

The Spirituality Resource Center's Compassion Project seeks to engage the public in exploring how we can employ Compassion in our daily private lives and stimulate harmony in our public lives. One respondent referred us to Jason Probst's Hutchinson News editorial in *The Faces of Food Stamps* page 12. If you wish to comment or submit your thoughts, go to www.spiritualityresourcecenter.com.

For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Matthew 25: 35-40

The Faces of Food stamps are many.

Sometimes those faces are of a working family struggling to stay afloat in an increasingly difficult economy. Sometimes, those faces are of the disabled, who because of misfortune or misjudgment are not able to provide for themselves. Sometimes it's the face of a child, and sometimes it's the face of a widowed grandmother.

And, yes, sometimes, the faces of food stamps are those of the afflicted and addicted, who have learned through the years to treat a compassionate social safety net as a game and a way of life.

But every one is the face of a person, the least of these of which Jesus spoke.

The fortunate among us - whose lives have fallen neatly in place, who have held on to our health and our hopes for the future - cannot control the actions, desires or outcomes of another, even if we think it just. We can't make another's choices, nor can we hold as ransom another's life if they don't conform to our ideals.

We can choose, however, to view those faces of food stamps with compassion or contempt.

With compassion, we offer help without judgment and assistance without the expectation of favor. We offer a path to a better life, with the hope that another will accept it freely.

With judgment, we offer neglect, shame and condemnation. We refuse to lay out a road to hope and prosperity, but instead outline what we will require to in order to win our love and approval.

Will a compassionate heart toward the hungry, the thirsty and the sick lead some to exploit our kindness? Almost certainly, but it is better than the caustic effect of a view tainted with hatred, ownership and disdain of our country's weakest people.

Last weekend, The News explored the issue of food stamps, as well as the people who rely on the food program to meet their

basic needs. The stories shined a light on both the merits and faults of the program, and on the people for whom food stamps is a daily fact of life.

Some argue the food stamp program is broken, that too many people game the system and in the process lose their motivation to work. Others argue the program is perfectly effective and should continue in its current form. Neither view is completely right, and the solution - if there's one at all - won't be simple or easy.

But maybe the discussion can begin with recognition that the debate over food stamps isn't a debate about policy, nor should it be a debate about whether the weak should comply with demands of the strong.

The issue of food stamps is a debate about faces and the people behind them.

It's about people who suffer misfortune, who lack the capacity to work, who aren't as strong, fit, intelligent, educated, charismatic or as mindful as most of us.

It's about people who have grown up poor and know no other way to survive. It's about people who have experienced trauma or who have made bad decisions for which they've spent their whole lives paying.

It's about people born with severe illnesses or people in debilitating car accidents. It's about people born to broken and tormented families or in a part of the country that suffers from chronic poverty.

And it's about people who see welfare as a better hope than work.

If we remove judgment, however, and view the issue of food stamps through the lens of people, maybe we begin to examine the underlying problem we originally set out to solve, which is how 47 million people in the richest country on earth can be so grossly excluded from the nation's prosperity that they must rely on the public's mercy for food.

So long as the debate is founded in judgment of another's decisions or lifestyle, the food stamp program never will fully serve as a tool to help the poor attain self-sufficiency. Instead of finding ways to help more people find a way to a better life, we'll continue to piously shake our heads in shame and disapproval at the faces of those whose lives don't mirror our own.

A conversation that begins with compassion, however, compels us to ask how we can best help and serve the less fortunate. A compassionate view moves us away from inflammatory language that reduces our brethren to something less than human and instead starts with the biblical idea that we should freely offer an open hand to the poor in our land.

The Faces of Food Stamps are many, yet it's worth pausing long enough to consider that one of those faces could be ours, our children, our friends or our families. Then we can rejoice for what we have and let compassion guide our decisions about how best to help the least of these.

Jason Probst