

The Resurrected Church from *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Clairborne

Message for Sunday, March 12, 2017
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Children's Message:

I'm wearing a disguise to hide my identity. Which is pretty silly, since everyone knows it's me. So have fun with it!

Good morning! I bet you can't tell who I am, can you! *Listen for their responses.* Wha—! How did you know that?... But I had this disguise on; it's impossible that you could know it was me. ...

Well, that was pretty silly, wasn't it? Of course you knew it was me. But what if it was Jesus hiding behind the mask? ...

Jesus told a story about how some people help others who are in trouble—they're sick or hungry or need clothing or a place to live—and Jesus thanks these people for caring for those who are in trouble. And the people say, "Huh? When did we do that? We never saw you."

Jesus explained: "That was me in disguise. Whenever you help someone, you're actually doing it to me."

Stop and think about that for a bit: *whenever you help someone, you're actually doing it to Jesus!* Wow!

Message: "The Resurrected Church" from *The Irresistible Revolution* by Shane Clairborne"

You know how I like to tell stories in my messages. Stories take ideas and bring them to life, so we can see and feel what it's like. Today I'm going to do something I've never done before: my entire message is going to be a story. Jane and I have been reading this book by Shane Clairborne, *Irresistible Revolution*. When we finished reading one section, I said to Jane, "Wow! I've got to share this with the congregation, when I finish this series on the mission of the church!" So here you go.

Just one thought: the idea here is not that we go out and copy what another church did. The idea here is to see an example of what happens when people get excited about living as followers of Jesus, and doing his work.

Imagine now that Shane is here talking to you.

We were sitting in the college cafeteria eating dinner, complaining as usual about the food and going back for more (the woes of college students). Suddenly, a friend walked up to our table and threw down a newspaper, muttering, "You guys are not going to believe this." The top story was about a group of forty homeless families who were being evicted from an abandoned cathedral in North Philadelphia.

The families were with an organization called the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, made up mostly of homeless mothers and children who took care of one another. They had been living in a tent city a few blocks away from the cathedral, but conditions were worsening, with rats and flooding. As they looked around North Philadelphia, they saw the wreckage of an industrial neighbourhood: thousands of abandoned houses, vacant factories, and empty lots. St. Edward's cathedral had been closed down along with half a dozen other cathedrals in Philadelphia's poorest neighbourhoods (and not without massive resistance from Catholics), and it had been left vacant for several years. Though the number of abandoned houses surpassed the number of homeless people, many of the people were stuck on an endless waiting list for subsidized housing. So, living in worsening conditions and with the government threatening to take custody of their kids, the families moved into St. Edward's as an act of survival and a refusal to remain invisible. Soon after, the Catholic archdiocese which owned the building announced that they had forty-eight hours to get out or face arrest. We could hardly believe our eyes.

We scarfed down the rest of our dinner with our heads spinning, wondering what we should do.

This complicated the old "love your neighbour as yourself" thing, which had become so manageable.

Now homelessness was not just adults on the downtown streets but women and children. It wasn't long before we were packed in a car heading into "the Badlands" in search of St. Edward's in a neighbourhood we had always been told to stay clear of. Little did we know that God's got a thing for showing up in badlands like Kensington and Nazareth.

JESUS WAS HOMELESS

After weaving through the streets of row houses in North Philadelphia, we came upon the monstrous cathedral. The building took up an entire block, with its school, convent, rectory, and sanctuary. The families had chosen to seek refuge in the historic sanctuary and had hung a banner out front that read, “How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?” It took us a minute to realize they were talking about our Saviour as a homeless man. Timidly, we walked up to the large red doors and gave them a knock. We could hear the thumping echo through the marble cavern. Several folks clumsily opened the doors, and they embraced us without hesitation. Then they invited us in. And we would never be the same again.

They gave us a grand tour of the shantytown they had constructed inside, and introduced us to a few of the children, who promptly stole our caps and jumped on our backs. They poured out their hearts to us, their struggles and their dreams. They reminded us that we all need each other and assured us that if we all shared with one another, there would be enough for everyone. When we asked what we could do, they didn’t seem as interested in our stuff as they were in us. They wanted us to join them in the cathedral and to bring our friends, and they alerted us to the urgency of the looming eviction.

With the laughter of the children ringing in our ears, and the weight of the families’ struggle heavy on our hearts, we went back to our college, disturbed, aching, and aware of the ticking of the clock. There was no time to waste, so we wrestled, prayed, and started conspiring. We knew that people at our little Christian college were familiar with the verse where Christ says, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). So, early in the morning, we ran through campus hanging up flyers that read, “Jesus is getting kicked out of church in North Philly. Come hear about it. Kea Lounge, 10 p.m. tonight.” And that night we gathered. Expecting no more than a dozen of our crazier friends to show up, we were shocked when over a hundred people packed out the little dorm lounge. We talked through the night, and a few of us announced our intention to join the struggle of the families and begin repairing a Church that was in ruins.

GOD SAVE THE CHURCH

The next day, dozens of us poured into the cathedral, casting our lives next to the families’, saying, “If they come for you, they’ll have to take us too.” And as you can imagine, the fact that dozens of students were risking arrest alongside the families made for quite a media spectacle. Folks from the city wondered who our parents were and thought through how horrible it looked to be arresting folks for seeking refuge in a vacant cathedral. The media jumped on the story and made it look like the church was kicking homeless people out (which wasn’t a stretch, since the church was kicking homeless people out). The clock continued to tick away, and the momentum grew; city leaders, clergy, and advocates came out to support the families.

Near the end of the forty-eight hours, we rang the old bell in the tower of the cathedral to alert the people of the neighbourhood, many of whom were already bringing donations and gathering outside. Around the forty-seventh hour, anticipating the arrival of city officials, we prepared a “Last Supper,” with all the families and friends gathered around a table on the old marble altar to sing, to pray, and to break bread together, with lots of tears. The families asked for a show of hands of who would remain in the building, risking arrest, when the officials returned. As I raised my hand, a young girl named Destiny was sitting on my lap, and she asked why I was raising my hand. “Do you want to be able to stay here?” I asked. Destiny said, “Yes, this is my home.” And I told her, “That’s why I’m raising my hand.” She hugged me and slowly lifted her hand into the air.

I will never forget when the officials came to evict the families. The families had just announced to the media that they had already talked with the owner of the building (the Almighty), and they declared, “God says this is his house and we are welcome to stay.” Who’s gonna argue with that? The representatives from the archdiocese pulled up to the curb, took two steps out of the car, saw the crowd, and crawled back into the car without uttering a word. So needless to say, the forty-eight hours came and passed.

Days and then weeks passed as we continued making daily trips to St. Edward’s (since some of us

decided it was best not to drop out of school). We knew that if the number of students ever diminished, the police and archdiocese officials would come back to evict the families, so we developed a plan. For the first time ever, we got a cell phone. And we got an air horn. When the officials came to evict the families, we would get the call and run into the middle of campus sounding the air horn, and a flood of students would stream into the gym parking lot, pile into a cavalcade of cars, and head down to St. Ed's, singing Tracy Chapman's "Talkin' Bout a Revolution" at the top of our lungs. It was a revolution. We stood on our lunchroom tables and preached, the words of the prophets dripping from our tongues. We took over chapel services and invited students to join the movement. The president gave her bed to the families in St. Ed's.

We became known as the YACHT Club (Youth Against Complacency and Homelessness Today). It was not a boating club, though we did have some boaters mistakenly call on occasion, and we didn't hesitate to ask them for money. The Spirit was tearing through our college campus like a wildfire, igniting us with passion.

The drama never diminished, with the archdiocese and city officials always scheming for new ways to quietly evict the families. Once, the archdiocese had gotten the fire marshal involved, a very politically suave tactic, since the fire department could come in and simply say, "We are doing this in the best interests of the families, since this building violates fire and safety standards, putting them at risk and endangering their kids." So we were frantically preparing for the arrival of the fire marshal. The night before the inspection, we were making whatever last-minute preparations we could when we heard a knock on the door. It was about midnight, so two of us walked to the door together, only to find two firefighters standing out front. Startled, thinking that they had come to prepare for the eviction in the middle of the night, we instinctively began talking in circles defensively. They gently interrupted us and said, "Wait, wait, you don't understand. We are here against orders. In fact, we could get in very big trouble for being here. But we know what is happening, and we know that it's not right. So we thought we'd come by and help

you get ready for tomorrow because we know what they will be looking for." We humbly apologized.

After walking through the building pointing out things needing work, they drove us to the fire station and gave us boxes and boxes of smoke detectors. They helped us get exit signs and fire extinguishers, and then they left. The next day, the fire marshal showed up, walked through the place, and said, "I can't evict them. The building meets fire standards." We never saw the firefighter angels again. Maybe they were angels, though they didn't look like the pictures in Sunday school. It felt like nothing could stop us, as if God really was on our side. I wasn't really sure how God felt about taking sides in difficult situations like this, but we had a real sense that even if we were being pursued by every department in the city, somehow the sea would split open and swallow them up (in the most loving way) in order to protect the families. I became a believer in miracles.

BECOMING CHURCH

Every week, dozens of us piled into Sunday services at St. Ed's, where we sang old hymns and freedom songs. It was a revival of sorts. Gospel choirs came, and we danced in the aisles. Catholic clergy led liturgies in very controversial services (since many Catholics take a vow of obedience to the church hierarchy, and we were testing the limits of that vow). Kids and homeless mothers preached the gospel. We shared communion—old apple cider and stale bagels or whatever we could find—and many of us were experiencing true communion for the first time in our lives.

The body of Christ was alive, no longer trapped in stained-glass windows or books of systematic theology. The body of Christ was literal, living, hungry, thirsty, bleeding. Church was no longer something we did for an hour on Sunday, and church was not a building with a steeple. As Don Everts says in his book *Jesus with Dirty Feet*, "Referring to the church as a building is like referring to people as two-by-fours." She came to life. The church became something we are—an organism, not an organization. Church became so fresh and vibrant, it was like we had brought something dead back to life. And perhaps we had. In fact, one of the old news headlines read, "Church

Resurrected.” There’s some systematic theology for you.

And yet amid all the spiritual movement, we kept bumping into this other thing people still called church, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. It seemed so far from the Scriptures, so far from the poor, so far from Jesus. I felt like I was encountering angels, wrestling with demons, and touching Jesus’ wounds, but the church seemed so far away.

One day we received a box of donations from one of the wealthy congregations near our college that will remain nameless. Written in marker on the cardboard box were the words, “For the homeless.” Excited, I opened it up, only to find the entire box filled with microwave popcorn. My first instinct was to laugh. We barely had electricity, much less a microwave, and popcorn wasn’t on the top of the needs list. My second instinct was to cry because of how far the church had become removed from the poor. Later that same week, another group of folks brought donations by St. Ed’s—the mafia. With the media jumping on the story, the mafia came by and gave bikes to each of the kids, turkeys to each family, and thousands of dollars to the organization. I thought to myself, I guess God can use the mafia, but I would like God to use the church.

Shortly afterward, I sat puzzled, grieving over the state of our church. “I think I’ve lost hope in the church,” I confessed, broken-hearted, to a friend. I will never forget her response. “No, you haven’t lost hope in the church. You may have lost hope in Christianity or Christendom or all the institutions, but you have not lost hope in the church. This is the church.” At that moment, we decided to stop complaining about the church we saw, and we set our hearts on becoming the church we dreamed of.

We dreamed ancient visions of a church like the one in Acts, in which “there were no needy persons among them” because everyone shared their possessions, not claiming anything as their own but “sharing everything they had.” We knew we could end poverty. The early church did, and the homeless families were doing it. We thirsted for the kingdom of God, and we knew that it could come “on earth as it is in heaven,” as Jesus said. We were not interested in a Christianity that offered these

families only mansions and streets of gold in heaven when all they wanted was a bed for their kids now. And many Christians had an extra one.

I remember hearing about an old comic strip back in the days of St. Ed’s. Two guys are talking to each other, and one of them says he has a question for God. He wants to ask why God allows all of this poverty and war and suffering to exist in the world. And his friend says, “Well, why don’t you ask?” The fellow shakes his head and says he is scared. When his friend asks why, he mutters, “I’m scared God will ask me the same question.” Over and over, when I ask God why all of these injustices are allowed to exist in the world, I can feel the Spirit whisper to me, “You tell me why we allow this to happen. You are my body, my hands, my feet.”

The adventure of St. Ed’s ended with the families holding a press conference. Many of them had received housing, as people saw it on the news and donated homes, as city agencies were persuaded to provide housing, and as friends pulled together to make sure everyone was taken care of. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union announced that this had been a project of survival and had never been intended to be a permanent solution (with one bathroom and no heat!), and that they were thankful for the powerful movement of people standing with them in their struggle.

So that’s how the story ended, but the legacy of St. Edward’s cathedral is far from over. Books and films have been made about the story. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union is now part of an international movement of poor and homeless families fighting to end poverty, and it’s rooted right here in our neighborhood.

Back to Bruce now: Wow, that was quite an adventure! When you say to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, I will follow you, wherever that may lead me,” wonderful things can happen.

Next Steps:

- Pray. Draw close to God. Know that you are loved, just as you are.
- Pray for passion—to be excited about Jesus and his mission.
- Pray for wisdom—to use that passion wisely.
- Share ideas with others, then do it.