumptuous with steaming ham and potatoes, salads, and pies with whipped cream. For a man whose canned goods had frozen in his tent, the dinner must have seemed like a royal banquet.

Dale ate with polite decorum, the only signs of his homelessness being his soiled clothing and his untrimmed beard. After dinner, he joined in the conversation around the living room fireplace, telling us about his family and his travels. Later, we learned that this was the first time Dale had eaten inside a house in the past ten months.

Over the years, I have tried to pinpoint what made Dale so special. He was friendly, happy, and helpful, but there was something bigger about him, something extraordinary. Somehow along his travels, Dale had managed to overcome the barrier of "self" to reach out to others unlike himself. He treated me the same way he would treat a homeless friend, the same way he treated his dog. He showed no favoritism.

This spoke to me in a way I never expected. When I think of withholding favoritism, I typically think of the people I consider "beneath" me, but what about the people "above" me?

Whenever I'm around people more fashionable or professional than myself, I inevitably erect a barrier of self-protection. I keep my distance, softly shunning them. It would never occur to me to ask them for a hug when maybe...just maybe they need a hug.

I once asked Dale about his faith. His answer was as simple as his life: "I believe I must love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, and mind, and love my neighbor as myself."

Today, whenever I am tempted to erect a wall due to fear or inferiority, I think of Dale and his easy manner of reaching out to me, taking a risk to accept me as I am. Though I don't know much about the condition of his soul, his walk spoke volumes to me and helped me to realize that disciples of Christ come in all sizes and packages. Indeed, Jesus, too, was once a homeless man who came to dinner.

Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality." (Acts 10:34 NKJV)