

**Mark Longhurst:**

Hi everyone. I'm Mark Longhurst, CAC's Publications Manager, and I have the great joy of working with the team that creates Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations. Our theme this year is Being Salt and Light, and we asked a friend named Carlos Rodríguez what that theme means to him.

Carlos is the founder and director of The Happy Givers, which is a non-profit in Puerto Rico that builds community, provides food for people, helps rebuild after devastation, and more. Carlos is also a speaker at the CAC's 2026 Revision Conference, and he really lives out Jesus's call to be a presence of compassionate action in the world.

In this moving story, Carlos shares about a special friendship he had with a man named Don Hector and how that relationship taught him to be salt and light.

**Carlos Rodríguez:**

About six months ago, I spent some time in the hospital with an older gentleman called Don Hector. And I know I'm not meant to have favorites because we serve the elderly here in Puerto Rico, we deliver more than 300 lunches three times a week. And we're literally feeding some of the most vulnerable people, some of the most marginalized people in our community here in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico.

And I'm not meant to have favorites, but I kind of did have a favorite, and his name was Don Hector. And Don Hector was a lovely gentleman. And there's a peculiar smell that Don Hector had, which again, I guess this is my second, I'm not meant to, but I do. I'm not meant to enjoy the smell, but I do. When I was young, when I was a kid here growing up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, my dad was a big-time smoker.

And so I remember that smell of the '80s and '90s, just a dude smoking. And then after he has a smoke, putting a lot of cologne on, which I do the same, imitating my father. And that smell of somebody who's had a smoke and then puts supermarket cologne on, to me is glorious. I'm a big, big-time smell person.

And so Don Hector had that smell and there's something about that smell reminded me of my father. And there's no doubt that there was a lot of brokenness, a lot of pain in my childhood, but there was also a lot of welcoming and a lot of belonging in the place of all that brokenness.

And so Don Hector had the smell and he had jackfruit. Jackfruit is panapen. Panapen is one of these glorious fruits that here in the Caribbean, we can do anything with it. We can boil it. We make this lasagna where instead of using pasta, we use panapen as the layers. It's delicious.

And so every time we would go to feed Don Hector, he would both give me a little bit of the smell and he would give us panapen. So two wins for Don Hector. That's why he was one of my favorites.

But the thing was, Don Hector, because of the smoking, was struggling with lung cancer. And his lovely wife, Carmen, had severe depression. They were living by themselves here just eight minutes from where I'm sitting right now. We would deliver lunches, spend some time with them, really enjoy their company. But between her depression and his cancer, we just knew we need to do more.

Just coming for a visit is good, but staying to do family is much better. And so part of our heart and desire as a nonprofit, and it's actually our tagline, we say, "Dignities are non-negotiable." Dignity towards every person, dignity in every meal that we serve, dignity in every interaction, dignity in the smells and the sharing.

So Don Hector with his cancer, his wife with this depression, and my heart breaking for them all the time, we try to go above and beyond. And above and beyond got to the point where Don Hector was at the hospital. He had pneumonia and it was terrible, and he wasn't feeling good.

And while at the hospital, I began to not treat him like a favorite. I began to, a combination of the fear that he was passing away, a combination of I'm so busy with so many important things like recording a podcast, and I got this email to write and I got this thing to do. And a combination of my fear and my pride led me to not going to visit Don Hector for a week as he was probably at the end of his life. And I didn't know that was it, but that's what it was happening.

And so I had a real moment of confrontation because I had to challenge myself again. And I'm guessing you don't know my full story, but I was a pastor for 18 years. And as a pastor for 18 years, I find myself really capable of holding microphones and saying all those beautiful things that Jesus taught us, all that beautiful ethic that you don't even need to be a Christian to validate and to see it as beautiful.

Do unto others what you would want them to do to you. I would want people to visit me if I was dying in the hospital. Serve the least of these. If I was the person in a marginalized community within my community, I would want people to stand up for my rights, to stand up for my needs.

Jesus said, "It is better to give than to receive." And yet the hypocrisy of me as a pastor for 18 years was even though I was using that Jesus ethic, I was really about the taking. I was really about the selling of the book so I can get more money. I was about getting the applause on Sunday so my ego could be fed.

And so one of the reasons why I started The Happy Givers as a nonprofit organization that serves the least of these wherever we are, specifically now here in Puerto Rico, where I was

born and raised, is to actually give myself, my family, my children, our community, an opportunity to actually not just say it, but to live it.

And Don Hector was an invitation that I was ignoring. And so after a week of this internal struggle of not being salt, of not being light, I challenged myself with some stern internal pastoring, some loving correction. I felt the invitation of the spirit, not as accusation, not as condemnation, but as a frustration that became an invitation. And so I went to see Don Hector at the hospital, went with Jessica, who's our social worker here at the nonprofit, and we went to see him. He was so happy to see us. And he immediately began to share the reality of being an elderly person in a hospital in Puerto Rico where we're lacking doctors and nurses. And the main thing, because remember, he always smelled good because he was very particular about being clean, about being clean-shaven about, even though he had a smoke, putting the cologne on.

And the main thing that he was frustrated with was the fact that he hadn't been given a shower. He hadn't have access to a shower for that whole week. He was wearing the same clothes that he came into the hospital. He's connected to different things. And so we heard his frustration. And I had this moment, again, this now his frustration became my invitation. Where I was like, "Okay, well, it's time to give him a shower."

And so I'm going to be really honest with you guys. I was not honest with Don Hector that day. I lied to him and I said, "Don Hector, don't worry about it. I'm a pro at this. I give old dude showers all the time. I do it. That's part of what we do at the nonprofit. And so if you want to do it, Jessica's going to leave. She's going to take your clothes, she's going to get them washed, and I'm going to help you have a shower and you're going to feel so good."

And I feel like I had, we as an organization and us as individuals, we had earned the right for, even though he was ashamed, and even though there was an element of like, "Wait, you're going to shower me?" He was so desperate. And we were saying yes to this moment where he felt like he had no dignity.

And so took his clothes off, asked the nurse to show me what to do, and I led him to a shower that was available. And quite possibly the most beautiful, the most awkward, and the holiest moment of my last year, I gave Don Hector a shower. And I helped him and here's the soap, and I'll get these parts that you can't get to. And from the shame it moved to this connection that was so meaningful to me. That in his most vulnerable moment, I was able to honor him and that it really, really is better to give than to receive.

And so finished the shower, they gave him a gown, went back to his bed, and we had the most beautiful, thoughtful conversation. He opened up his heart to me, talked to me about the fear of dying because he was afraid for his wife. And he didn't want to put it on me or the organization to take care of those final days.

But there is nothing like being salt and light. And as Father Richard has said many times, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the good." And giving Don Hector a shower and spending time with him was the good.

And so it's my honor and my privilege to serve this community because in a way, when you're helping the elderly... We started the nonprofit because we wanted to help children. We have an adopted daughter from Ethiopia. We wanted to fund children's homes.

And yet when we came to our community, sometimes nonprofit leaders, we end up helping people like we want to help them instead of how they need to be helped. And so because we wanted to follow Jesus to the margins, the margins, the vulnerable, the marginalized here in this community is the elderly.

And so we keep finding God in those showers, in those trades of jackfruit and mangoes and avocados. We keep finding God in these smells that remind us of our childhood and our brokenness, but that invite us into maybe generational transformation. And there is so many good ethics and teachings and books, and there's so many good people speaking into microphones, but there's nothing like just being present with the ones who need presence.

And so for Don Hector, who passed away a couple of weeks after that shower, and for every elderly person that we serve, and for every person in your community who is marginalized, who has been abandoned, who has been rejected, the invitation is to be salt and light. Salt, which both gives flavor and preserves. And light, which always shines brightest in the darkness.

I love you. I hope to see you here in Puerto Rico. Be salt. Be light.