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Discovering Jesus on the Lower East Side

Confessions of a ~~Youth Pastor~~ Hypocrite on Loving the Least of These

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The knots in my stomach tightened. As the distance between us grew, I could feel the color leave my face. *You hypocrite*, I thought. *So busy with ministry that you pretend not to notice?*

Truthfully I *had* noticed. In fact I saw her so vividly that I crossed the street so she wouldn't see me ignoring her. Not that it would've really made a difference. She didn't know me from the thousands of others who ignore her every day, and we'd never even seen each other previous to that moment, as far as I knew.

But that wasn't the point.

The point was that I felt guilty—and I didn't want her judging me like I was judging her. It was shameful, especially since we'd been praying for her for weeks. Not her specifically, but for teens like her—with matted, green hair, body piercings, and unshaven armpits.

It was July 1996, and I was one of 13 inner-city young people (ages 14-22) who had joined forces to open a youth center called Generation Xcel in one of the country's oldest housing projects in Manhattan's Lower East Side. At 21 I was the unqualified youth pastor and the oldest cofounder involved in our day-to-day activities. Like the rest of the neighborhood, we were mostly Latino, with two white girls and a black guy thrown in for good measure.

But that summer a change had come to the neighborhood. Suddenly there were lots of white kids hanging around, and not just the Range Rover

teens and college students who liked to party at night and leave before the sun rose. Homeless and dirty, this wave of newcomers did strange things to their hair and wore funny clothes. They slept in parks and banded together for protection.

Spiritualizing the Solution

A couple of our youth leaders asked why none of the green-haired kids came to our youth center. Good question. I suggested that we should pray for them and maybe then they'd come. So as a group, that's what we did.

Now I found myself walking away from one of the people our youth ministry was praying for. Even worse, I was walking away from the chance be *an answer* to those very prayers.

There she was, one of *those* girls, panhandling on a stoop across the street from the entrance to the park. And I was too busy for her. Worse, I was a phony, pretending not to notice.

Self-Righteousness

I tried to justify my actions internally: *I've got things to do, places to go. The youth center. The interns. The kids we're already serving.*

It didn't work, so I tried excuses: *Too late now. I already passed her. It wouldn't make sense to waste more time and go backward.*

Not good enough. As an aspiring attorney, I even appealed to precedent: *I've ignored homeless people before without feeling like this. Surely she'll survive just as the others did.*

The jury was close to reaching a verdict. And then the kicker came: *You Levite. You Pharisee. Where's the Samaritan in you?*

Repentance

Conviction fell, so reluctantly I went back, wondering as I walked: *What am I going to say? "I'm sorry for ignoring you?" How weird is that?*

Weird, maybe, but appropriate. A couple of false starts later, I finally walked over. "God, help me," I muttered under my breath.

I squatted beside her, introduced myself, and awkwardly apologized for being a hypocritical youth pastor. She looked hungry, so I invited her to breakfast. She told me she hadn't eaten in several days because her last meal—scraps from someone else's garbage—had made her sick. She was just starting to feel better.

We went to a diner a few doors down from where she'd been sitting. She ordered French toast, as I recall, and saved half the portion for "her" stray dog that hadn't eaten either. I prayed over the meal and for her. She ate. We talked.

She had run away from family problems at home and hitchhiked to the city. She said she was waiting for some friends to take her to California. She

claimed to have just made an appearance on an episode of *The Montel Williams Show* about teenage runaways.

How much of her story was true, I don't know. But for an hour that morning, I did everything I could to make her feel important. Like she mattered. Nothing special, really; I just tried to treat her with the dignity that God our Father gave her. Like I'd want someone else to treat my sister.

I told her about the youth center a few blocks away that we'd started "by youth for youth," and about our church, Abounding Grace. If she or her friends ever needed anything, I promised they could visit any time. She was grateful but said she didn't think she'd stick around the city long enough to take me up on the offer.

Before we said goodbye, I prayed for her again. That was the only time we ever met, but periodically God reminds me to pray for her some more.

Salvation

I often wondered why God sent me back, why God valued the delay on my walk to work. What really happened that day? Did anything change for her?

Maybe. Maybe not.

But something changed for me. That day God saved me from myself, and in the process reacquainted me with God's kingdom. Hopefully, she experienced it, too.

Salvation visited me in the person of a homeless runaway who forced me to confront my tendency, even as a youth pastor, to live for myself instead of those around me. My tendency to gravitate to people, places, and partners that could add value to my ministry. To pursue relationships for what I could get rather than what I could give. The most marginalized and vulnerable among us, like smelly teenagers who act out or hide out or check out, are easiest to overlook. But they are also the very ones God most desires us to love.

"You Must Be Born Again?"

I realized later that it wasn't the first time salvation had visited me like that. I'm a PK, a preacher's kid, and grew up in a Bible-believing home and church. After two years of dodging the inevitable, my pastor parents finally drafted me at the age of 18 to start the youth ministry at our storefront church plant. Besides an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy, my biggest struggle was overcoming the criticism from neighborhood street kids that I couldn't relate to their experiences because I'd been "born with a Bible in my hands."

To a degree they were right. Unlike most of them, I had two happily married parents. We were financially stable despite my entrepreneurial father's occasional business busts. Though our church plant was surrounded by poverty, our family commuted to church from a middle-class neighborhood. My private school education created options for college that

chronically underperforming public schools couldn't provide. Indeed I was living the college dream while the teens in my youth group were avoiding high school drug dealers and middle-school mayhem.

But all was not well with my soul. A crisis of faith had gripped me. Despite being a tried-and-true evangelical from a Pentecostal tradition, I couldn't tell you when I "got saved." If "born again" happened in an instant, during a moment of decision—as I'd heard and preached myself for years—then was I really born again if I couldn't tell you exactly when that moment occurred?

The truth is I couldn't remember ever not loving Jesus. But neither could I describe for anyone a specific moment when I decided to follow him. There were possibilities, to be sure: The dozens of youth group, concert, conference, retreat, chapel, revival, and Sunday school invitations to which I had responded over the years; the hundreds of times I prayed with my parents before bed; even the occasional campfire worship-fest. I finally narrowed down the options to three: A summer camp altar call, a Sunday School prayer, and a devotional with mom and dad before watching Dan Marino lose the Super Bowl. But which one was "the" one remained a mystery. My theology couldn't account for such ambiguity. How could I know for sure I was even saved?

The Irony

Even as I agonized about *when* I got saved, I espoused a life verse that should have offered me hope.

The gospel Jesus preached was, "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). In one of his descriptions about who would inherit that kingdom, Jesus told a story about sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). The sheep, his followers, are those who see him hungry and give him something to eat; thirsty, and give him drink; naked, and clothe him; sick, and comfort him; imprisoned, and visit him; as a stranger, and invite him in (v. 35-36).

When do they see Jesus sick, hungry, or imprisoned? When they have eyes to see the marginalized and needy, and the heart to love them well. Jesus concludes, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least brothers of mine, you have done it unto me" (v. 40). Their promise: "Come, inherit the kingdom" (v. 34).

By contrast, the goats in Jesus' story stubbornly ignore the vulnerable while they busy themselves with being religious. Their consequence: eternal banishment from Christ's kingdom (v. 45-46).

The Awakening

Throughout my 20s, a misguided Messianic complex anticipated my 30th birthday, because age 30 is when Jesus began what we regard as his earthly ministry. But shortly after turning 30, it seemed that everything I'd built was rocked to its core.

Instead of a portal to ministry success, age 30 brought testing like I'd never known before, and my personal salvation dilemma reached a crescendo. Was God trying to get my attention? Was he sending a message that I was too blind to see? Too tone-deaf to hear? Whatever God's agenda, I'd been slow to track it. Finally, the awakening: When had I felt closest to God? When did I sell out for him? When did I first love him well, with everything I had to give?

I was a boy, only nine or ten. My parents had just started Abounding Grace as an outreach ministry. Motivated by a literal interpretation of Romans 5:20—"Where sin abounds, grace abounds more"—they asked the police where the worst drug spots were in New York, figuring that if they found an abundance of drugs, they would find great sin, and by extension, experience abounding grace. My first ministry experience confirmed their theory. A drug deal went bad about 30 yards from where we were situated, and a man got stabbed. I was hooked. I was also only eight years old.

For the next two-plus years, my dad worked full-time to support three missionaries who would take an old truck, outfitted with a sound system and covered stage, throughout New York's "worst" neighborhoods for evangelism. In the summers, rather than swim in our luxury pool or play in the watershed land just beyond our yard, I chose to accompany the truck so I could play in Johnny pump sprinklers and vacant lots in between burned-out tenements.

Summers with Jesus

Those summers I fell in love with the children of the Lower East Side (LES), the neighborhood to which the NYPD had directed my grace-seeking parents. The LES was also vastly different than my own. As a college student, and later a twentysomething youth pastor, I could never really explain why I felt more at home in the LES than in any other community where I'd lived; why I spent more time in the LES than in any place I ever slept; why I felt a closeness to kids with whom I had so little in common.

My affection for the LES and the youth who live there—those whom society describes as the most "at-risk," the poorest of the poor, the least likely to succeed—originated because I'd come to know Jesus by loving them. They had given Jesus a face, a voice, flesh, and blood. They made Jesus real for me. And Jesus made the invitation to love him with my whole heart, mind, soul, and strength—and my neighbor as myself—tangible through them. Learning how to love them sincerely, without expecting anything in return, taught me how to love Jesus.

I went with the truck to evangelize, and instead, Jesus found me. He saved me through them. A decade or so later, when I had grown complacent in my faith and comfortable in my ministry, Jesus reminded me what salvation looks like through a teenage runaway. And a decade after that, when I'd regressed back to pride, Jesus reminded me what really matters.

Why Love the Least of These?

Why does Jesus require us to love the “least of these”? Is it because he needs us to save them? Or is it because we need them to save us?

During my thirtysomething crisis, I rediscovered that when all else fails, Jesus can be found within arms reach. Not only does he live among inner-city kids, but also he similarly identifies with the ADHD student that interrupts a youth pastor’s sermon. He sleeps beside the homeless teenager and burned-out stoner. The latchkey kid is Christ’s constant companion. He’s sitting next to the loner who attends youth group because mom makes her, but she hasn’t said more than two words to the youth worker, ever. Jesus weeps for the thug teen’s heartache. His broken body, which hung naked and exposed, can be seen among the disabled. His visage reflects in the Goth kid’s mirror. He accompanies the bicurious and the “out loud and proud.”

The good kids, the pretty ones, the smart and talented ones, the cool ones—we’re told that they bring the most bang for our youth ministry buck. They’re the influencers, the ones with the greatest perceived potential. So why not invest a disproportionate amount of our time and energy in them?

For the same reason that Jesus hung out with prostitutes and sinners, the racially despised and socially outcast, the broken in body and spirit: Christ’s kingdom belongs to such as these. If young people have been labeled, rejected, disrespected, or otherwise demeaned by those around them, God chooses to reveal himself through them.

The Kingdom’s Agenda

As we learn from them how to love God and others well, God’s kingdom advances.

There’s no formula for how to love well, no three steps to make it easy. Being kind demands sacrifice. Being available demands inconvenience. Extending grace, mercy, and forgiveness is painful sometimes. Pursuing justice for others may require paying for it ourselves. Being among them necessitates forsaking what’s comfortable.

Salvation brings with it a cross.

Taking up that cross requires, first, the humility to repent. Repent for ignoring those God most loves, for over-spiritualizing service, and for self-righteously justifying sin. Sometimes repenting to God requires apologizing to smelly teens you passed off to others. Next, cultivate a willingness to act. Faith without works is dead; so, too, is love. If you’re unsure what active love looks like, review 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 12, and Philipians 2. Then create space to love courageously.

If you've been too busy being religious to notice the Kingdom at work among us, ask Jesus to impart eyes that see and ears that hear. I was, and Jesus did—and he resurrected me in the process.
