

Why I love the Church: God calls us to serve hurting people in a hurting world

Message for Sunday, February 10, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Children's Message:

I'm going to tell you a story. When I'm finished, I'll let you think about it. You might want to ask your parents or grandparents, to see what they think about it what it means.

Once, long ago (but not too long ago) in a faraway place (but not too far away), there lived a very special king. He was very kind and very wise. Even though the kingdom was very large, everyone knew the king was a kind and loving person.

Once each week the king would go into the city and out to the villages to see the people. He would stop and talk with everyone he met, both rich and poor.

Although this king was very, very rich, there was one thing he and his wife did not have. They wanted it more than anything else in the world. Can you guess what it was? That's right—he and his wife wanted a child, someone who would continue leading the country after he was finished. Oh, how they prayed and wished for a child.

And then one day it happened: his wife the queen gave birth to a child! The good news spread quickly throughout the kingdom, and the people were happy and thankful; now there would be someone to lead them someday, after the king.

The years passed, and the little baby grew to be a young man, a prince. The king had only one child, and he loved this child with all his heart. He was especially careful to make sure that his son would never be hurt. So he built a very tall stone wall around the castle so that the prince would see nothing of the ugly, evil things that happened in the world outside.

But the prince was curious, just like all boys and girls. One day he decided that he wanted to see what the world was like outside the stone wall. He took off his fancy clothing that princes wear and put on plain clothing so that he looked like any ordinary person. Then he slipped away from the castle. He walked down dusty roads and through village streets. He saw the clear blue skies, enjoyed the

beautiful flowers, and felt the gentle rain just as he did behind the stone wall; but he also saw people stealing and cheating one another, and mothers too poor to feed their babies. He was both happy and sad.

Of course, the king was frantic when he discovered that his dearly beloved son was lost in the great world beyond the castle walls. So the king gathered together all his messengers and told them to go to every street corner and alleyway and read to the people this solemn declaration: My son, the prince, is lost somewhere among you. Will you help me find him?

Young and old, male and female, the people looked high and low to find the prince, because they knew the king would be forever grateful if they found his son. But no one could find the prince, because he had disguised himself to look just like everyone else. And because the prince could be anyone, the people decided it was best to treat everyone as if he were the prince.

Even to this very day the prince still walks the streets, and you may by chance meet him someday.

Thanks to Richard Coleman for this idea, in his book *Gospel-Telling*.

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1) Where is God when it hurts?

Everyone wants to ask questions of God—more like *demand* answers. Why does God allow babies to be born to parents who are child abusers? Why does God allow warring armies to blanket villages and farms with land mines? Why does God allow cancer and strokes?

Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:31-46 tells us clearly that Jesus is coming back, and that things will be set right. Sometimes people joke about the idea of a judgment after death. Make no mistake: there is a judgment day, and all of us will have to give an account for what we did with our lives.

But what about in the meantime? What about the days, the months—the centuries—while we wait? What about the evil and injustice in the world right now? Where is God when we need him? Where is God when it hurts?

Philip Yancey, one of my favourite authors, suggests the answer to that question is both profound and shocking.¹ God has not abandoned us at all. Rather, he has taken on a disguise, the most unlikely disguise of the stranger, the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the rejects of the world.

2) God calls us to care for people in need

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the Lord returns to earth to judge the people. This is what he says to those who are blessed and enter into eternal life:

Matthew 25:35-40, New Living Translation:

“For I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then these righteous ones will reply, “Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?”

And the King will tell them, “I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”

A movie was on TV some years ago, starring the young Hayley Mills. She and two friends were playing in a barn and stumbled across a homeless stranger sleeping in the straw. “Who are you?” Mills asked in surprise. The tramp, even more surprised at being suddenly woke up, jerked his head around, saw the children and muttered, “Jesus Christ!”

What he meant for swearing, the children took as the truth. They actually believed the man to be Jesus Christ. For the rest of the movie (*Whistle Down the Wind*), they treated the tramp with awe, respect and love. They brought him food and blankets, sat and talked with him, and told him about their lives. In time their tenderness transformed the tramp, who was an escaped convict who had never before known such caring.

The mother of Hayley Mills actually wrote the story, intending it as an allegory of what might happen if all of us took literally Jesus’ words about the poor and the needy. By serving them, we serve Jesus.

Mother Teresa was trying to explain to a rich American visitor who could not comprehend her total commitment to the dregs of Calcutta. She said, “We are a contemplative order. First we meditate on Jesus, and then we go out and look for him in disguise.”

If we cannot sense God’s presence in our lives, it may be that we have been looking in the wrong places!

3) God calls us to care for the ones no one else cares about

According to this parable, Jesus knew that the world he left behind would include the poor, the hungry, the prisoners, the sick. The appalling state of the world did not surprise him. He did, however, make plans to deal with it: a long-range plan and a short-range plan. The long-range plan unfolds when he returns in power and glory, to straighten out the planet earth. The short-range plan began right away. He turned that awesome responsibility over to the ones he left behind to carry on his work:

Luke 14:12-14, New International Version:

Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

“Where is God when it hurts?” we often ask. The answer to that is yet another question: “Where is the church when it hurts?”

4) The Church is the Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 12:27, New International Version:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

¹ *The Jesus I Never Knew*, pages 232-233. Much of what follows is taken from his writing.

Jesus described clearly what he expects of his church. Why does the Body of Christ not look more like Christ?

I cannot confidently answer this question, except by asking another question. You see, it's because I am part of the problem: Why do *I* so poorly resemble Jesus Christ? While I cannot answer this vexing problem, I offer these three truths.

a) **The church has brought light as well as darkness**

We cannot deny that the Church has often been the source of darkness. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Church has promoted such disasters as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the slave trade, apartheid, and so on. But it was also in the name of Jesus Christ that St. Nicholas cared for the poor, Mother Teresa founded the Home for the Dying, Wilberforce freed the slaves, General Booth established a Salvation Army to bring good news to the downtrodden, and so on.

We can go on and name hundreds and thousands of individuals who have served all over the globe—including right here in Hastings County—for little pay and even less fame, all in the name of Jesus Christ.

b) **Jesus takes full responsibility for his body**

Jesus told his disciples,

John 15:16, New International Version:

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.”

Remember that these were the very disciples who so exasperated Jesus with their pride and their petty jealousies. He knew that within a few hours of speaking those words, at the time of his greatest need, they would desert him.

It was on this type of “rock” that Jesus promised he would build his church. He knew what kind of weak, sinful people we would be—yet he chose us anyway.

c) **The miracle of grace**

How is it possible that such a motley crew of sinners can be called the church, the Body of Christ? Again, I answer that with another question:

How can one sinful person, I myself, be accepted as a child of God? Only by the miracle of God's grace.

2 Corinthians 4:5-6, New Living Translation:

We don't go around preaching about ourselves; we preach Christ Jesus, the Lord. All we say about ourselves is that we are your servants because of what Jesus has done for us. . . .

But this precious treasure—this light and power that now shine within us—is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own.

Have you experienced the grace of God in your life? Do you know—I don't mean hope, but know *for absolutely certain*—that God loves you?

I emphasize this because it is the vital key for loving others. When you know the unconditional, unending, unlimited, love of Jesus in your own life, then you will have what is needed to share love. You will be able to go beyond your little circle of friends, and love others in the community, in the world. You will be able to seek out the ones that no one else cares about, and put love into action.

Next Steps:

- Pray: Confess to God that you have sinned. That is, you knew what was the right thing to do, and yet you chose your way instead. Don't make excuses; take responsibility for your actions. Then experience God's grace: forgiveness and love even though you don't deserve it.

1 John 1:8-9, New Living Translation:

If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.

- Pray: Where is God calling you to love and serve others in his name? Don't be afraid if it seems challenging, too big. God has promised to be your help through it all. You can invite others to be part of it, too.