

## **Collecting Stars.**

Our family used to go camping alot. I think I when I entered the world, I must have come out with a tent pegs in my hand. As a child, I used to explore the green forests, the dirty paths and the blue skies at a place called Crystal Lake. I still think about the days when we used to drink directly from the lake, and it was so clear it was like looking in a mirror. One of the habits I have picked up from my camping days has almost turned into an honest obsession. You see, I collect starlit skies.. I try my hardest to spend a lot of time underneath them. It's like some sort of tapestry that invites me into it. A sky full of diamonds. I feel as if we are long lost lovers, somehow when I sit underneath them, the world comes together and it all makes sense. You might be thinking, but they're just stars! And if you and I were in the same room having this conversation, I might have thought about what you just said and realized that some of what you said is true. But what if there's more to these stars? Maybe the stars, as beautiful and unfolding as they are, are part of a larger tapestry, a bigger story. And this bigger story is still happening, in fact, you and I are part of it. If we draw the curtain and peer behind the stars we might see that there is more. I believe this is the same for the message of Jesus the Nazrene Rabbi, and even the message for the world. Somehow, through centuries and centuries of history and human hands, both messages have been distorted, maybe a better word, might be stolen or hijacked. Sometimes from without, unfortunately, most within. This book is an expose on our history as people who follow the Rabbi from Nazareth. It is also an invitation to follow me, engage with me, repaint with me the real message of Jesus for his church and for the world. Our story starts on a hill far away....

The scene opens up on a nearby hill where Jesus used to play as a boy. This hill would have brought back so many interesting memories for Jesus. Him and his dad would have been to the city quite a bit to do some construction work and probably made some lifelong friends here. As he is sitting there with some of his close friends and followers, he begins talking with them about a simpler time. And the act of reminiscing, brings him to this sort of dreaming outloud--a new kind of society. One of the nearby shepherds listens in and picks up on some everyday Jewish language. But it's said in such a fresh way, that he rushes to gather some of his friends and some random pedestrians and they start to listen in to this new Rabbi who has just come on the scene. The way he speaks is like nothing they have ever heard. He begins to speak of a society where the poor are the richest, and where the hungry are the filled. These words **begin** turning an identity-less people and their way of life upside down. You see when Jesus is talking to this group he isn't dreaming of some **kind of utopia**, he is envisioning something that is very possible and he is inviting them to dream with Him. A world where people look at each other as equals, where enemies are loved and women are full of value and children have something to say. This is something they have never experienced. This unassuming Rabbi is attempting to create a world, not simply a community that changes the way we see things. It would have included prostitutes, shepherds, the sick, the poor and the needy. And then, He gives them all pictures to hold on to. You can just see it. For years and years, many of these people have been told they don't matter to anyone or anything. For some, their families and status in the community have been literally stripped from them. These people got nicknamed the "unclean ones"; their sickness separated them from their close friends and from any future within that society. They were just one of the many of outsiders.

We have them now as well.

Let's take a look at who his inner twelve were. Luke was this Gentile doctor. A practical healer. People would have visited him for medical help. It would be too easy to overlook what a Gentile was and simply label him an outsider. A Gentile was also outside the religious faith, not just a denominational difference...he would have been more like a modern-day buddhist or maybe what we might more closely consider as a Native American healer. He was outside the fold according to the Pharisees. And Jesus entrusted the Kingdom to this guy? Also, Mary Magdelene who also might of been one of the financiers of Jesus ministry was an ex-prostitute who might have actually quite easily slipped back into the practice. So Jesus' ministry was sustained by a prostitute. She held up the ministry of Jesus. And Jesus supported her by believing she had what it took to build the Kingdom of God on earth.

Then we meetup with a guy named Matthew. A tax-collector. Now, try to imagine a tax-collector who randomly shows up on your doorstep for a routine surprise audit. All those feelings your feeling now would have been what most of the Jewish people would have felt plus a side-order of betrayal. Jewish tax-collectors were known as double-crossers. It would be like your best friend turning you in for something you didn't do. The ultimate of all betrayers. They worked for enemy Rome. They not only collected taxes from their own people, but they would also overcharge each person and whatever the difference was they would pocket it. And for the most part, the price was ludicrously outrageous. It actually helped in creating the homeless population. This was Matthew. A betrayer.

Judas was most likely part of a band of people called the Sicarii. The Sicarii were a bunch of extreme nationalists who believed that the only good Roman, was a dead Roman. Not to mention that Judas was also the one in line to betray his friend Jesus for some money. So, Judas would have been a terrorist, a mercenary of sorts who according to our story would have only been looking out for number one. And yep, you guessed it, Jesus chose him too.

A mystic healer. A prostitute. A political thief. A terrorist. And this is just getting started. This is who Jesus chose to build His Kingdom with.

If we were to modernize Christ's message, it would be something like this: "I am here to enable and empower prostitutes, drug-dealers, thieves, **Buddhists**, and anyone else who wants to join this Kingdom movement that they have what it takes to live out the gospel."

The Pharisees heard some of this message and this is when things started to go down hill for Jesus in their books. They wanted a small message for a small group of people. They wanted to keep this gospel message for the elite. We need to ask if we are doing the same thing in our churches and lives and language? Jesus wanted to give God's message to everyone, not just the Church. If you take a look at the majority of audiences that Jesus interacted with, you will notice that almost every time it was a mixed crowd. It usually involved healing or transforming a life. It was a conversational message that everyone could join in on. So, when we meetup with Jesus on this childhood hill and he begins to talk to this crowd about salt and light and being a city on a hill, all which are non-speaking metaphors, he is addressing a **mixed audience**. It would have sent ripples through the Jewish society where they thought they were the chosen nation and that the message was all about being chosen not about taking it out to the rest of the world.

Sound familiar?

## SYMBOLS

Jesus was using Jewish symbols because that is where He lived. But, His message didn't end with the imagery-- it invited everyone to be a part of the larger story. For some this interpretation seems a bit risky because it takes us as the saved and strips us of our ability to know whether others have come to know God or not. Actually, in hindsight, it puts the responsibility back on God. It allows us to trust that God is the only one who needs to know. Maybe our ancient definitions of evangelism have also reduced the wider message of God. Rob Bell puts it this way: "What if all men were already forgiven and just didn't know it yet?" Which is straight out of the message of Peter.

## TEAM CAPTAIN

I loved being team captain. It meant I could choose who I knew was in or out. I could choose people who I knew had what it took to get us the winning victory. And if we won, it meant we could all go to Pizza Hut to celebrate. There wasn't a chance I was going to give that up. I could slowly canvas the group of nobodies among the somebodies and try my best to separate the two and leave the leftovers for the apparent losing team. Peter thought the same way.

He being a Jew had this idea that the message of Jesus only extended to a few people. That it was somehow their original chosenness that made this message exclusive. Him and

Paul got into it over this very thing. Yet, he has a complete turn-around, he actually rethinks everything.

I wonder if we need to do the same?

In his first letter to some Gentile Christians, **Peter** applies his newfound discoveries and says “For the Messiah also suffered for sins once for all, an innocent person for the guilty, so that he could bring you to God”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, why are we constantly asking for forgiveness. **Peter** is saying that Christ died once, that word once is singular, it means one time. **Peter** was saying that there is never ever going to be a need for someone else God-like to have to come again and die in our place. It happened once for all. When Jesus whispered the words, “It is finished!”, this is in part what He was saying. It's all over now. I, nor anyone else will ever have to experience this again. Yet, if you walk into a Church you will constantly hear words like repentance and forgiveness which tends to be coupled with this almost mythical place of perpetual death and fire. I think the full message of forgiveness has been lost in the mail somewhere. And the other part is resting quietly in the hands of the Devil. The message of Christ's forgiveness has once again been hijacked from within. Let's rewind a bit and now meet up with Paul the sent one. Paul was this murderer who thought what he was doing was for God. He Thought he was protecting the orthodox truth of his faith. He believed what he was doing was right. Sound familiar? Then Jesus turned the lightbulb on and Paul realized he messed it all up and literally changed his whole way of thinking and life that same day. If you ever hear Paul tell his story, he focuses on when He met Jesus, not so much the aspects of repentance. It was about him encountering Christ. And that looks different for each person; see Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for each of their takes on it.

IN THIS CONTEXT.

We are already forgiven.

If we don't believe this, it's as if we are saying that Christ's death on the cross wasn't good enough. He needs to relive it because we feel guilty. Most Churches today focus so much on the need for forgiveness. Now, I am not down-playing the need to be forgiven, but I am definitely trying to dismantle the focus on it. This wasn't the intended message of Jesus of Nazareth.

What if Christ's death was the ultimate sacrifice (and that we don't need to be reliving his death)?

I'm sure, Christ doesn't want to be reliving his own death.

If this is true then that would make us a new creation<sup>2</sup> as Paul the Sent One once said so eloquently. What is Paul saying here and why does it matter in this context? It's important to first understand that the Greek language is quite sophisticated and at times even leaves verbs out of its sentence structure. This means that sometimes we have to go through the whole of the article before we can get the full message. Here in his letter to the Corinthians, he is really saying this: "If anyone is in Christ -- New Creation!" Another interpretation is that the verb is the subject. So it might sound like this: if anyone is in the messiah, the new creation has come!<sup>3</sup> Richard Liantonio<sup>4</sup> is an intercessory missionary and worship leader who explains it this way:

"What does this mean then? If this latter translation is correct – then 'being in the Messiah' is not simply an opportunity for a fresh start or a new chance to get things right (as great as that is). Being in the Messiah means that one is a participant in the eschatological life of the restored and renewed heavens and earth even now. Some way and some how, through the Messiah, the God's future for the world, where peace, justice, life and joy reigns, has come forward and burst forth in the present time. This is not a "spiritualization" of eschatology. Rather, understanding the *radicality* of New Testament thought is grasping that the apostles believed this time of literal, cosmic, physical, eschatological fulfillment, the full restoration of heaven and earth, though yet remaining future, has nevertheless dawned in "the now." This restoration is already tasted by those who are 'in the Messiah.'"

What if being a new creation is the very thing our enemy doesn't want us to realize?

Maybe, the message of Jesus has been hijacked from within.

HIJACKED.

There is an ancient story encircled in poetic metaphor about one of the most famous Israeli battles and how their king meets up with a giant named Goliath in a Palestinian field for the future of their nation. At this time in history, their prophets would be begin talking about a messiah who was going to come through the lineage of David. This saviour was going to change everything. Some Rabbi's have translated this story to represent the warring reality between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. So, even before Jesus stepped into our world and invoked a new way to be human and a new covenant, there was already talk about how things could be better. Maybe how the church as is isn't fully

aware that it could be hiding the new covenant while hanging on to the old. How things as they are aren't good enough. How maybe the old is hiding the new from us.

The world as it was and the world as it should be.

The Church as it is and as it should be.

## THE TRAIL

I like to hike. If there is a vista to get to or a goal to meet, that is my focus, that is where all my energies lie – getting to where I need to be. And as I make my way up to the goal, I find I sometimes lose what's around me. Once I hit the beautiful panoramic view it reminds me that that things are much bigger than they appear on the trail. The trail can sometimes blind us from how big the end goal in sight might be. If we all can agree that we are in discovery of truth, then truth would be this trail. We might call the trail "Christian" truth, and the panoramic view--Truth, itself.

Sometimes our own discoveries of truth can even limit us from finding Truth. Thomas who was one of Jesus' friends experience this as well. Most of the time, he gets a bad rap about a guy who doubted Jesus.

Who doesn't?

I am here to tell you that I doubt quite a bit. Doubting needs to be part of our faith to make it believing. I think Thomas wanted more of Jesus, and he didn't care who knew about it. He didn't just want to hear about the Messiah coming back to life, he wanted to talk to him, eat with him, share life with his friend.

Who wouldn't?

Before Thomas received his unfair nickname (The Doubter), he had a conversation with Jesus that demonstrated that Thomas too was a trail-walker rather than a viewfinder. Jesus is hanging out with some friends, Thomas included, and He tells them He is getting ready to go back home. And Thomas wants to get Jesus' address and phone number to come and visit. In fact, if you begin to read the conversation through **the** Aramaic (Jesus' spoken language), you begin to see that Thomas was seeking the "4 Steps to Peace With God" or the "12 Steps to Recovery". Not that those things are wrong in and of themselves, but the problem is that we tend to be creatures of habit who can't live without our habits and Jesus knew this. Jesus responds to Thomas' question by saying that He is "...the way, the truth and the life..."<sup>5</sup> This is where we start to lose the plot and go into all kinds of reasons we have a history of blood and violence on our hands. We have to recapture the Aramaic message of Jesus to understand what His message was and how it changes our message, if anything, and what we do with it. So, let's dive in.

Jesus was saying that He is the process.

He wasn't mandating a path.

He was inviting friendship and romance. A divine romance that involved two lovers, God and man, constantly chasing after one another in relationship. We as people find comfort in systems and habits and our own pet ways of doing things. Sometimes we get so protective of them, we don't let anyone know about them. Sometimes we get angry if

someone comes in a messes up our rhythm.

Jesus knew this too.

Another way to say what Jesus said in John 14 verse 6 would be something like this: "I am not found in your habits, I am not found in your rhetoric, I am not found in your systematic theologies or theology for that matter". (I do not want to minimize those who have spent their whole lives digging through books and through a wide array of empirical experiences and have come to discover certain things about God). Jesus invites us all into relationship and for those who think they've figured Him out, He invites them back into the simplicity of the candlelight dinner and dance.

What if we have got it all wrong?

What if Truth was always bigger than Christianity?

IT'S UNFOLDING.

When Jesus said that He was the truth He was inviting people into a curious kind of relationship of ongoing discovery. The ancient Jews believed that truth was unfolding rather than something to be violently conquered or colonized. It's this perpetual rollercoaster that might begin with the scripture but is not contained only in scripture, it invites us into the awareness that the ride doesn't stop there. It involves a lot of wrestling and journeying through mountains and valleys and on rollercoasters. It's a red carpet being rolled out, yet, the red carpet doesn't have an end...it continues on and on.

This is truth.

We have a blood-thirsty history of proclaiming truth in the name of God when it was more about ethics than truth. Truth isn't a right or wrong. Truth isn't about or defined by morality. Sure, there are traces of truth in it, but truth is so much bigger than one thing or one religion for that matter. It isn't an absolute philosophical concept. Sure, maybe it starts there, but rather it is an ongoing discovery and rediscovery of the person of Jesus. This too looks different for each person.

Maybe the message of Truth has also been hijacked from within.

The challenge is to begin seeing our experiences bigger than some organized faith or some sanctioned tradition.

When we begin to see things as bigger than our own thoughts and doctrine, it creates a lot more room for God to be God on His terms. It allows us to see things that are impossible as possible because yes, God is just that BIG!! It also frees us from the chains of being bound to some static way of thinking and allows the Spirit of God to breath.

To be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

THE WIND.

The Latin definition of conspiracy means to breath the same air. The wind was another symbol among the Jews of the Holy Spirit. It was embedded in their way of life. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the spirit is like the wind<sup>6</sup>, you have no idea where it is going to end up.

The ancient Celtic monks nicknamed the Holy Spirit the "Wild Goose". A goose is untamed, undefined and can't be controlled. But it can be followed, it can be chased.

The curious can run with it.

The Holy Spirit is the same. She too invites us into the chase.

Jesus invites us into this kind of conspiracy. The kind that has the ability to change the world. To quite literally flip it all on its head. We have adopted an overtly colonial approach to making sure everyone knows the truth around us. We go to extreme creative lengths and expend all of ourselves and resources on attractional models and approaches to getting people into church services.

Christ's conspiracy is counter-cultural even to the Church.

MISSIONAL.

He invites us all to be intentionally missional people. Intention simply meaning purposeful. Why do we meet people? Not to get them to church. We meet them because all of us are made for relationship. Because when we meet together, where two or more are gathered, God is there. We meet people because we want to know them. We want to engage with them by sharing life. We don't meet them because we want to somehow sell them Jesus. We don't meet them because we are guilted into a pew quota. Trying to get more and more numbers into the business of Christianity.

We meet them because they are also a part of God's creation.

God breathed life in them.

God joined them to his conspiracy long before we came up with a way for them to get "saved". We will deal with the implications of this point later on.

REDEFINE AND RESTORE.

Follow me back to Rome.

Rome was an a politically oppressive country that proclaimed their peace through victory. Their evangelism (euangelio) was that they needed everyone to believe their truth and agenda. They wanted to make sure that their trueness was the only one that stood up and they would kill to make sure everyone knew this. Then Jesus stepped in and began speaking of a different kind of evangelism. The word evangelism was political in its origin. It was a new way to see things, a call to a new and different way of life. A reality to live in and be a part of. Not a prayer for salvation. We have taken Christ's political message and supercharged it with church language and have used the Roman model to make sure everyone around us knows that we are right and they are wrong.

We all have a responsibility to redefine and restore evangelism.

Could the good news as is, be lacking? Maybe there's more. And it didn't just deal with one's soul. Salvation was holistic. The word means healing. It was the belief that pain and

suffering didn't have the last word. That war and destruction weren't the last people on scene. That when this kind of healing showed up, that was the last word.

GOOD NEWS.

People like Emperor Augustus would have used good news as a phrase to signify their political agenda. Emperors would have pushed this good news with their “peace through victory” method of violently forcing people to believe and live the “Roman” way. This sounds hauntingly close to some of our history. When Christ steps on the scene, He begins talking about a new kind of good news that is about an almost mythical kind of Kingdom that is transferred from one person to another through love rather than an oppressive urgency. Let's like painters come together and recapture the character of God so we can discover the meaning and the heart of Evangelism. If you look at how Christ interacted with people, you might be able to see that we have lost our way. Jesus hardly ever mentions people's sin.

Why? Because he has the ability to see them post-cross, he sees them as forgiven and restored, which was the intention of the cross.

Why don't we?

There is a sense of safety in knowing things, in being in control of information. We find peace in embracing clarity.

THE BACK OF THE BOOK.

I have never been a big fan of **math**. I was the guy waiting for the teacher to turn her back so I could slowly peer over my neighbour's shoulder to find the answer I needed, so I didn't have to repeat the course. Thanks to all those people. As I got older, **math** got that much more complicated and so did the answers. But, what was even more exciting was the discovery that the answers were in the back of the book. Okay, so there were only the odd numbers, but it was enough for me to feel okay about the numerical journey ahead. Plus, I could depend on my unsuspecting "tutors" to help me get through the next year of math. I felt okay after knowing there was a good chance I might pass my class. Knowledge is a very powerful thing. It whispers to our need for safety. Labels make sense of things, some things that would be probably be better off left unlabeled. Calling someone a sinner gives us a subconscious sense of superiority. Labeling people puts us on the pedestal. I heard Brian

McLaren speaking on this very thing at a conference recently, he calls this kind of thinking "the chair". It's that we have a tendency to stand up on our chairs of psychology, medicine, and even religion and it allows us to look down on others and put them in categories. Brand them, if you will, like some sort of livestock. If you stand up on the chair of psychology then someone who has family issues and has a hard time connecting with people, in general, are labeled as "anti-social". For those in medicine, if there is a person who has trouble controlling their shaking hand, it might be assumed that they have an early onset diagnosis of **palsy**. For those that are religious, we might look at someone who believes something that is outside of our sphere of theology (even within Christianity at times) and label them a pagan or a heretic. Now, let me say that labels in and of themselves aren't bad things, **it's** the malice with which they are used. It is the intention

behind the words that really give the end phrase the ultimate value.

God has labeled everyone as forgiven.

God sees them this way.

Why can't we? What is stopping us?

Why is it so hard to seek relationships with those who don't believe the same thing without labeling them first? These are just some of the questions we can all wrestle with to find where we go from here. What we have to come to accept is that the death of institutionalized Christianity is sadly imminent.

HOUSE PARTY.

The Jews knew how to party. At times, they could have easily rivaled some high school parties today.

Seven days.

Alcohol.  
Music.  
Dancing.

Poetry.  
Art.

One of these parties was called the Feast of the Tabernacles, practicing Jews know this now as Sukkot. The word means dwelling or abode. It was a dwelling festival or “house party”. It was a reminder that God was always going to be there for them. A reminder for them that He was their shelter when they were rescued from Egypt. They were instructed to create a dwelling with no walls as a reminder that they should maintain a spirit of constant hospitality...

Even to foreigners and outsiders.

See, even near the beginning of mankind, God's heart for the marginalized was made clear in the architecture of Jewish festivals. They were responsible to make sure to invite those passing through, a place to stay. A place to call home. Hospitality. They would also make a roof with an opening in the middle to give them a skylight to the heavens, to remind them that God wasn't very far. They would have this party and invite fellow house party members to come over and enjoy themselves. Sit around campfires and share stories of how God rescued them and how they barely made it out alive. There was humans connecting with one another from completely different backgrounds. And God was for that. He was there. "...when two or more are gathered...I am there"<sup>7</sup> They would drink and salute God because He chose them to be his message-bearers. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the end times and how it all is going to play out in the end. What's even more interesting is that each Jewish festival didn't just signify a remembering or looking back, but also a looking forward.

EVERYBODY GOES.

Jewish Rabbinical Scholars say that each party or festival represents an event in the end time scheme. The House Party falls into the point in our future history where God brings people to His Kingdom. Some scholars debate that it could mean that all people get to be a part of the New Jerusalem. We say things like “when we get to heaven” or “when I go to heaven”.

What if our beliefs have minimized our role in living out heaven here on earth?<sup>8</sup>

Could this include all people getting in on the kingdom life?

The danger is that if and when we come to our conclusions that things are going to end up a certain way and then force others to believe them then there is no opportunity for binding and loosing<sup>1</sup> that Jesus says the disciples can do. That we all can do. This was an art reserved only for Rabbi's. It was the ability to interpret and reinterpret scripture. It was the ability to realize that there is more to the Christian message than some airtight reply to truth.

Are we suffocating Truth?

I think it is when we defend it to the point where we don't let it speak for itself.

When we feel the need to define truth as Christian, we too can easily be categorized as the very religious system that killed Jesus. Like rediscovering an old favorite book, we too can find as the ancient Jewish nomads discovered that Truth is unfolding. And when we

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<sup>1</sup> Read Velvet Elvis by Rob Bell; He has some good stuff on this

accept that Truth is unfolding we can begin to see the excitement of the unknown journey ahead. There are twists and turns and confusing bends that draw us in and out of the heart of God. Like someone who is searching for a treasure and will do anything to make sure they find it, Jesus draws us into the conspiracy. Are you ready?

There is more to Jesus than what we have come up with.

There is more to life than what it is now.

## PIRACY 101

We live in a world of knock-off's. Piracy is one of the biggest criminal activities out there. It is the process of taking something that is the real deal and making copies of it.

It happens in the art world. It would be like taking the Mona Lisa and making an exact replica but selling it off as the real thing. The world of celluloid has found a way into the Church.

In the computer world. Numerous articles have been recently written on how people are fined vast amounts for making and selling DVD's as if the actors walked right off the screen.

Even in our pulpits. We've pirated the message of Jesus and made it into something its' not. This book is about recapturing that message. Understanding his words not from the Greek, but from his common everyday spoken language of Aramaic<sup>9</sup>. It really does change everything. What if the message of Jesus wasn't for a few and we've taken our copy of His message and made it so?

Are you ready to find out?

Are you ready to take this journey with me?

I hope so. Keep an open-mind.

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- ◆◆.1 1 Peter 3:18
  - ◆◆.2 2 Corinthians 5:17
  - ◆◆.3 2 Cor. 5:17 TNIV
  - ◆◆.4 <http://www.richardliantonio.com>
  - ◆◆.5 John 14:6
  - ◆◆.6 John 3:7-15
  - ◆◆.7 Matthew 19:18-20 (my translation)
  - ◆◆.8 When Jesus talks about going to prepare a place for us, it is a reference to Jesus going and preparing a room for us in the City that will come here; He is using Jewish bridal language.
  - ◆◆.9 and Syriac which is a dialect of [Middle Aramaic](#) that was once spoken across much of the [Fertile Crescent](#).

## CONVERSATION 2

Evey was this mild-mannered girl who lived her every day life in down-town London, she followed the letter of the law. She was a good citizen. Until she met a mysterious character by the name of 'V'. This ominous figure named V believed the government had become too powerful for its own good. He wanted things to change and he was willing to go to any lengths necessary to make sure that that kind of change was going to happen. Even destroy systems and structures that were the ultimate icons for oppressive power. He invited Evey (through a series of tests) and others to join a new kind of conspiracy that changed the face of the England and history.

V was starting a revolution. One that almost anyone could be a part of, if they wanted to. One that would flip the world as we know it on its head. Jesus was trying to do the same, or was He? A revolution by definition is one that is a fundamental shift in power or structure in a short time. It usually has to do directly with governments and their infrastructures. We have many of these in our history books. But, Jesus did come to violently descend from heaven to overtake the Roman government? Some of the Jews, including his followers thought so. So, on a political level, Jesus did not come to be a revolutionary. But if we choose to use the word broadly, in the sense of a movement started by a person or a group of people with the hope of affecting change in a society for the benefit of the population, then Jesus definitely came to bring that kind of revolution to all of humanity. Jesus in one place says that He came to bring a sword not peace. For the Jews, the sword was linked up with Rome and their

way of advancing themselves. It would have created feelings of uneasiness and restlessness. It was a semiotic symbol used by Jesus to mean social unrest. And the peace in that verse pertains to social order. So, Jesus came to upset the system. To challenge the every day expectations and status quo of the Jewish people and the Roman world. So, this movement of Jesus was intended to turn the world upside down. If you've ever hung upside down for any period of time you know all kinds of things go wrong. Blood rushes to your head. You might lose your lunch. You might even pass out. But to be sure, your sense of reality is disrupted. So by this definition, can we at least agree that Jesus came to start a social revolution?

## JESUS CULTURE

This is bigger than Marxism, although there are hints of Karl Marx all over the movement of the Saviour. Or the other way around. Jesus invites us into this kind of revolution. One that changes everything. And even at times creates more unrest than peace in the conventional sense. It was a revolution that started within a culture, within a time in history that had a certain audience and a specific context in mind. We can't get away from the fact that Jesus was a Jew and lived as a Jew and thus spoke Aramaic. And ever so often might have spoke Latin and Greek<sup>1</sup>. Scripture was written by those within this culture and by a few of those outside of it that caught on to the heart of Jesus' message. When Jesus shared what we now know as the gospel, the audience would have heard a different word than the one we use now. The term gospel was used by those who were political. It would be a title for the politicians and there way of doing and see politics. President Roosevelt's gospel would have been his

agenda of "walk tall, and carry a big stick". Jesus was being politically and socially subversive<sup>2</sup>. When Jesus says something like this, the people that are listening in would have expected Him to utter such words because according to their ancient prophets the Messiah was going to be one who had the "government on his shoulders"<sup>3</sup>...they didn't know that Jesus was being metaphorical. Hebrew authors were poets, they had this knack for intertwining poetry, metaphor, the literal and word pictures all in one breath. Our Western society has been framed by the Enlightenment which has a tendency to praise reason and the art of the literal word. It is helpful to remember this subtle nuance when approaching scripture. Another example of this would be when Jesus is telling his stories.

## STORY

Our culture is riddled with story. People like a good story. The tendency is to hear the word story and think folklore or a simple bedtime fairytale, but this is so much deeper than fairies and frogs. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlev<sup>4</sup>, a Hasidic Jewish Mystic said this about God and story: "God made man because he loves stories." I imagine God sitting up in his comfy black leather couch sipping on his Caramel Frappucino enthralled by who He has created and how we are all learning what it means to walk in light of knowing that He has made us. And we are all learning this. We are fumbling toward ecstasy. I think we have lost the art of telling a good story. I think we need to recapture this art or we will all slip into the art of surviving. Which there is a place in the story for that, but, I don't think we were meant to just survive. We were meant for so much more. And this

realization inspires us to write stories of hope. Of peace. Of grace. Of resurrection. Madeleine L'Engle<sup>5</sup> once said this about story: "It's no coincidence that just at this point in our insight into our mysteriousness as human beings struggling towards compassion, we are also moving into an awakened interest in the language of myth and fairy tale. The language of logical arguments, of proofs, is the language of the limited self we know and can manipulate. But the language of parable and poetry, of storytelling, moves from the imprisoned language of the provable into the freed language of what I must, for lack of another word, continue to call faith." There is something deep within us all that is aware that there is more to life than what we now live. That the world is not as it should be. That there is more. And that knowledge, keeps us searching for what that more looks like. All the while, as we continue on our search there is a soundtrack of lyrics running through our head beckoning us on with the words "...I still haven't found what I'm looking for<sup>6</sup>..." This is the art of the story that we get drawn into when Jesus arrives on the scene and begins sharing stories of how life is more than what there currently is. And I think we can all agree that we have those days where it feels like there could be more.

## WHO IS GOOD?

Jesus told this story that would have been heard many times before, but He decided to change the characters to make His point. In fact, we have probably heard this many times before. Sometimes it's too easy to pass over something we have become comfortable with. It is the story of the Good Samaritan. We tend to tell this story to reinforce the idea of compassion being the central marker of someone who follows Jesus. And this thought is good but barely

touches the surface at what is going on here. Let's take into consideration why Jesus even told the story. There was a teacher of the law who asked 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'<sup>7</sup> So, this is the leading question that compels Jesus to tell this remake of what would have been as the good Jew. This is an important part of the story that tends to get glossed over. But, I think if we dig a bit deeper here, we might find a lot more going on than just a message about compassion. Now, eternal life, heaven and Kingdom of God<sup>8</sup> tend to be used interchangeably here and mean life of the ages or life as it was meant to be. So, essentially this teacher is asking how He can join in on the movement of Jesus.

Being a teacher of the law, he would have known the Torah<sup>9</sup> which has an immensely high view of human life. In fact, Jesus is making a commentary on Leviticus 19:18 where the Jewish people are told to love their neighbours. Which is another question that is brought up by this teacher, "Who is my neighbour?" And Jesus redraws the boundaries to even include the Samaritan as their neighbour. In the Jewish culture, a Samaritan was a racial enemy. Someone who didn't fit in and was disliked. We can all probably think of someone we just can't get along with, that is the protagonist in this story. He's the good guy. Now, when the Jew heard this story, the third person wasn't supposed to be an outsider, it was supposed to be a Jew. Jesus chooses to use the Samaritan who was a racial outcast as well as a cultural enemy of the Jew who used to be Jews themselves until the two Kingdom split in the Old Testament<sup>10</sup>. Jesus actually never gets around to answering the question. He challenges the inquisitor to be a neighbour to everyone. Do we need that challenge today? Further along in the story, we are told that the Samaritan

takes the injured man to an inn and pays two denarii<sup>11</sup> and any other costs incurred. He overextended himself for the sake of a stranger. For an outsider. The place where the injured guy stayed is loosely translated from the Greek into what we know as an inn or hotel<sup>12</sup> Since Jesus spoke Aramaic he most likely used the word funduq<sup>13</sup>, which roughly translates into a hostel. If you walk into a hotel and then walk back out onto the street and walk into a hostel, you will see that there are visible differences and even in what is provided. This nuance would have been recognizable to a Jew. So, why the big deal on the separation of words? Because a funduq was a place where all people from all walks of life would come and share life together, sometimes even share beds, but it was a place of common ground. Much different to what our churches are like today. Which is what Jesus was essentially commenting on. It was the exclusive state of the synagogue that Jesus was directly dealing with here. And He was inviting them to be more. To extend their compassion into their practices and every beliefs. Maybe we could learn from this today. Couldn't we? In fact, in some of the early writings about the funduq there were stories of warring tribes and family members who would end up meeting in these mysterious places of peace and walk away in complete reconciliation. Isn't that what we should be doing? Reconciling people. Healing broken relationships. Bringing peace where there seems to be none. This is part of the more Jesus was talking about. Jesus also uses currency in the story that seems to be nothing more than just money used in a transaction, but if you dive deeper into the narrative there is much more here.

THE OUTSIDER SAVES

Two denarii was also known as the half-shekel atonement. At the age of 13, a young Jewish child went from being a boy to a man and one of the many responsibilities of a man in that culture was to pay a temple tax. The temple tax was specifically reserved to purchase animals for the typical once-a-year sacrifice that the priest would enact for everyone on their behalf. His action would atone for the sins of others. Jesus is playing on the issue of atonement. Of being absolved from our sins. Here in the story though, it isn't the priest who absolves the victim, it is the Samaritan. The outsider. The homosexual. He atones for the victims' sin. It's as if Jesus is saying, bigger than right or wrong, than sin or no sin, the one thing that can absolve the sins of another is hidden in the act of compassion. And anyone can join in on this movement of compassion. There is hope that we all can be a people dedicated to not merely seeing the need of someone else and walking by, but that we all, as the human race can fight indifference and wrong theology with compassion and grace. This is the invitation. This is just one of the famous stories of Jesus recapture back into the original language. It is important to understand someone's story from their time and place. Imagine if your story was stripped of its context and culture, I wonder how different your story would be? Would it even be painting a picture of you at all?

## UNCLEAN ONES

Jesus is having a conversation with some of the unclean ones and some of the religious leaders started gossiping under their breath about how it seems like Jesus their Messiah is hanging out with all the wrong people. Their Messiah shouldn't do that. After all, He was the Jewish Messiah wasn't He? Jesus

overhears some of their snarly commentary and starts to tell a story about 100 sheep<sup>14</sup>. Numbers are never just numbers in Jewish writing. They were poets. They intended their words to be dripping with alternative meanings. The number 100 pertains to the selection process of God's chosen people<sup>15</sup>. The question by the religious leaders is basically asking why Jesus chooses to be with the outsiders. And Jesus intentionally starts a story with a number about who's in and who's out. He was telling a story using their language, not trying to create a theology. I think it is important to take in the reality that Jesus didn't sit and wonder if one day people might create doctrine and a system of beliefs out of what He said. He was being Jesus. Jesus also wasn't exclusive. If He ever was, it was always toward those who treated the outsiders with disdain. Even the idea of repentance in scripture tends to be aimed at the followers of God. In first-century Palestine it was rude to blame someone for something. If you borrowed your friend's chariot and lost it. You wouldn't say you lost the chariot. Your friend wouldn't say you lost the chariot. You both would say that the chariot got lost. The implications are hilarious. And so Jesus starts the story out by saying "Suppose one of you...", so within a few words of the story, He is already incriminating them for their way of thinking by interjecting a cultural taboo into the story. In the book of Ezekiel<sup>16</sup>, God romantically nicknames Israel as His sheep and He their shepherd. He promises to care for them and watch out for them like shepherds do. Jesus becomes the shepherd in this story and this shepherd goes for those outside the fold. Essentially, Jesus redraws the the boundaries again. He basically tells them that now the new sheep are the ones He chases after. This would have been another insult.

Jesus isn't attempting an assault on all of their sensibilities (although, at times this does seem the case), in the sharing of his new vision for the world; there will be things that will naturally have to change and this is what Jesus is offering here. It is an offering, but a challenging one. The Hebrew word for sheep is *tso'n* and is pronounced *tsone*, which at the root of the word means to journey. The sheep in the fold, the 99, represent the religious leaders, quite possibly the whole nation of Israel. The problem is that they aren't journeying.

There is no movement. No forward motion.

He is saying to them that they aren't being who they are meant to be. But even more subversive, He is telling them to be more like the lost sheep. To get lost. Why? Because then they are journeying. But not only that, that He will go and find them. Now, a parable that typically gets categorized as a story about redemption is now looked at as a story of redemption in a whole new light of the word. Jesus is inviting us to lose our ways of thinking that create outsiders. It is also saying that the outsider has something to teach us. The words of Jesus are rich with parallel, hyperbole, humour and even frustration that tend to get lost in the reality that the Bible we have doesn't record the message of Jesus in his language. Since the printing press, we now have access to the Bible in

Aramaic<sup>17</sup> Understanding the message of Jesus from his language is essential to our development, but it is also essential to how we develop our message and beliefs. Without this understanding scripture becomes a bit anaemic.

FIGS AND CHURCH

Jesus sees this fig tree not bearing fruit and curses it to never ever reproduce again and it seems a bit odd to the disciples why Jesus does this and I think understanding it from the eyes of a First-century Palestinian Jew might give us some insight to why Jesus did what He did and how it affects us today. Every State in the USA has a flag that characteristically symbolizes that states ambience and attitude. For example, California has the brown bear as its emblem of choice to signify that California has a lot of these bears. There is more to it, but you get what I mean. It was a logo that represented something more, something bigger. In this case, it was the country logo for the nation and people of Israel. And Jesus curses the tree? Yep. One characteristic of a fig tree is that you can see the fruit before you see the leaves. And Jesus from way off can see this tree isn't bearing fruit, isn't being what it it meant to be and essentially kills the tree. He is basically saying that Israel as a movement of people has become dead to Him. Of no use. Powerful provocative imagery. You might think I am overstating my case, but in this context of verses Jesus moves on to the temple and in one of his most famous scenes ever recorded he flips the tables and says this, "...Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves". Now what was going on here was that the poor were being oppressed. Doves were the bird of choice for the outsider, the unclean and the cripple. Some of the merchants, including the religious leaders would come and take these animals reserved for the unclean and use them for their own financial gain. Jesus was basically calling them selfish. But there is still more. The phrase "for all nations" would have reminded them all of God's words to Abraham<sup>18</sup> which that God would use Him to bring His message to the world. And they are not doing that.

In fact, Jesus goes a step further and he even calls them names, He calls them thieves. Thieves keep things. They steal things. They devalue things. Jesus is throwing this tantrum to bring this point out loud and clear. They are taking a message for the world and keeping it to themselves. I wonder if we have done the same? I think it would be safe to say that we have a habit of trying to keep the message too close to home when the world is in need. Let me be clear, when I say message I don't mean talking about it. I mean living it out. When Jesus uses the word gospel it connotes action. In fact, the word baptism in Jesus' famous last words do not mean to dunk someone in a tank. It is actually the only time where it means action. And so does making disciples; the word for disciple is *talmidim*, an action oriented word. Jesus is saying when you meet up with people, demonstrate this new way of life in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Also, it is saying that when we demonstrate love and compassion and grace and peace, God is there with us. An amazing reminder that we are not alone in this. That God is here with us every step of the way. Sometimes, I think we can't hear this enough.

### CONVERSATION 3

DENTITY.

I have noticed more and more magazines that are inundated with commercials and less relevant articles. If you take a closer look at what these one-page eye candy advertisements are selling you might be surprised to know that it is much more than just a product. They are selling you an identity. They are selling you the lie that you may not be good enough without their next big thing. That somehow if you buy 'this one thing', not only will your life be changed but somehow people will like you more and your soul will be at peace. It might sound like I am overstating my case but even Edwin Land who was known for his entrepreneurial prowess said this about marketing, "Marketing is what you do when your product is no good". So, how does knowing this help us find out who we are? I think it's important that we know the origin of the messages that we receive on a daily basis, where they come from and if they have any validity at all. We are challenged by the writer of 1 John to test the spirits, I don't think that just means subjects that have to do with church. We must become wary of outside or inside messages that begin devaluing us as a community or individual. Let's take the message of sin. Can we agree that sin is more than missing the mark? That it is more than separation from God? That It is also broken relationships between one another. Between us and creation. Between who we are and who we are meant to be. Between the truths we fight for and the lies we can't seem to

shake. Can we also agree that we are not our sin? The Apostle Paul said that it is the "sin" within him, but not him, that seems to be in control<sup>2</sup>. Paul is distinctly separating his identity from sin in and of itself. He is not his sin. You are not your sin. We are not the sum of our mistakes, bad choices and screw-ups. We are more. We have always been more. I imagine if Satan were real<sup>3</sup> and he was sitting a room and had to confess his fears, I think he would say it was the people of God finding out who they were meant to be in Christ and living that out. Our identity rests in the fact that we have been fully redeemed. Now, I am not one for churchy words, but a little history about redemption before we go on.

### REDEMPTION MEANS LETTING GO

The Jewish people were oppressed by the Egyptian ruler Pharaoh who was quite ruthless in his dealing with slaves. For sport, Pharaoh would force the Jewish slaves to hunt wild beasts, irregardless of the outcome. He would stone them if they didn't produce enough bricks. He would keep them working past midnight and beyond. If you notice, each plague corresponds with the act of mistreatment at the hand of one of its most cruelest rulers. Then they cried out. And this is where redemption started<sup>4</sup>, it started with a cry. A realization that they were in need. An open awareness of their oppressed state. God responded with Moses and began the process of redeeming His people. He chose one man to rescue many people. It took them the whole of the Old Testament to find out what it looks like not to live like slaves. They got used it. They somehow believed the lie that they were nothing more than slaves. They watched the commercial and believed the advertisement. In fact, when times got hard, they preferred slavery over their new found freedom.

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<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to John Eldredge for that distinction.

<sup>3</sup> we'll deal with this a bit later on

<sup>4</sup> Jesus wants to Save Christians by Rob Bell

Freedom is scary.

As exciting as it is, it can be immobilizing if you have never known the experience of letting go. Letting go leaves us naked and cold. We find safety and warmth in what we know. Our identity is formed by what we know rather than what we don't know. And if we have come to believe the lies as truth then we can go no further than what we know. I wonder if we prefer our slavery over our freedom? I have shared life with many communities of faith around the globe, and my experience with these communities is that they spend a lot of time on the subject of sin and sin management. The focus in these meetings tend to be centered on how we should be trying to fix our sin and how sinful we are. There are occasional subjects that find their way throughout the sermon set, but the one that reigns supreme is the repetitive tendency to teach one another that our value will always be thwarted by our sinfulness. Yet, Jesus, Paul and the New Testament tell a different story. Follow me. A woman who might have been in her late teens was caught in the act of adultery, practically stripped bare and thrown at the feet of Jesus as a test. Interestingly enough, the guy involved was nowhere on the scene, when according to the Torah law, both would have been stoned to death on the spot. The group of religious leaders began challenging Jesus in their expected Jewish manner, typically by either leading a conversation through questions or by quoting their tribal prophet. Now, what it's important to notice here, is that in a community of people who do not separate their beliefs from their everyday life, to them the tribal prophet was the ultimate authority. Yet Jesus goes on to respond by playing artfully in the dirt. Practically equating himself to the woman at his feet. He was also saying that He was bigger than their tribe. He was bigger than a denomination or even Christianity. And then he turns and responds to the woman who is still crying and expecting judgment and tells her to live her differently. Why? Because she

has met Jesus who believes she can. The famous phrase slips off of the Messiahs' lips; dripped in so much grace there is no room for condemnation or judging. "Go and sin no more"<sup>5</sup>. The word for sin that Jesus uses here is one that speaks of sin as something temporary and in the moment. In fact the Hebrew word for sin is pronounced khate. It means that sin isn't a forever kind of thing. It isn't an act that continues. In fact, Judaism says that sin is an act, not a state of being. That we can all participate in the ways of sin. We can oppress one another. We can hurt each other and God. Remember, Christianity was birthed out of Judaism. Jesus practiced Jewish holidays, customs and challenged the ones that separated those in need. If sin is not a state of being, then where did we go wrong? Have we been reading scripture with the wrong eyes?

#### RETURNING THE FAVOR

Our identity rests in the reality that the good news is that all men have been forgiven once and for all. That we no longer have to spend so much of our time focusing on how depraved and evil we could be, rather we can begin asking the question post-sin and post-cross: "What does it look like to be Christ in everything I say and do?" "What does it mean to be Christ to the outsider?" These are the questions we should be expending ourselves over. Not "how sinful am I?" The danger is we can be focusing on a problem that has already been annihilated on the cross. A problem that by its own nature is dead because it has been killed. Why would we intentionally focus on something destructive when God himself sees us all as already fully forgiven? Why is it so hard to accept that God's forgiveness is actually that good? It can cover everything and redefine who we are. The author of Hebrews says this "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all<sup>6</sup>." Another way to say this, would be that God sees mankind (through the death and resurrection of Jesus), as fully forgiven. Now, whether

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<sup>5</sup> John 8:1-11

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 10:10

someone chooses that forgiveness is whole different subject entirely. I think we might have a hard time believing that God's forgiveness is either good enough or whether its even true. We have done what Blaise Pascal said we would do: "God made man in his image, and we returned the favor". We have designed a God who has limits on his grace. Not on those who follow Him, but those who don't. Sure, we won't admit that in theory. But the way we live life and the way we tend to communicate with God and others demonstrates how we see God and truth. And I believe most of us because of what and how we have been taught have a hard time accepting that God's grace truly covers everything. But, according to God--it does. We are no longer sinners. This is news we can begin to embrace and once we do, I think we can move forward. And I think God is a fan of forward motion and progress. This new found identity then leads us into a community of people who look outwards. How? Because focusing on our sin has us focusing on ourselves. Focusing on ourselves deprives those in need of something deeper than simply food or shelter, especially when God has empowered us with the ability of being the voice for the voiceless. The Good Samaritan is more than just a story of how we are supposed to help those in need, it also about how we might be judged. It's as if Jesus is standing face to face with us and is challenging all of our beliefs and saying: you will be judged by how you treat the 'other', the one in need.

## THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The story of the Good Samaritan not only teaches us about the other but also plurality. Not just religious plurality but also evokes a theory of leadership plurality<sup>7</sup>. The ability to have different leadership. The story teaches us that all people have a purpose (and that there can even be homosexual pastors who can add to the conversation). And my questions to add would be:

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<sup>7</sup> A great article on this at: [www.pomomusings.com](http://www.pomomusings.com)

Who are we to define who God chooses and doesn't choose to build his Kingdom with?  
Do our beliefs limit God's ability to demonstrate the expanse of His grace?

Now, we know the answer is "No" in theory, but in practice and reaction (these include the silent reactions we harbor in our heads) we still have some way to go. So, why do we feel the need to still judge people and stand at a safe distance from those who live "different" lives, or to use a more fundamental word, those who live "sinful" ways of life? I think for us, it is a lot easier to see someone else's faults before admitting our own. And I wonder if in that is what this is all about. Maybe we are supposed to continually revisit our own actions and attitudes in light of others. This isn't some masochistic approach to the Christian life or an invitation to become extremely depressed by what we do or don't do. It is a charter to see that sin was never was the point. That this journey we are part of is to be living out what it means to be Christ. It is and was never meant to be a life where we attempt to manage and wash ourselves clean. It was more about Christ and what He came to do and how He chose to live His life in response to His relationship with God. And then, it is how we respond to that knowledge. He knew who He was in connection with God. He said it this way, "I and the Father are one" <sup>8</sup>. Jesus and God were in sync with one another, they had a relationship like lovers do.

#### LIKE LOVERS DO

Cigar-toting South American poet Pablo Neruda had this notorious quirky ability to compose quite metaphorically creative poems, one of which was quoted in the movie "Patch Adams", a movie about a clown-turned-doctor who falls in love with a damaged woman, changes her life and yet ends up, sadly, being murdered. I hope I didn't ruin the movie with this spoiler. At her funeral, the character Patch hesitantly finishes the poem that Neruda himself wrote for one of his lovers:

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<sup>8</sup>John 10:30

"I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,

or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.

I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,

in secret, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you as the plant that never blooms

but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;

thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,

risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.

I love you as straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;

so I love you because I know no other way

than this: where I does not exist, nor you,

so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,

so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep."

These words are the same words God exchanged with Jesus. They were so close they were able to finish each others sentences. This is so much bigger than candle-light dinners . He came here to demonstrate what we can have with God. Not when He returns. Not one day when. Now. This moment. While you are reading this, you were made to be 'one' with God. This is a huge part of our identity that we don't hear enough of. The way most interpret this is that we have to use some kind of cloud-covered equation with some

mysterious key that we will find when we either pray more or read more scripture or give more offering. This approach isn't that far from carrying around a rabbit's foot. Jesus knew God. Jesus wasn't nervous about getting it wrong. He was so close to God that there was no room for doubt. He just lived life with God. I believe this is an integral part of our existence. That we simply live life with God, minus the equations, minus the rabbits' feet. What if the way of Jesus never had anything, to do with God hiding answers? I have met many Christians, along with being one of them, who at times were so nervous and stagnant by the possibly getting it all wrong. If God is love, then He is love. Period. If He is not, then we should end the book here. Jesus didn't come here to make us ready for some big day in some golden city. Sure there are apparent inclinations to read scripture in such a light. Why not? It makes us feel good and gives us something to look forward to. I am not saying that there won't be a day when we all meet up with our Creator, but they come here. The City descends from heaven. I am sure that those details will play themselves out one day in heaven's own time. Jesus came to make us ready for the here and now. His relationship with God is an invitation to have the same kind of symbiotic rhythm that they had. The mystics caught on to this. The prophets did too. They had such intense belief that they could have what they called "Union with God". In fact, Teresa of Avila, the mother of the mystic faith said this: "Take God for your spouse and friend and walk with Him continually, and you will not sin, will learn to love, and the things you must do will work out prosperously for you." It is this kind of language that evokes the imagination of a couple who are so in love that they don't know what it's like to be without one another. Teresa figured out that the love that is shared with God also comes with this intense desire to work together. To build and create. To inspire and move forward. It is this that we seek. It is this very thing we crave. It's no surprise that Jesus used words like freedom and that at times we are the ones with our ideas and theologies that get in the way of that freedom. I

think this is because we are afraid of what it means to be free. At an inauguration speech, Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us." Jesus says it another way, "...you are the light of the world...". Later, a few chapters away He is talking to a crowd of people and Jesus tells them: "...I am the light of the world...". If you take these two phrases at face value, what Jesus is saying is that we are just like Him. We have it in us to be a community of people who are influential. If we accept who we are then we too can change societies, change cultures, transform the lives of those on the margins and embrace the freedom He came to give us all. We have been told we are sinners and prisoners of our humanity so much that we have no idea what it looks like to be anything else. This alone will stop us from being who we are meant to be. This will impede churches from being a movement rather than the organization that it has become. It will get in the way of those who want more. Jesus came to show us a new kind of humanity. A humanity where mankind embraces the divine within and learns to live it out in such a way that political powers begin taking cues from them. That societies begin looking outward rather than inward. A world that sees everything as a gift. This message isn't about some new-age philosophy. This is so much more. This is realizing that God believes in us. That at our creation, He was lost for words. That we were "very good" or really beautiful might be a better rendering. God's jaw dropped when he saw you and I. His jaw still drops when new life is ushered into the world. This kind of God we most of the time miss, because there is a tendency to either focus, or in the name of balance try to bring in, a God who solely expends himself in anger over what we do or don't do.

God is bigger than our ideas of Him.

In fact, in his own words, He is outside of them. He is not the sum of our theology or even our interpretations of scripture. He is more. This more is where we start. This hunger for God and who He is will be enough to transform us more than any sermon, any verse memorization, and any bible study or group gathering. God wants more for us, why don't we? What if we are afraid of what God wants to give because we are happy where we are? We are comfortable with who we have become. Sure there is some minimal frustration about who we have become, but our metaphorical church seating charts keep us from moving in the real world. It keeps us from changing.

Our identity doesn't rest in God alone, it rests in our comfort. It rests in a small god who bends to our every whim. Because we don't know what to do with our questions and doubts, so our identity is the one that suffers. So, instead of asking questions, we become brainwashed by someone who has the ability to dazzle us with words (who knows I am may be dazzling you now) and either make us feel guilty or good about ourselves.

God is bigger than our sermons.

He is also outside of them.

That doesn't mean He is never in them, it means He is not bound by them. Once we get this, that we are in intimate friendship with this HUGE God who loves us, our lives will forever be altered. But, do we want that?

### **The Art of Metaphor**

The ancient Rabbi's had this art, no, responsibility to see beyond Scripture. They had this knack for taking a story (whether it was true or not) and finding deeper meaning rather than what was right before their eyes. It would be like dipping your hand in a lake not

knowing what you might get and you end up grabbing a handful of pearls. According to an online source, "The ford of the river Jabbok was the place where there was a conflict between two paths. It was at the confluence between two streams. It was also the only place where it was possible to brave and wade through the torrent that crossed the path of the road or trek that passed on further into the land of Israel. At certain times of year this was quite a struggle, and especially if there were goods to be carried over, cattle and flocks to be got across, not to mention family and children<sup>9</sup>... The Rabbi's wouldn't have just seen this as one of their ancient brothers in a battle with God. They might have it seen it as a metaphor that to be a Jew is to wrestle. To be a person who follows God, is to wrestle. Grapple with questions, doubts and fears. Maybe for some, who go to church, and get told that doubt is wrong, walk away, disheartened by the untruth that has just been shared. Then they go home and try their hardest not to struggle, not to doubt, not to question -- yet they do. Riddled with guilt. Well, my friend you are in good company with these ancient wanderers.

#### ANCIENT WANDERERS.

When we meet up with Jacob, he isn't comfortable with who He is. He uses his brother's name Esau, for starters. Then years pass and we meet up with him again and he finally gets to place where he is comfortable in his skin. He accepts who he is. And then in great Jewish humor fashion; God changes his name. Can we all agree that there is something beautiful about coming into who we were meant to be? Finding that we are so much more than we are now. That God believes we have it in us to be like Him. So much so He signed on the dotted line when He created us, and somewhere in our souls it says "authentic copy, one of a kind". This God wants you to know that you are on your way...

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<sup>9</sup> <http://biblestudy2000.tripod.com/Biblestudy2000a/id1.html>

## CONVERSATION 4

I think we need conflict. I have had a difficult time debating this issue with myself. I am not a person who likes to get into fights. I care about what people think of me way too much. In fact, on a gut level, I think conflict is useless. At least, due to my childhood experiences, I have come to believe that conflict can only be destructive and never formational.

There is a familiar story that has been floating around now for centuries. It has even showed up in our cartoon mythology. It's the story of a hopeless Tortoise who just cannot seem to get it together and a Hare who seems to know all the tricks of the path. As the story goes, the Hare challenges the Tortoise to a race. During the race however, the Hare thinks so highly of himself that he decides to take a nap. And in that time, the Tortoise discovers his potential. Now, depending on what cartoon you saw when you were little the Tortoise might have simply won the race because he tried so hard. The one that has been embedded in my mind is the one where the Tortoise stretches his neck out and uses a part of himself that he was never aware of to win the race and win the gold. Conflict brings

potential. Adversity brings pain. Pain brings change. Change affects the world. I know you might be thinking that this might be overstating my case a bit, after all this was a short story written by a famous slave who lived within a society who endorsed conflict. Late psychologist M. Scott Peck said this about conflict: "The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

This talk of conflict isn't justification for global chaos. War is destructive. Period. Do we ever need war? If we ask that question then we should also ask the following questions: Do we need unnecessary death? Do we need governmental oppression? Do we need justified evil behavior? We could go on. Like Gandhi once said: "You can't shake hands with a clenched fist." But, you get the point. Jesus uses peace along with love almost more than any other words that show up during his short time with us here on earth. Why? To make a point that life is lived well when it is in harmony with one another, when harmony is sought out as a way life. No, I am talking of internal conflict. It is here where I want us to work out together if we need conflict to help us become who we are meant to be. In the West, we have been trained to think that pain and conflict should be avoided. Words like pain and conflict tend to fall in the category of "things not to talk about." In comes our cultural of denial which tells us what we should and shouldn't be talking about. Yet, think back to those times of conflict, and sure, they were not the most exciting times in your life. But the after-effects of such painful moments have helped you become who you were meant to be.

Jesus is talking with a bunch of his friends and He challenges them to think about what they are getting themselves into by choosing to follow Him. Then he goes into graphic

provocative imagery of what their lives might look like if they commit themselves to the cause." Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me". To understand what Jesus was saying, I think we have to back to the cross. The cross was much like our electric chair, but it was messier in the aftermath. It was an instrument designed to publicly humiliate the criminal that hanged on it. They would usually start by whipping them with a cat-o-nine tails which had shards of rocks and bones to strip the flesh. The Roman government would also require them to be naked. There were no laws of public indecency in the time of Roman rule, in fact, they loved the human body. The Roman population learned most of their love of the human body from their Greek neighbors. What are we learning from ours? Historians go on to say that the cross was all about lowering the status of those who were hanged. We could go on and on, but there are enough good books on this subject already. Jesus was not using mythical language here. He was talking about us taking up our own cross and following him.

Death becomes us.

The Aramaic word for death is "Mowth", it means death. Unfortunately, Jesus wasn't sugar-coating this phrase by using rich Hebrew imagery. He was using the violent death of the cross as a metaphor for a way of life. Death into life. Death equals life. Giving up for the benefit of another is life. Letting go of things that slow us down = life. Conflict is a sort of death we each have to go through to become more who we are meant to be.

Brave heart is one of my favorite movies of all time, let's forget the historical absurdities for a moment and embrace the movie for what it is-a good story. It tells the story of an average man who by a series of unfortunate events becomes a hero for

freedom for his people from the tyrannical hand of Edward the Longshanks, one of the most brutal kings in England's history. Towards the end of the movie, William Wallace is having a conversation with the Princess and she is attempting to persuade William to save his own life. He responds, "All men die, few men truly live!" This was a man who was ready to die. He learned to see conflict as something we go through to make a change. A cocoon of sorts. He was in touch with the reality that in just a few moments, his life would be over. Most "heroic" people are in touch with their own mortality. They realize their lives aren't the point, that they are a part of something bigger. They were not afraid of death. But for some reason, our culture is. Turn on the television and count how many commercials have to do with aging and other products that are being sold that preserve our youth. We do not talk about it, because we're afraid of it. We need to talk about it. Accept it as a reality. We are all going to die. Conflict is the same. We, like me, do not want to talk about conflict. We would rather presume everything is alright, when deep down we know things are actually falling apart. So, we need heroes who are going to stand in the gap. Stand in the silence and say something. So when Jesus invites the disciples to take up their cross, He is inviting them into a "heroic" way of living. They too must come to terms that their lives are a part of something bigger. Jesus somehow believed His way of life could actually change all civilization. And so did those who followed Him. Most churches spend a lot of time deciphering what Christ is talking about here and tend to use cryptic language and ethereal descriptions of what it all might mean. They say things like "...it means that we have to give up everything we want" or "let go of all our dreams". This is not the case at all. Jesus is saying that it is in our conflict, our times of hardship that we find our dreams. Jesus goes on to say that we must "deny ourselves". The word for deny in the Aramaic is the same English word for contradict. Again, at the heart of contradiction is conflict. He is saying we must be people who realize our potential

through loss and conflict. Much like the Tortoise at the beginning of our talk. That at times we must be willing to make decisions for the greater good that may cost us everything. Let's change the cross to mean cause. What is your cause? Why are you here? Are you here to follow Jesus? To follow Buddha? Money? Happiness? Take whatever your cause is and replace it with the cross in that verse. Jesus wants us to see that we must be ready to die for what we believe in and then also come to terms that we are going to have to, at times, make decisions in life that will literally strip us bare for the greater good. We have to contradict ourselves. Conflict is essential. Some may be reading this and having a hard time with this as a conversation topic. I understand. I too am having a hard time writing this as a person who grew up in a conflict-ridden house. But, what if conflict in our culture and upbringings have only taught us one side to the benefits of conflict? What if the fact that we have become victims of our childhood and environment have created this fear of conflict? If this is you, it is important to deal with this issues head-on. It is imperative that we, especially as Westerners, come to terms with the healthy side of conflict. Whatever that means for you, look for healing. For me, it means counseling and dealing with my demons that are sometimes too easy to hide behind our Sunday smiles.

In the book of Lamentations, there is a story of Israel going through conflict. Historical. Geographical. National identity. Personal. Just to name a few. The story is written in the descriptive style of a Hebrew poem. Here's the backdrop. Israel is personified as a woman who is in utter pain and experiencing conflict. Can you relate to that? There is a narrator who sees everything. Then there is a gibbor or "mighty man", maybe a close rendering would be "hero", although at times these two words could be worlds apart. This gibbor starts out like more of a reporter who is chronicling events in the life of Israel. Then in Chapter 3, everything shifts. He feels her pain. He even uses graphic imagery to describe the emotional violence he is experiencing just watching this go on.

Have you ever turned on your television and watched so much agony that you felt like you had to turn away? Have you ever experienced so much pain that all you felt like doing was run from the scene? This is what is going on here. "The LORD filled me with misery; he made me drunk with suffering. He broke my teeth with gravel and trampled me into the dirt. I have no more peace"

Here is a man who has seen so much pain in another that He himself is actually questioning whether he wants to be alive. Yet later he says "...the Lord is my portion."

What? He literally bears his soul and practically rails against God and then comes up with the conclusion that God is more than enough? If I was Jeremiah, I am not sure I would be writing those words in the same sentence. Then again, if I was Jeremiah, I might not have a problem with hope and despair being bedfellows. In the West, hope is typically defined as something we get or experience post-despair. Even our cliches allude to this way of thinking, "the sun shines after the rain". More often than not, it seems that David is angry at God for abandoning him and leaving him for dead, you ever feel like that about God? David did. But then he tends to come to the apparent conclusion that "God is good".

What? Why?

Yep, David too came to the same conclusion that the author of Lamentations did. That hope and despair can live in the same room together. We are taught that we should not talk about certain things in our culture. This culture of denial has led us to believe that everything we say and do and live has their own little compartment that it should stay in. Even hope and despair. But without despair, you don't need hope. Without hope, all you would have is despair. They need one another. So does conflict. Without peace, all you would ever know is conflict. But without conflict, you don't need peace. We need conflict to remind us of peace. To remind us why we're here. Now, I don't think that means you need

to put this book down and go to look for conflict. But, I think we have learned to run from the very thing we need to help make us who we are meant to be. Take a moment and daydream about a moment, either recent or in the past where you experienced some sort of deep tension. How did it make you feel? Where were you? Why were you there? Now, ask yourself: "What did learn from this experience? How did it make me a better person?" Now when I use the word conflict or tension, I do not mean when someone got raped, or you might have been beaten or someone in your past abused you. We are not talking about someone else's destructive choices and how they may have shaped you. Although, they are important and they need to be dealt with. This is not what I mean when I use this idea of conflict. That is evil behavior on someone else's part that unfortunately has been placed into your life. For the record, I am sorry you ever had to deal with that. Bestselling author and psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck said this: "The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers..." See conflict leads to transformation. To borrow a term from Pete Rollins who is the leader of a community of people in Ireland who do something so creative called "Transformance Art", the belief that the creation and life of art can transform people and worlds. Amazing concept. If the end goal of conflict is to lead to some sort of transformation or change then we can call that "Transformance Conflict". The Jews believed we needed conflict.

If you look at the Old Testament, you will see a nation formed by conflict. A nation who like us, learns to run or hide from it. Who didn't want conflict, so much so, that they begin to join in on the beliefs of the people around them. I am not condoning that we go to create conflicts by having others believe what we believe. I do not believe this is what Jesus meant all. But there is a way of life that can subversively and creatively and

peacefully find ways to change the culture for the better. This is what I believe Jesus was dreaming out loud about.

It was around 930 BCE that Jerusalem and Judah decided to separate from each other, mostly do to different opinions on the rightful heir to the throne. Judah became known as the southern kingdom and Jerusalem as the northern kingdom. Let's talk about Judah for a moment before we move on. The capital of the Southern Kingdom was Samaria, where the New Testament Samaritans came from. That is another conflict saved for another book. Judah got comfortable with their time in Babylon. They began accepting the Babylonian belief system and mixing it in with theirs. One major religion in that time in history was Zoroastrianism. Without going to into too much detail here, because there a lot of good resources out there on this religion, some of the main creeds of this faith are that:

1. A belief in a place called heaven
2. The belief in an ultimate archenemy of God called Satan
3. A belief in a place of eternal damnation

As the days went on and the Jews became more synchronized with the belief in Zoroastrianism, they too began believing in the above things. There was no recorded belief in Judaism in some evil-encompassing being who ran around trying to trip us all up. In fact the term devil doesn't even show up in the Old Testament and the title Satan only appears 19 times and most in the story of Job. But Satan is a servant of God in this story. The Jewish view of Satan actually employs the meaning of the word. The word Satan means one who opposes or adversary. The ancient Jewish people believed that we needed adversity in our life. They too believed we couldn't become who were meant to be

without conflict. We need conflict. We need Satan. Now, if you've read this with your Western eyes on, you just thought of some mythical half-goat half-human creature that Dante spoke of in his vision. Or some guy painted all red in a suit with a pitchfork. Again, this idea of Satan being a person did not come from our ancient pre-Christian roots, but from a religion that was around the same time that Judaism (our origins started here) was still forming itself. So, when Peter is told by Jesus to get behind Him and calls Peter "Satan". Jesus isn't calling him the person we think Satan is, although He could have easily been using a cultural reference to Zoroastrianism, but most likely was referring to Peter as a person who was blocking his path, or someone who was stepping in the way of what He knows He has come to do. We can all be Satan. We can all get in the way of someone's development. Now the Jewish view is that adversity also comes out of God himself. In the poetic metaphor of Job which has traces of the Aggadah, a Jewish compilation of fables and legends, Satan is a servant of God. Just like we have been talking about how hope lives with despair, conflict resides with peace, adversity comes from God. He is committed to us. He is committed to our development, to us becoming more like Him. "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things." This is the prophet Isaiah describing the character of God. This verse does not say God is all evil, it does not endorse a theology of God going around creating evil. It does say that He had a hand in forming darkness and disaster. That he contributed to it. The Jewish idea of darkness is that we need it to help create distinction. That if light was all by itself, all things would remain the same. There would be no difference. There is also a Jewish story of how light and dark were in conflict with one another and that God created peace between them. So does that explain the relationship between God and evil. Ancient Rabbi's said this, " Evil is something that is allowed by God in order that the good should become manifest and known." There is a tendency in our

western approach to think that opposites don't attract. Sure, we believe this in romantic settings, but we tend to reject this in any other environment. It seems impossible that loss can come from the same place as gain. Or that joy can dance with confusion. But this is central to what the origins of our faith teach us. So, where do we go from here? How does this affect us? I think it challenges us to let go of our need for explanation. Our need for things to make sense in a linear way. It invites us to see as Rob Bell once said that "Everything is Spiritual". That all we go through is more than just something that we go through. Also, like Peter, we too have it in us to promote evil or to live out our lives in healing response to how this knowledge changes us. We must come to a place within us where we can reconcile the reality that God chooses to use conflict to change us. A friend of mine told me this, "God is committed to your development, no matter what!" He was saying this in response to whether I should leave some place or go somewhere else. It was so freeing. To know that life isn't about finding some equation to figure out if I go left or right or whether that decision is wrong or right. But that I was made to enjoy the life God has invited me into. That I should live it well. Including the hard times that come and the good times that arrive as well and to arrive at the same places that Job did about God, which is that "you give and take away, blessed be the name of the Lord". Now instead of just quoting a verse and leaving it at that. Let's find out what this means from the Jewish point of view and why it is important us on the subject of personal conflict. I think it also has something to say about global conflict. Remember the story of Job. He lost it all. Everything. And he was able to come out of this saying what he said. I mean, I would want to curse God. I was adopted at the age of five and was taken away from my family and everything I knew. I had heard about God, but we weren't on speaking terms. You know the kind where you can just sit for hours and talk with someone and not even realize a moment passed. God and I weren't there. We wouldn't be there for some time. Somehow,

Job came to realize something, that sometimes, the things that happen around us are completely out of our control. And that the origin of all things (good and conflict) come from God. Maybe that is what we all need to get back to. The basics of realizing that all things originate in the Divine. Job came to a place where nothing else mattered. He used words like 'nude' to give us an emotional picture of how distraught he was. Nudity was shaming in their culture. He had come to a place where he just let it all go. In the letting go, he also found out that it was about choosing who God was over all that he had experienced. Someone's name wasn't just a title like it tends to be in our culture. It was who you were, it was identity and to some even your potential and lasting legacy. It was you encompassed in a word or two. How would you encompass who you are now in a word or two? Do you think it describes your potential? We need to let go. We need to set down the things that get in the way of dancing with God. Dancing is an intimate state of being where we realize that God leads the steps and we follow. And it is also realizing that at times God steps back and lets us lead the whole thing. Job knew this. And so he came to the conclusion that we need to let it all go. That the struggle isn't the point, it is the result that is the point. This is what brought him to say to God that he chooses Him, which is what the word 'blessed' implies in the Hebrew tongue. Who you do choose? Temporary peace from your conflict? Or do you choose the you that is on the other side of that conflict.

## CONVERSATION 5

Silence is the hardest things for most of us. It forces us into corners we've convinced ourselves that we are not ready to deal with. So we talk. We make noise. We scream. Sometimes the sounds we make hide the pain we feel inside. But, we embrace it. Some of us, call it home. It isn't part of a cycle. It does not follow a natural pattern of progression. It is a way of life. Our televisions fill our already inundated minds with more stuff that we don't need to think about. Getting up, going to work, coming home, eating dinner, having sex and then wake up and do it all over again. And the in the middle of all that we do, it is up to us to find out what the ever elusive Will of God is for our lives. Some pastors might tell that there are a series of confirmations that need to happen before you know that is what God wants you to do. Others might say that it comes when we rigorously search the scriptures and find that one verse that seems to direct or guide us. Or maybe all this plus a series of uncontrolled outside events that cohesively work together to help you find your heavenly destiny. Now, I apologize if I am minimizing the experience that some have and how God may or may not work. This is not my intention. What we must be willing to do as one of my recent friends said is "reexamine everything". God is bigger than our equations.

Bigger than our Bible verses and seemingly outside "uncontrolled events" that mysteriously lead us to make a decision about whether we go right or left.

## FREE

If God is freedom then He invites us all to live "freely". Let me explain. If a warden sets you free from prison and then follows you around and watches your every step and then reprimands you for making a wrong choice. Then that isn't freedom. It's freedom with expectation. When Jesus left his friends with the final words of "making disciples", he did not hand them a step-by-step handbook with color photos on how to go about doing that. Why? He trusts them to find it all out on their own. In that, I think He also realized it was going to be different for everyone. So, why is it that when some other follower says something different from what the majority does, they are already wrong before they open their mouth? Remember, Jesus was against the idea that "majority rules". The majority became nothing it was meant to be. It morphed into an institution of people dedicated to preserving all things safe and traditional. Jesus was against it, and if He was against it, why aren't we? Now, I am not saying we should challenge all things that Christendom has given us, there are some good things there. But, we must be willing to reexamine everything. What if Galileo didn't challenge the system? We would still think that the world revolves around us, which honestly, it still seems that way. And they called him a heretic and were ready to hang him. So, why is that when someone decides to question things that they to get labeled a heretic? By the very definition, Jesus was a heretic. And if that is the case, and we are all his followers, then we too should be ready to be called heretics against the institution, against the Empire of religion. Now, before it seems like I am being combative for the sake of being combative, let me tell you why we are here in this conversation. Because life and God doesn't belong in a box. Too many times we try to

keep God, ourselves, and life cooped up in our little boxes that seem to want to make sense of everything. And by definition, those things aren't defined by having boxes, their very definitions will not allow that.

## I SURRENDER

There were some 15<sup>th</sup> century monks who nicknamed God the "abyss". Now, in that culture and time, calling God an endless black hole wouldn't have gotten you the Emmy for the most popular person. It most likely would have gotten you hanged in front of all of your friends and enemies. They too were heretics. And they were fine with that as a title. Their idea was that God could only be known not by lurking around the edges (which they called theology) but that God could only be experienced by letting go to jumping in. Maybe for far too long we have lived in the Enlightenment age. What if being enlightened is letting go of our enlightenment? Again, it was not about experiencing God through theology. It was also leaving that behind. It was leaving behind frameworks, systems, ideas, and even understanding in place of experiencing the person of God. The person of the Holy Spirit. And the person of Jesus. But it could only be met in surrender. In the constant context of reexamining everything.

## CONCEDE

Way back when people lived in ancient tribes, people sacrificed things. Animals. Food. Children. Adults. The practice of sacrifice was part of everyday life, like shopping is to most of ours. These people believed that if they gave up these things, then the invisible god (someone in their tribe would usually sculpt a wooden image to give them a visual; this says a lot about our need for connection to what we believe in) would in some ways respond by giving rain to dry land or healing a family member from some kind of illness. It was very superstitious behavior, but no one questioned it because it was an everyday aspect of their lives. I wonder if we to have similar practices we may not even be aware

of? After Adam and Eve decided to take a permanent holiday away from the garden, the first recorded sacrifice we have in the Bible is Cain and Abel. As we know, Cain killed Abel and we've been trying to reverse that act since it happened. Brothers killing brothers, this story has global implications even now. But why sacrifice? Would God tell the Levites (the personal assistants to the High Priests) tell them that all life is holy and then endorse the pagan practice of sacrifice? This dichotomy is explained in the Caballah, a collection of belief and writings within the mystical camp of Judaism. "The cabalistic interpretation of the sacrifices are usually associated with the esoteric exposition of the tabernacle and the Temple, whose every detail has symbolic significance in the realm of the Seafront (the ten attributes of God), and with the connection among the individual Jew and the Jewish people as a whole and the divine world, both the good powers and the evil...It is possible that their detailed treatment of this subject had a polemical purpose - to oppose Maimonides' conception of sacrifice, which denied its intrinsic value and held that the practice originated in pagan customs which God conceded to the Jews after the exodus from Egypt, because they had not reached a high enough religious level to enable them to worship Him in a spiritual manner" God conceded to the Jews. Is that what that just said? God went ahead with the sacrificial system. He didn't necessarily endorse it in the way we might define the word endorse. He chose to go ahead and use it for their benefit. We see that God didn't fully agree to this system, especially as it being full proof, because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. To end all sacrifices. To end superstitious ways to get to Him. Are there any still lurking around? Maybe like praying to twist God's arm to fit our agenda. Or trying to use scripture to find certain methods to get God to follow our understanding of Him. We do this in our everyday relationships as well. We try to get others to respond the way we want them to. We say words like "please" and "thank you" and say things that we want to hear so we can manipulate and be manipulated to get what we want. Isn't that

what we are doing with God? Praying with the intention of getting something out of it.

Wearing our cross necklaces. Going to church. What if sacrifice meant something else?

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is Korban, at the root of the word it means to unite or come close to. Sacrifice is a romantic word? Yep. It means to be one. To be just like God. That was the purpose of the ancient pagan practice of sacrifice. To be just like the god you served. To follow in His footsteps. Not manipulate him.

#### LIKE AN EQUAL

If God can concede to our practices, would He choose to concede to other things of our own design.

We see God doing this in the middle of having a conversation with Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The conversation between Abraham and his creator happen in his tent. This is not a mistake, God dwells with man. Meeting in someone's tent is one of the most intimate things you could in this culture. It would be like letting someone share a meal with you while holding a knife to your neck. Their life was in your hands. It was a vulnerable thing to do, to let someone inside your home. It was saying I entrust my life in your hands. I wonder if we have lost this art of hospitality in our culture of fences, guns and iron screen doors? I wonder what it looks like to get it back. Now, it's important to remember that around the time that this conversation is happening, Lot has already moved to Sodom. He is among the pagans. He is Abraham's nephew, he is family. In this culture, you didn't define yourself as an individual, you defined yourself by whom you were related to. Your fame or notoriety was determined by whom you came from. This is different from our culture where we spend so much energy exerting our anarchical right to be an individual. Also, you never left family behind. You fought for them no matter the cost. So, enter into the conversation between Abraham and God in the tent and you begin to see a pattern. Abraham is bargaining with God here, he thinks he is God's equal. He is so

close to God that he believes he can actually negotiate with the all powerful Creator. And God isn't offended or shows no sign of nervousness. He enters the conversation. And He talks with Abraham like an equal as well. I wonder if we have lost the art of being close to God? How do we get it back? At the end of this interesting conversation, God concedes. He ends the bargain with His friend Abraham by fully agreeing that He would not destroy the city even if there were ten righteous people. Abraham stepped in for his nephew. For family. And God went along with it. This isn't the only story we see God working alongside humans to preserve life or to increase the opportunity for personal growth. We see this in Moses, Gideon, Elijah and even Jesus. The story of God is that we get to write with Him.

## SEASONS

Solomon, the Son of David inherited the ability to write poetry and rule a country like his father did. In one of his most famous of works he goes into this list of experiences we all have in life. Although, this list isn't an inclusive list of all things we go through, it is an invitation to see that life happens in seasons. " For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.

A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak." If you are lucky, you might just experience all these emotions in one day. Life can do that sometimes. You can lose someone dear to you and then you could win the lottery all in the same day. We are emotional beings. We are made to experience life. Not read it in a book. Go ahead and lay this book down and step outside your door and drink in the moment that is now. Go ahead, it will be here when you get

back. Life is about the experience of it. All of it. All the seasons it has to bring. We've been talking about God willfully conceding to man. What if God concedes to the seasons as well? Now, when I say seasons I mean the seasons of relationship. You can sit in a room with the closest of your friends and chat about anything. In the same day, you can both sit in silence and rest in the comfort of each others' company. You can plan a road trip to one of your favorite destinations or play a game cards without ever leaving your living room. You can just be yourself. But, you have to know who you are before you can be yourself. You can just be. Period. Other than our personal experiences of God, the recorded conversations of God to man are written down in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In fact, one might say, in comparison that there is a lot more conversation and interaction between the Creator and the created in the Old Testament than there is in the New Testament. There is much more speaking from God to man. Then Jesus comes on the scene for three years to show what it means to God on earth. To bring heaven here, now. To oppose systems of oppression and to find peace in the midst of all. There is so much more we can go into here. But as the seasons move on and time rolls forward that God seems to be more and more silent. The other day, one of my friends asked, "Why does it seem that there are more miracles and demonstrations of God's presence in third-world countries than there is here in the West?" One simple answer is that we don't need God enough. We have too much. Our entitlement has become our god. But, at the heart of that question is the realization that we could be experiencing God a whole lot more. It's as if he was asking, "Where is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?" The God who kicked this all off. Where did He go? What if God never left at all. What if like the friend above, He is leaving it up to us? He has chosen to concede to the seasons in our relationship. That He has become comfortable enough with us that He has decided to empower us with the ability to heal the world. The Jews have this phrase "Tikkun Olam", which means to heal or

repair the world. It's a phrase packed with so much meaning but comes down to the fact that God put us here to set things right. To reverse evil. To endorse peace. To fight for those who have no voice. This ideology introduces the concept that God trusts us. It is important for us to trust God, but He also trusts us. This is a big deal. An itinerant missionary once said it this way, "(we) are co-workers with God". God has enabled us with the ability to carry the message of His Kingdom. He believes we can live it out here. He isn't afraid of us getting it wrong. If He did, Jesus would have left another handbook on how to get it right. God isn't nervous about us messing up. I wonder if the theology we have has made God too small, too scared to let us build and create things here that represent Him? I see scripture encouraging the exact opposite. Jesus is God. Jesus was there at the creation. He helped put all that we see around us into existence. He is creative. Then He says to a bunch of his friends that they are the light of the world...and then a few chapters later He says that He is the light of the world. What He's really saying is we are just like Him. He didn't say one day they will be the light of the world. He told them right then and there they are the light of the world. His message was overheard by those who might have been deemed as outsiders and dirty by their culture. Jesus was starting to build a sort of revolution. He was saying that all people could be like

Him if they want. We have it in us to be like Jesus, now. So if God is conceding to the seasons and has chosen to back off, we are Him on earth now. This doesn't mean that He never interacts or demonstrates Himself. The whole idea of Logos that the author John used was that Jesus was this Logos. The Greek idea is that the Logos is the creating, animating force that keeps all of creation together. That Jesus and God are even now still creating. And we get invited into that. We get to be a part of the divine artwork we see on display. We get to work out his Will on earth. His dream has already been laid out in black

and white. We tend to talk about the Will of God in this kind of big, out there in the mist, ethereal equation based thing that we might get lucky to find if there are enough confirmations. This isn't to say God doesn't work this way ever. What it does mean is that if God's dream has already been given to us through the ancient scriptures, then life is about learning to live out here on earth and help in the process of Tikkun Olam. So, where is this dream of God?

It is all over scripture. Fight oppression. Bear one another's burdens. Be peacemakers. Love God. Love one another. Take care of creation. Recapture what it means to follow in the way of the Rabbi from Nazareth. Forgive without holding on. Bring healing wherever we go. This isn't one of those lists that end here. There is so much in scripture. That is why it is a life-long pursuit. We cannot chase after perfectionism. It gets in the way of God's grace and redemption. We must chase after healing the brokenhearted. God has put everything we need within us. This isn't some book that endorses humanism. This is realizing that being human is a good thing. That Jesus came as a human not the divine. Sure, He still was divine. He came to show us a new way to be human. A better way to be who we are meant to be. So, God might just be willfully conceding to being silent because He wants us to figure out what it means to live out His will on earth. Because He is depending on us to wrestle with what He has already placed within us and learn to live it out for the benefit of the world and the context within which we live. He trusts us. Abraham Herschel was once quoted as saying that "we have been told that man has a God-shaped hole, but in reality, God has a man-shaped hole..." God needs us. No. Not in the co-dependent over compensating manner that some couples work out their past issues on one another. He needs us to be image-bearers. But the charter wasn't meant to sit in a room with an exclusive group of people embracing their membership rights. It was meant for the world. The message of Jesus was always bigger than Christianity. So, what are

afraid of? Ourselves? Failure? Success? Spiritual activist and author Marianne Williamson says this, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." God wants us to know He believes in us. Trusts us. Depends on us. And that news might just create a movement of missional people who look outwards with everything they have. With all their hearts. With all their resources. God has conceded to the silence and the seasons because we are His voice. We are his hands and feet. Because He believes we can change the world. He believes we can overcome our fears and that "our presence (can) automatically liberates others."

## CONVERSATION 6

Our family loves taking road trips. The kind that would take a few days just to plan and get ready for. The ones' where all your sisters sock would end up in your suitcase because she ran out of room in hers because of all the makeup she was taking with you. We would go to the mythical changing rocks of the painted deserts and the arch in St. Louis to the slums of Tijuana. Our lives were filled with postcard images embedded in our heads. Along with all the bathroom breaks and the annoying questions of "are we there yet?" We really got to experience the world as little children. It was amazing. I wonder if at times, in our churches, should we ask that question? Are we fully present?

It seems to me that children have this incredible knack for being in the moment. When you tell them they are going on a trip to Disneyland, that is all they can think about. No matter what happens around them, their world can even fall apart, but, they are going to Disneyland. Children have a knack for knowing how to be fully present. Maybe that is why Jesus used them so much as a metaphor for the Kingdom. They also have this intense interest in the world around them. Questions abound. It's as if as children, we once had

the ability to be lost in wonder. To be in awe of what was around us. "...you must become like one of these..." to join in on the movement of Jesus.

We are told that one day in the future we are all going to get out of here. Some theologians call this evacuation theology. We're going to leave earth. We might even magically don white robes and grow angelic wings and play harps, however it's going to happen, we do not stay here for very long. It's as if we're all stuck in an elevator together and we're waiting for the janitor to come to get us out of here. We talk about going to heaven as if we're in a house on fire and we all need to run out of here before it all burns down. We think everyone else are like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, that they are unaware of the death and destruction that a loving God might one day bring. And we're Abraham trying to save the few we know that are righteous. What if we have gotten the message wrong? What if we were meant to stick around and rebuild the Kingdom here? This idea of heaven being somewhere out there beyond the clouds and stars is nowhere in scripture. There is indirect inference that heaven is "up there" but nothing solid to sustain this belief. In fact, the author of Revelation uses the imagery of a city (sometimes called the New Jerusalem) coming down from the skies. God comes to dwell with man. This is what is going on in the Old Testament when we see phrases like a "pillar by night" and a "cloud by day". This is God intimately intertwined with his creation. God wants to be with us. God here. God now.

Steeped in the ancient creeds of these wondering followers of God is this phrase "Tikkun Olam" which when loosely translated means "Repair the world". To heal or repair the world is a central tenant to the Jewish faith. It was the understanding that we all have an integral part in helping make the world a better place. This is so much deeper than any new-age thought, this is something that we all are responsible for. We each have a role. We have a

part to play. God depends on us. No, not in the co-dependent way two insecure lovers might, but in the way two cogs might need one another so a machine can work. Paul said it this way, we are "God's co-workers". The actual Greek rendering is even more substantial, it lends itself to the idea that there is synergy among us and God. There is a lot of deep poetry going on here that we might lose in the English. Synergy is the cooperation of a series of things working together for the end goal. Even in Paul's phrase there is assumption and expectation that God believes we have what it takes. That He doesn't have to separate himself from us because of some sin we can't get rid of. God doesn't just have hope in whom we could be, He is willing to work with us to help us become the best us we can be. To heal the world, we have to be in it. To help repair it, we have to share in all of it. Our culture has taught us otherwise. All you have to do is switch on the television and wait for the commercials to flash across the screen to see that we are subconsciously inundated with image after image of how we are missing the next best thing and that without it we aren't fully us. Maybe the way to fix this fear of being here is to apologize to ourselves. That we have somehow accepted the lie that we are not enough. That we need more. More of us. The department store Macy's used to run an ad campaign entitled "More You" and it was all over the place. You could be walking down the street and see it on the side of a bus or flip through the different array of channels on your satellite television, or see it on a T-shirt. They wanted to make sure you got the message that they had what you needed to be more you. God made you "you" when you drew your first breath, even before you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye...you were you. And that is what the world needs-you. You here. You now.

The Jews believed that it wasn't our responsibility to fix what was wrong with it, but that we could all work together to repair the divine in it. It's people coming together and dreaming out loud what the world could be and then working in that divine synergy to see it through

no matter what the cost. See, maybe the Church has got it wrong. We spend so much of our time and energy trying to point out what is wrong with world and forget that God has and still calls it 'good'. The Hebrew word for good means beautiful. It paints the image of someone who lost all ability for words, someone who has seen something so captivating that their jaw has literally dropped in exclamation. This is God's response to his creation. This is God's response to us. A God that we get to we work with. We work with Him to bring Heaven to earth. To help transform cities, societies, cultures and ways of life. Abraham Herschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians of his time invites us to see that God needs us, he says "We have heard it was said that man has a God-shaped hole, but really God has a man-shaped hole..." I am not trying to create a theology of humanism, but as I dig deeper into the Jewish understanding of God and man, I am enlightened to the reality that God has an intense love and fiercely high opinion of humanity and our ability to follow through on what He has set out for us. But if we are constantly spending all of our creativity, energy, and hope in getting out of here then how could we be of any help to the movement of God that depends on us staying here? Christ came into the world to save or a better word would be to heal it word. In fact, that is what it means to save something. To heal it. To repair it.

We have been taught to believe that the world is bad and that the only hope we have to cling to is that one day we will get out of here. Which is great for the selected few that might be a part of it all. It also absolves us from any responsibility to transform the world we live in. It allows us to be people who are passive participants in the Matrix. Remember that movie? The one with Keanu Reeves as Neo or the "One" who comes to realize that he is to save mankind. He goes through a series of trials and interactions that take him one step closer to realizing that he has the ability to help save the world from the Matrix

controlling the minds of the people. Has the church become the Matrix? I am a sucker for a good ending. I really like the movies that leave you wanting more or create this inner curiosity for what happens next, even after the credits roll. I read in a book somewhere that the author likes to read the ending of the books first. There is something about knowing the end that makes us feel safe in the now. It gives us this sort of feeling that everything will be okay. My nieces would get so excited days ahead when they knew we were all planning a trip to Disneyland. They couldn't sleep they were so excited, which meant everyone else could sleep either. There is an excitement and hope that comes with the realization that there is something to look forward to. But, what if there is more to waiting than simply sitting and hoping and wishing? What if there is more and it involves us being intentional with our time, passions and efforts? David was a poet-king of Jerusalem. He was a big deal to Jewish history. Revered for his skills as a leader and as a God-follower. He understood hoping and waiting. Waiting was central to his vocabulary. He knew it well. You may know it well too. "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope." The Jewish word here speaks of waiting as an active thing. It's a child who excitedly waits for his father to get home and expends all of his energy running to and from the couch to see out the window when he arrives. It is not a complacently hopeful awaiting for the possible arrival of someone who might come. It is the hyperactive kinetic reaction to the knowledge that God is going to act. Period. That He will respond. It is word that is interlaced with hopeful action. What if our culture has hijacked this message? What if somewhere in our sordid history the church has helped this idea along? God has already empowered us with the ability to repair the world around us. There are so many ways we can join in.

The danger is that we don't join in at all. That we focus so much of our time and interests on somewhere out there while people are hurting and dying around us. The danger is that we get so comfortable with this place called heaven and we can get so heavenly minded that sometimes we forget "we're living in a real world with real hurts and real pains" The danger is that we never have the ability to be fully present. To be with someone in their suffering. To sit and ask questions with them, to cry with them. The Jews had this practice called Sitting Shiva, it is still used in some Jewish homes. Close friends would come around during the time of their friends' mourning and if the mourner would cry then the friends would as well. If they laugh, then so did their friends. You get the point.

If we were sent here to go there, then none of the above is important. Yet, Jesus commands us, (and I was reminded by an interview with Bono that it is a command) to "love your neighbor...". In fact, if you search the Bible you will see a consistent thread running through it that challenges us all to be people who are driven by compassion. Our embrace of evacuation theology will keep us from chasing after the heart of another. To heal others.

"Defend weak people and orphans. Protect the rights of the oppressed and the poor." Asaph was a cymbal-playing Levite in charge of David's choir. This rock star used his poetic platform to fight for others. His whole family was so talented they became like the first Von Trapp family around. They decided to let their music infuse their beliefs in creativity and progressive behavior. They used what they had to affect change. The danger in never being here on earth is that we don't get to be in on this change. That we don't get to be a part of this act of repairing the divine. Focusing on the good that the world has to offer. Creatively and energetically racing after in numerous opportunities to help the widow

and the poor. The idea of being here or fully present is an act of holiness according to the Jews. The numerical value of *halom*, (the Hebrew word for here) is the number 75. This is the same numerical for *Kohen*, the Hebrew word for priest. There is something divine, something deeply holy about being there for someone. There is something healing in words not spoken and a touch that should have been administered long before they lost something dear to them. We need one another. The very act of being fully present with someone is holy. You are participating in a movement bigger than yourself when you are "here" for someone. So be fully present. Be here.

The world is waiting on you. What are you waiting for?

## CONVERSATION 7

I get it wrong a lot. I had always prized my knack for being really good at finding things. You see, I am visual learner. I learn by seeing and experiencing. If someone gives me a landmark as part of my directions to get somewhere I won't get lost. If there are a bunch of lefts and rights without any landmarks, chances are I need my own GPS to carry around. I've got to admit though, sometimes (I would say 5% of the time; I am being generous because I am writing the book and not my wife!) I do that guy thing, you know, where I act like I know where I am going but I really don't but because I am supposed to be the guy who knows everything and doesn't have the ability to get lost - ever-- I project that I have it all together and that I am Google Map personified!

We have been diving in and out of culture and how it affects us in this book. We cannot talk about this enough. And let me define what I mean by culture here, it is something that has been around before you and I were born. Something we can see in action and is right in front of us. But culture isn't devoid of personal experience and the environment we all grew up in, the places we have come to fear the most and the places we call home. Culture is symbiotically connected to our society and we are connected it. We can't

unculture (new word, add to your dictionary) ourselves. We can deny and slowly move away from cultural practices and beliefs. But our culture is a part of our DNA. Like Thomas Berry the cultural historian once said "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." We can't get away from the fact that our culture is in this communion of subjects. That life isn't objective, it is subjective. It is to be felt and touched and experienced. But, we also have to be honest about our experiences and our limits and understanding. This chapter isn't about how bad we are or how limited we might be, it's about how culture helps define who we are and what we believe or how it steers us in a certain direction. This has nothing to do with being a victim of culture, but it does have everything to do with being a culture-bender. Someone who is willing to challenge ideas and ask questions and someone who is willing to rethink everything. A person who is dedicated to reimagining what the world could be, recapturing the message of compassion as a way of life, seeing that we are all part of this communion of subjects. We live and breath and share in this beautiful thing called life. We cannot do that without being honest with whom we are as people.

I learned I am bad at directions here in England. I am much better at home in California. Where I had lived most of my life. But our culture says that I should not confess that to you. That my recognition of self-ignorance is the ultimate sign of weakness and therefore tells others I must have a low self-esteem. We have to be honest with one another. Because we need each other to make this thing called life work. In fact, culture says the cool thing to do is hide your flaws, hide your insecurities, don't let anyone in. It's safer that way. Don't talk about death, don't talk about sex, don't even think about asking the person next to you how they are, they might just hit you. We are afraid. We are terrified to show our scars and share our demons. Yet, there is healing there. There is something medically

helpful in acknowledging our own baggage. Syd Baumel, a Canadian Homeopathic doctor says this about confession "... baring your soul can not only calm your heart, research suggests, it can lower your blood pressure. Confronting your demons can not only ease your worried mind, it can boost your flagging immune system. Like an apple a day, confession can keep the doctor away."

It's a returning to whom we are meant to be. There is something mystical about letting go of past junk and then actually meeting the person you were always meant to be. Teshuva is a word in Judaism that expresses the concept of a return. The Prodigal Son had a Teshuva. He returned home after realizing how destructive his decisions were to himself and everyone around him. He returned home. Life is a journey of returning home again and again. This isn't a theology of how much like lowly worms we are, which are sometimes words that hymn writers have used about the human race. God doesn't see us that way, we should work our hardest to do the same. It is purposefully contradicting our culture of denial and what is 'PC' and what is not 'PC' and being able to sit in a room with others and share our soul. In the hope of finding connection and healing and restoration. So that we can do the same with the world. So that we can "love others as we love ourselves." But we must come to a place of Teshuva before we can move forward.

The world is falling apart. I don't need to tell you that. Read a newspaper or watch a news channel and you will see what I mean. The state of the world is not as it should be. We are all responsible for living out what we believe. But, it must be in a state of Teshuva. Teshuva is the process of returning things back to the way it was meant to be. There is a search involved. A community of people needed and willing to go on this search and bring others along with them. And this living out what we believe is much more than simply

telling others about Jesus. Remember that God sees the world as a good thing. That we are all responsible for repairing the divine. This process is going to take time. Returning home always does. We must be realistic, but we must always be willing to embrace the impossible. That God chooses to use us to build his Kingdom. Not just us. Everyone. This message of Jesus was that everyone gets to be a part. We as his proclaimed followers must be in a state of repentance when we choose to follow this Rabbi. Also, repentance might not be what you think it means.

Our family used to go to the beach a lot. We used to spend time on the old rickety wooden piers, that seemed to tell stories of those who have walked before. It was beautiful scenery, birds flying through the air like dancers on a stage. One of my favorite things about being on the pier was begging my dad for a few quarters to put in the silver viewfinder that awaited for my arrival. It was like a poor man's Disneyland. I stepped up and slowly peered through the two eye-holes and the world was that much bigger and that much smaller all at the same time. It was like looking at the world for the first time again and again.

Jesus is our viewfinder. Even before this Rabbi stepped on to the scene, his family was paving the way for his arrival. His cousin John was by this famous river talking to anyone who wanted to hear about this new guy who was going to usher in this other kind of Kingdom. Different to the ones' they were used to. He would use words that they would have known to get them ready for this incoming 'Savior'. John, in the deepest and loudest voice he could muster would shout: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near!"

Powerful stuff. Repent. Kingdom. God. All these in the same sentence? No one heard of such a thing. It would be like us trying to sit around the dinner table and have a conversation about politics, religion and family issues all in one go. It was unheard of. Before we go further, let's unpack what all these things mean. *Metanoia* is Greek the word for repent. It has nothing to do with sin. When the word is properly placed in its context, it literally means "Think beyond what you know" or maybe even "reform your mind." Somewhere along the way it was adopted by those who wanted it to mean something else other than what was intended. In fact, if you search the scriptures there is not one verse that places repent and sin next to each other, unless it directly relates to those who follow God. You may find one or two, but in reality, I think scripture is pointing to something here. If anyone needs to do any repenting, it is us.

The closest verse we come to is Acts 2:38 which says "Peter answered them, 'All of you must turn to God and change the way you think and act, and each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift". Peter is saying that they have to become less ignorant and more aware. It's even more than that. He's saying "You have to be more open to the possibility that you may not be living the best life that was meant for you and that you might want to rethink your direction". Then he goes on further to couple baptism with the forgiveness of sins. In first century Palestine, much like today, we use baptism as a symbol or metaphor to signify our "dying of the old man" as I have heard so many times before. Peter is doing that with his words here. He is using baptism as metaphor and isn't creating a theology whereby you can only be forgiven when you get dunked. That would be exclusivist and against the very heart of Jesus' message. When Jesus and John both use the word near

in reference to the Kingdom of God, its the same word we use for "inside". The Kingdom of God is within. It is near. It is around. It is among us.

Maybe the invitation of Jesus to repent isn't solely about what we have done wrong, but it is a challenge to continuously be in the practice of remolding, revisiting, deconstructing and remolding our paradigms. Maybe what we should be repenting of is how we have treated one another or truth or the many other things Christ lists' in his talks. Maybe we should repent for having a hand in the death of those we have tried to "save".

When Jesus invites Nicodemus to be born again, it isn't a doctrine of salvation He is talking about it here. It is an invitation for Nic to lose it all, to give it up, to let go of everything he has known and become like a child again. This is what it means to repent. Then Jesus says something odd. I can almost see it now, like a scene out of the 'The Twilight Zone', the eerie music slowly crescendos and then in an almost ominous manner utters these words under his breath "you must be born of the spirit...to enter the Kingdom of God!" and then the organ plays loudly for effect while Nicodemus' jaw has to be lifted with a crane. Nicodemus scratches his head and asks, "So, I have to go back in my mother's stomach again. That is really weird. It might be uncomfortable." Okay, so this is my rendering of the story. Remember that the Kingdom of God isn't something that is out there in some mist that we have to go groping for. It is a way of life that we are all (and I mean all) invited to join in on. We could join in on the empire. The Kingdom of Caesar. The Kingdom of Obama. The Kingdom of Gordon Brown. We could go on, but I digress. Jesus is saying that there is a way of life for all humanity (and all creation for that matter), that we are intended to be living out of but aren't at this moment in history. He has come to show us that way.

Syriac was the language of the Palestinian people in that era of history along with some other dialects that were floating around as well. He used others, but this is his most common speaking language, it's a derivation of Aramaic. So, Jesus tells Nic that He has to be born of this spirit. Not a ghost. Nic would have known which spirit Jesus was talking about but the birth part might have confused him. Yet, I wonder if we do?

*Menahhemana*, is the Syriac word for spirit. It means life-giver or one who resurrects others. In essence, Jesus is telling Nic that if he is really interested in being a part of this Jesus movement/experience called the Kingdom of God then what he has to do is first realize that the life he is living isn't giving him life. That the life he thinks he is part of is more like the Matrix. Nicodemus is one of those that are linked up and needs to be disconnected. I think we all could do with a bit of that. And if he chooses to let it go to realize that might be a better way than he can give in to this life-giver. This spirit. The one who brings things back into life. Again, it can't stop there. Then once we choose to accept life, then we go to share it with others. We go into other cultures and situations and our contexts and seek out ways we too can bring resurrection. The resurrection of hope to one who has lost it all. The resurrection of peace to those who have none. The resurrection of grace to those who may have forgotten what it means to be loved.

In the Greek world, baptism was used for objects as well as people. They would dip objects into the water to commission their use as we can see in the Greek adventure story written by Xenophon entitled *Anabasis*, "These oaths they sealed by sacrificing a bull, a boar, and a ram over a shield, the Greeks dipping a sword in the blood and the barbarians a lance." The word they use here is a root word for baptism. It was getting ready for

something great and an inviting into something bigger than yourself. It was a letting go and a picking up. This is what is going on here with Nic. Jesus is saying He has to let go of all this knowledge (like we spoke about earlier).

I wonder what we have that we need to let go of and recommit it out to be part of a bigger story? What theologies do you have to let go of to meet God where He is? Nicodemus had to let go of a quite a few. Maybe you and I do as well. To join in on this way of life that seeks to change you and then challenges you to go and change the world around you. You see the message of Jesus isn't that we simply learn and keep what we know, but to share it by living it out on a daily basis. And here's the beauty of it all, we don't have to get it right the first time. If God's not biting his nails, then neither should we.

## CONVERSATION 8

# Community

I have a Facebook and a Myspace and I belong to four other random online communities. I am on the Oregon Trail and Mafia Wars on Facebook. So, I have to be a bit discreet on what I write about because I might get taken out. Online communities are funny. They make you the celebrity of your own world. They allow you to create a person that you may not be, along with a past they may never have existed. In a word, sites like Facebook give you -- safety!

I wonder if there is more to these online communities other than just Linus's blanket? Remember him, he was Charlie Browns' friend in the Peanuts gang comic. I used to wake up every Saturday and Sunday just to read the comics. Sure, there was more to life than this, but come on, we're talking about comics here. Linus never let go of his blanket. In fact, he held on to it so long that occasionally you would see him hiding behind an ominous smoke cloud.

I wonder if that is like us and our online celluloid worlds and virtual red carpets that beckon us on?

Maybe we hold onto them because in some weird sense they hold onto us. Maybe we are afraid that if we let go of our online persona's than the dust might clear and people might really see us for who we are. Who knows, we might even have to deal with who we think we are. Escaping is central to an online community, in fact, some might even say that is the only reason they join them -- to escape. We now live in two worlds, the one where people breath in and out, and one where wires and megabytes tell us who we are. You see these places on the web keep us from being rejected. They let us be who we really are without apology, in the real world, that is not such an easy thing. A world drenched in unspeakable dangers and "what if's"; so escapism is the new safe. Places like Myspace allow us to join a community without the commitment. Community is way too messy, way to unsafe, way to risky for most of us to take our masks off. So for most of us, pseudo-community will have to do. Maybe in the corners of your bedroom as your typing away creating another personality you hear voices that tell you are not good enough, you do not have what it takes. Maybe those voices are familiar ones, maybe way too close to home and others might Others might have made a random comment that you have held on to you for years. But, to be sure, somehow your belief in them has made them more true than they really are. The part of the Gospel that we sometimes fail to hear (we've talked about this earlier on) is that Jesus started the whole process of initiation with the disciples. He did not follow tradition. By Christ breaking Jewish tradition and doing the initiation process as the Rabbi, what he was saying to the disciples and what he is saying to you and me is that we have what it takes. We can take risks, to be who we really are without apology, to

believe we have the ability to give ourselves wholeheartedly to any community. We have what it takes. Let that ring true the next time you sign-in or tweak your profile.

## MICROSOFT GOD

One of the most overused phrases in Scripture is "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..."<sup>10</sup>, it also one of the most easily overlooked phrases in Scripture. You may have heard that the Hebrew word for God here is *Elohim*, it is a word that describes a pluralized form in one name. It would be like saying, "Microsoft offers some of the best computer products out there". You are talking about the company, yet the company is held together by the people within it. God is the Himself, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The three make one.<sup>11</sup> God is in community. He works in community. He himself is community. He also invites us into that community. A great painting circulating in power-points these days is an old tattered iconic image of three angelic like beings sitting at the same table together leaning in. A posture of intimacy in the first-century. In the middle of the table is a bowl. Yet, the peculiarity of the photo is that there is an opening at the front bottom center of this Russian icon; the implication is that we are invited to join. So does that mean when a non-follower of Christ views this painting that she is not invited? Think about that. God is not afraid to invite all of us to be equals. Before any of us step on the scene, God has already put in place a way for all of us to be with Him and together. A community. Not just the Church. All humanity.

The Shema Prayer<sup>12</sup> is an ancient prayer that happens to still be in use today by many practising Jews. The Shema: "...is the first prayer a Jewish child learns. The word "Shema" means Hear and that is the first word of the prayer. The prayer was developed as a

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<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1:1

<sup>11</sup> Now, there are many good writers and books that have tried to dissect how this works, and I am not going to do it here and I think it is also good to know there are things we aren't going to know and that's okay. And also never to stop asking questions, it essential to our journey.

<sup>12</sup> [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com) search 'Shema Prayer'

summary of the whole of the Jewish law. The prayer is taught to all Jewish children by the parents and thus emphasizes the responsibility of parents in passing on the faith to their children. The Shema is the central focus of Jewish worship." This prayer is integral to the spiritual development of a child. Part of the words of the prayer are as follow: "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" The word for one is Echad. It denotes a picture of unity. Of working together. In some Jewish circles, it is also interpreted as unique, different. In this one verse we see God laying out how man should be, how all creation should be working together as he Himself does - in community. Israel is a nation, a group of people. A community. Now this next part is where the Church seems to miss the point. We think that God is ours to keep, "the lord is OUR God"...we think the story stops there. God tells Abraham that He intends to use him by making him a pretty influential guy. This would have been the first ever episode of the MTV show - MADE (where people who have never had a chance to become what they have dreamed are given the opportunity to chase it). Abraham is the "father of many nations". He is going to start something global. But see it doesn't stop with him being chosen, the chosenness isn't the point. It's what we do with it that determines what happens with what we have been given. I think too often we keep what we have, because it is comfortable. The habits of holding on to things keep us warm. And that warmth keeps us safe. And our safety puts the world in danger. The Lord is our God, but for the sake of being everyone else. We can no longer afford the safety of our pews and chairs and our own versions of truth to lead us along. We must become an active community that intentionally and incarnationally looks outward. Now this next part of the Shema is what takes us into all kinds of interesting directions. But it should at the end lead us to one. As I was saying earlier, the word for One means either oneness or uniqueness. Either way it was put in there not just so we would know who God is but also how he works and how he invites us to work together like him. It means that in our

uniqueness and differences we all come together and work to rebuild the world around us. To recapture hope where it might have been lost. To find peace where it may have been covered in the rubble of war and things left unsaid. To instill grace in situations where there seems to be none. To be God where He seems to not be present. To be the answer to our own prayers.

I have lived in England for just under two years now. A beautiful place that is still unsure of itself in the realm of weather. It changes like a 6-year old child in a tantrum. This does make me long for my home state of California, where it doesn't rain as much, and the tantrums are fewer and far between. Now, California is also known as one of the most lenient and liberal of all the United States that still is unsure of what it stands for. It's more like a teenager discovering who its' supposed to be. Actually, America in the scheme of history is still doing just that. One well-known attribute of California is how it embraces individuality so fiercely. Even the elusive American dream tells the story of how one man or one woman comes over to America and gets the house, and gets the car and the beautiful wife and finds eternal happiness. The story never involves a group of people. It never seems to allow for the reality that this might happen for a community. In this country, it is about the individual. Somewhere down the road we have forgotten that the individual is meta-epistemic. We are part of the whole. We don't make up the whole. We can't afford to do this alone. I think this is one of the most destructive ideas that have entered our society. There is nothing wrong with being an individual, but somewhere along the way we have come to believe that our individuality is the point. Which we end up ostracizing ourselves and others. We have songs and television shows that praise the life of the "lone wolf" or the "loner". Yet, in just two years of being here, I have discovered something about the peculiar people of the mythical ageless lands of the UK. Even though there are

glimmers of the individuality that we so highly commend in the States, there is an overall sense of community within the walls of this country. There are programs specifically designed to help those in need. There are organizations that are in place to keep people from becoming homeless. There are so many others that could be shared here, but the point is this, there is community here. We could learn a thing or two from our history in regards to community.

Way before the ages of the Renaissance and Enlightenment period arrived in our history books, we lived in community. We breathed our first breaths into community. We call them tribes. They called it their way of life. The Paleolithic period of hunter-gathers, (one of the earliest account of humankind) lived and shared life in community. They started their lives in community and they ended their lives there too. According to sources, "...Human societies from the Paleolithic to the early Neolithic farming tribes lived without states and organized governments...Middle Paleolithic societies, unlike Lower Paleolithic and early Neolithic ones, consisted of bands that ranged from 20 to 30 or 25 to 100 members and were usually nomadic. These bands were formed by several families. Bands sometimes joined together into larger "macrobands" for activities such as acquiring mates and celebrations or where resources were abundant. By the end of the Paleolithic era about 10,000 people began to settle down into permanent locations, and began to rely on agriculture for sustenance in many locations. Much evidence exists that humans took part in long-distance trade between bands for rare commodities (such as ochre, which was often used for religious purposes such as ritual and raw materials, as early as 120,000 years ago in Middle Paleolithic." Man lived in community. They even searched for resources together for their communal religious experiences. They were not scared of the possibility that what they believed might have more commonalities than not. We need to

come to a place that Brian McLaren calls "generous orthodoxy". We must see that Jesus is bigger than Christianity. That the message of Jesus was not for a few, it was for many. For all creation.

In the movie *Instinct*, Anthony Hopkins plays an anthropologist who ventures out into the African jungles to spend time with and study the life and community of gorillas. During his time with these animals he discovers something about humanity that he shares with his Psychologist played by Cuba Gooding Jr., let's listen in:

CAULDER: What are you making here?

POWELL: The true history of mankind. It's a true history. No fiction, no lie. Africa, two million years ago. Humans. Then they moved. Migrated. Ten thousand years ago, civilization. You. This is me? Yeah, and me too. Us. Takers.

CAULDER: Who are the blue people?

POWELL: They're tribal societies -- hunters, gatherers, planters. They never killed more animals than they could use. They never ploughed more land than they needed. They fought, but they never waged war. Never exterminated. They had a place in the world. And in the world, they were part of it. And they shared it. We changed all that.

POWELL: We have only one thing to give up -- our dominion. We don't own the world. We're not kings here, not gods. Can we give that up? Too precious, all that control? Too tempting, being a god?

The enemy of community is control. Fear. The more fear the smaller people get. The smaller a group of people become. God says to Abraham, "I want to make you big. For the world". We are all meant to be bigger than we really are. The assumption in the ancient Jewish life is that it can only be done community. God is community. He chooses a community. Then He sends that community out. Community. Community. Community.

The night before Jesus was heading to the cross he prayed. But he did not want to do it alone. He got some of his friends and told them to sit at a nearby tree and he even asked them to pray for him. In Matthew 26, Jesus tells some of his closest friends to "Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation...". Jesus asked for prayer? Yep. He was going to go through one of the most horrific deaths of all time and He didn't want to be alone. He wanted friends around. Have you ever had one of those moments? One where it seems like your world will end, and there is nothing you can do about it except share your agony with those around you, this is what it was like for the Son of God. And then He goes into one of the most interesting prayers recorded by John, it was recorded as if John was there in person hanging on every word. The assumption is that the disciple didn't fall asleep. Out of all the things Jesus could have prayed, He chose to pray for us. For the world. Not for world peace. Not that He would not feel a thing hanging on the tree. But, he prayed that we would all be one. One. There that word is again. Jesus is purposefully playing on the Hebrew word Echad here. The word we talked about earlier. Jesus sees this idea of being one not as some idea to be marketed in the ever-growing place of post-modernism or any other place for that matter. He sees this oneness as a way of life. A way to live life. He prays it in such a way that He believes we can actually be one. This is deep stuff. Jesus believes something, that it seems, our actions throughout history and even

now say we think otherwise. His beliefs about mankind come out time and again. Not only mankind but even his closest friends. He says this in His prayer: " I will be in them, and you will be in me. So they will be completely one. Then the world will know that you sent me. And the world will know that you loved these people the same as you loved me."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus is inviting us into something big here. He is saying that when we are all in community we are most like the divine. Like God. We are just like them. And then He even goes on to say that when we are in community (not perfect community, He understand this) that somehow that oneness will be so loud that the world will want to be a part of it. This is powerful stuff. Jesus believes that community has the power and influence to help change the world. Being in community is an act not a belief. It is something that happens and occurs and keeps occurring. He even takes it a step further, Jesus says that the act of being a community is good enough to actually have others meet God in an intimate collision course. The word "know" in Hebrew/Aramaic is one of intimacy. Jesus isn't talking about "salvation" as we know it. He is talking about experience. He is talking about Damascus way before it even happened. But it doesn't necessarily happen with a little pamphlet and a door-to-door scheme. It happens when we realize that we can't do it alone. That we weren't meant to do it alone. That when we come together and be one that we can race toward the same goal and be there for one another. And in that act, it somehow is more than enough to change the world around.

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13 John 17:13

## CONVERSATION 9

There was a rabbi from Nazareth who invited everyone to join His conspiracy to change the face of humanity. The art of conspiracy might have started with one person initiating some sort of insurgence, but it never ended with a one-man-army. Conspiracies are not one-man armies. They tend to happen with a group of people dedicated to a new way of life. They usually tend to be something that is needed. Conspiracies tend to be counter-cultural and those leading them tend to have an innate charismatic following of some sort. They also question the current system in place and begin to ask questions about those systems and those leading them. This is why the leaders of these sometimes oppressive systems want to quickly do away with these pesky leaders of cultural revolts.

Jesus was one of them.

He invites us all into this conspiracy.

This conspiracy is unlike any other conspiracy, it is one that starts in transformation and ends with us being the transformers, but much better than the toy! (Just a quick reminder for those that are following along (the Latin word for conspiracy is "breathing the same air").

This conspiracy is so much more than just being a bunch of Emergent subversives. There is a mysterious sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves. Something that transcends time and space. It even goes way beyond the language of "calling". It is something we all crave, whether you believe or not.

Within our human genetic make-up, humanity craves togetherness.

Sure, some more than others and some less than others. This is much more than simple pop-psychology, we as humans have been made to be a part of some kind of community. The conspiracy of Jesus is different from the conspiracies throughout history because it seeks to be a movement that looks outwards rather than discovering manipulative tactics to just keep the "inward" agenda alive. It is a society of people that seek the needs of others before their own. The conspiracy of Jesus starts with us meeting Him and breathing in the mist of his presence and living out his presence in a tangible way within our culture.

## BIRDS AND CULTURE

Too many times there are fruitless arguments about whether or not we should be using our culture to engage people. Jesus took on the culture of humanity in all its fullness or as William Young says in the Shack, "*It would be like this bird, whose nature it is to fly, choosing only to walk and remain grounded. He doesn't stop being the bird, but it does*

*alter his experience of life significantly.*" Jesus never stopped being God, but He did choose to suspend those rights for His whole time on earth. Later Jesus says, "I only do what the Father tells me to do" verifying that He willingly chose not to "fly". We can also choose to follow in the footsteps of our Rabbi and embrace the culture, not to the point that we are led by it, but to the point where the culture begins to take cues from us. The conspiracy of Jesus seeks to not see the culture as the enemy but as the vehicle to discover innovative outlets to be *missional* in our approach to helping others. Others may read the previous sentence and think I am talking about Evangelism. I am definitely not. Well, not in the traditional sense. I believe the Evangelism we now have looks like we took our cues from the culture. We try to find creative ways to sell Jesus to our society. And it seems that we need to get out from underneath the tyranny of Christianity. Erwin McManis says it this way, "The greatest enemy of the movement of Jesus Christ is Christianity". I read somewhere recently that Erwin is trying to dismantle biblical Christianity. Nowhere is he or anyone trying to dismantle anything. We are simply in conversation.

DEATH.

If you ask someone who was around during the World Wars (WWI and WWII) they might probably tell you that the general attitude that pervaded society was that you just dealt with things. You simply "sucked it up" and got on with life. It wasn't a very vocal culture. A lot of fundamental Christianity was effected by this period in our history. We were taught to simply accept things without challenge or question. Without the opportunity to dig deeper. And it seems that the Christianity that we have isn't willing to die to itself so it can be resurrected. This is bigger than doctrine. Bigger than theology. Bigger than a system or set of beliefs. This is about us as people who say we are committed to a way of life and seeing that something is (at the core) wrong with what we have to offer the world and who are willing to point it out. This isn't about reinvention. This is about death. Jesus uses death

many times as an invitation to follow after Him. This conspiracy of Jesus is about us coming to a place inside where we realize we need Him more than theology. More than what Calvin or Luther gave us. Although, without the history they have given us we wouldn't be able to start this conversation. And that is what this is. It isn't a mandate. It is a movement. A dance and God is the music. We need to start letting the music lead us rather than us trying to force the dance to fit the music. Maybe it's time to learn a new way to dance. (This book isn't about you learning new ideas. If that's all it has become, then it has failed.) It is about us living out this conspiracy dance together. So how do we do this practically? I think we start by coming to a place in our development as a Body of people who start to accept that this Jesus revolution begins with us asking questions. Digging deeper. Challenging age-old ideas and systems that have never had a place in our future. It is us going into our neighbourhoods and towns and asking what it looks like to be a people who invite "outsiders" (those who don't believe or those we might think that "need to get saved") into our conversation. This is where the change begins. This is where the conspiracy of Jesus starts. And most importantly, it starts with the death and letting go of the things we call home.

#### JESUS AND THE MARKETPLACE

Evangelism is sold as something that we need. That without it we aren't really following Jesus. I think the problem with that mindset is that the evangelism we have now is more marketing than anything.

Christian T-Shirts.

Jesus bobble-heads.

Testa-mints (these are hilarious. "Christian mints for bad breath").

Evangelism as it was meant to be has gotten lost in the shuffle somewhere. We echo typical marketplace models and "Christianize" them so much that we even find scripture to support the need for *attractional* techniques. What do I mean by *attractional*?

Well, walk with me a bit.

Imagine you come home from a long day at work and you go through the simple routine of switching on your television and grabbing your favourite beer and pull the lever on your favorite old recliner to relax. While you are in "relaxed" mode, an image flashes across the TV screen and pulls you in, and without knowing it, the next you thing you know you are on the phone to buy your new at-home gym. Why? Because the marketing firm that was responsible for making the ad found a way into your psyche that made you think you need that item. Whether the marketing firm chose to men who have Goliath-size pecks or maybe it was the attractive "if you buy now you will get cleaning cloths for free" deal; somehow they have made you believe you need it. Here's the thing, they don't care how you come to the conclusion that you need their item, they just want to make the sell.

Sound familiar?

I have shared most of my life with many Christian communities and over the years have been taught that the salvation of all mankind was on my shoulders. (Think about the implications of that statement for a second before you move on). That little ol' me should be trying to "save" people with the urgency of a house on fire. That is unrealistic and unscriptural. In fact, from the Old Testament to the New Testament we read that Jesus is the only one who says anything about saving mankind.

He chooses.

Not us.

#### THANK YOU BUT NO THANK YOU

In Matthew's letter, Chapter 18 verse 11, Jesus says why He came here which was to "seek and save the lost". The conspiracy of Jesus invites his followers to rest assured that his death was enough. Because in some weird way when we rush out to go "save" our family or friend, in a sense what we are saying is that the cross wasn't good enough. It's the "thank-you-but-no-thank-you" mentality. The conspiracy of Jesus invites his followers to rest. Period. Christ's death on the cross wasn't just for a few people, it was for all mankind past and present. Rob Bell asks it another way, "What if everyone is forgiven and they just didn't know it yet?" We must begin to move away from the attractational model of sharing our faith. Marketplace Jesus is no longer for sale. In fact, if you look at Christ's approach to what we now know as Evangelism, I think you might be surprised at how subversive His tactics were in comparison to ours.

Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem through the market towns of Samaria and Galilee and he's making his way through crowds and a series of conversations, when a young rich ruler (who some historians think could have been Saul of Tarsus) asks this Jesus what he needs to do to get in on what He's been talking about. And Jesus goes through the conversation and lists off a few things and by the end of the story, the man walks off.

The man walks away.

Jesus doesn't chase after him.

He doesn't try to do some miracle to get his attention, Jesus doesn't use his divinity to get the guy to say a prayer. God's Son who came to save the world, let's one of those He came to save walk right out the door. Jesus later tells the famous story about a teenage boy who runs in after school and asks for his inheritance. In the Jewish context, the son was basically saying to the father, "drop dead" and "I don't care if you starve". To ask for your inheritance while your father was alive was like giving your father the middle finger and embarrassing him and stomping on his reputation. The father's neighbours who would have lived in an insular-type community would have easily caught wind of this "typical teenage behavior". In small Jewish communities, correcting one's child was done as a community rather than individually. It might have even included stoning the son. So what does the teenage boy do? He runs away. Who wouldn't?

But, the father doesn't chase the son.

He doesn't force his son back into the family.

He waits in desperate anticipation and in the hope that one day the son might come to his senses and return. And as we all know, he does.(The Jews call this Teshuva. We can talk about this later.) What is even more interesting is that the father "was a long way off" when the son finally decided to come back. In the Aramaic, it would be like saying that there were miles and miles in between them. And yet, the father chases after the son, but only when the son chooses to return. This is also symbolic of what our actions have the potential to do when in relationship with one another.

Like creating distance.

Hurt.

Pain.

Misunderstanding.

And broken hearts.

But still the father bridges the gap. The conspiracy of Jesus invites others to walk away and come back when and if they are ready. Fundamental evangelism says “we must get the sale!” Conspiracy evangelism says it is not our job to get the sale. It refocuses its energies on being Christ to people in practical and socially transformation ways as well as introducing them to the Messiah through our lives and lifestyle and our intentional engagement within each of our contexts. It believes that the cross was good enough for everyone to be forgiven. It embraces a new kind of grace. A kind of grace that lets God be God and allows God to choose who can be in or out and what methods He chooses to employ. Conspiracy evangelism distances itself from orthodox evangelism even to the point of pulling away from evangelism terminology. The conspiracy of Jesus invites us to be who God has created us to be and let His love direct our paths and interactions. This too takes the stress off of us and allows us to discover who we are meant to be in Christ and rely on the reality that we are being Jesus at all times. And that, in and of itself, is more than enough evangelism for the world around us. The conspiracy invites us to an inner life with God. A life that relies upon God to lead who we should interact with.

INNER LIFE.

Most people stay away from dark places. The tense stomach muscles and the dripping beads of sweat that accompany such a journey are enough to keep Ernest Shackleton away from the journey towards the inner life. This journey is much more treacherous than

any journey that Sir Shackleton has ever been on. Because it might just involve death. Giving up things. Saying goodbye to the past. Laying to rest the words of others and realizing that those words aren't the last word. We surround ourselves with so much noise that we drown out any possibility for us to hear the inner longings and pain that might be lurking in the caverns of our heart. Kat Kent, a Canadian psychotherapist says it this way, "A fear of closeness could develop into a person creating a 'false self'. A child who has been humiliated might grow up as a distant authoritative figure that nobody dares approach. Another person may hide his feeling of unworthiness by appearing loud and full of self-importance. The constant joker uses humour to keep a safe distance from those around him. The star whose success has depended on youth and beauty may not have learned how to develop relationships as a whole person."

All of us our broken.

Whether we know Jesus or not, we are a people fragmented and broken. Whatever we think we bring to the table, we bring it fragmented. It is in pieces, and it less than what it could be. This is not about guilt or inadequacy. This is the realization that Jesus calls broken people to carry his message. When Jesus met a few fumbling teenage fisherman on a shore far from here, he knew who he was dealing with. Yet, he still chose them and their brokenness. We can't afford to see brokenness as a weakness any longer. David the poet king, invites us to see brokenness as something that draws us to the heart of God, "God is near the broken-hearted", are words that ring in our heads but hardly ever go to our hearts. Why? Because, we are a people who need distance from truth. Even though we know truth has the ability to heal, we have gotten used to not being whole. I would much rather have heard that my parents just couldn't take care of me, rather than find out

that I was adopted because of their lifestyle of drugs. The young girl who runs away and becomes a prostitute would rather think her father died than that he left her because he just couldn't keep his commitments. We live in a world of broken promises, look around you and you will see what I'm talking about. Rob Bell calls this the "culture of denial". We live in our contexts afraid of connection, yet, we have pseudo-communities like Facebook and Myspace that make it seem otherwise. The ability to walk into what we fear and then walk out when it gets too close for us to handle is where safety and danger hold hands and we can no go no further. Imagine what our faith would look like if Jesus backed off and decided not to go to the cross when he was praying to his Dad? The conspiracy of Jesus invites us all into the places we have come to fear the most. Jesus himself enters in with us and experiences the pain and healing. He is the one who offers to carry our burdens. I have moved quite a bit in my life, I usually carry an old green duffel bag I got from the Navy. It was sort of the Linus' blanket for me without the cloud of dust. It went with me wherever I went. Whenever I entered my new home on my itinerant journey, I carried it with me. It came with me. When Jesus invites us to come to him with all of our problems, worries, stresses and losses he offers to replace them with rest. In his words, he never says that those issues will be vaporised into some eternal abyss somewhere. He simply offers his rest. But his rest is something, even without knowing it we might just crave. The word for rest that Jesus used in his everyday Aramaic was Menuwchah, it is the idea of consolation or comfort. If you dig deeper, you might even find more metaphors laced with romantic language. It would be like a lover saying "You can hide in me." or "I will catch your tears when they fall". This kind of language is drenching with metaphor and candle-light dinners. Jesus promises to be there with you.

He promises to experience it with you.

Now, if you are like most followers, that sentence just whizzed right past you. We have gotten way too comfortable with the language of Jesus. We, like the Israelites have seen too much. And unfortunately, like them, we too have taken ideas and theology and the sense of rightness to polar extremes and have come up with a golden calf of our own.

Jesus is there with you.

Say it.

Let the realization that you will never be alone again permeate through every pore. You are not alone. The conspiracy of Jesus reminds us we can't do this alone. It reminds us that we can't let others do this alone. It compels us to come to grips with the fact that accepting the truth of who we are and where we are brings healing. And that the healing we receive is a gift that can't stop with us. It must be shared and given to others in need. There is something terribly divine in being with someone who is in the midst of experiencing loss.

## CONVERSATION 10

### *Not all wander are lost - Tolkien*

There has to be a death. Some things might have to die. A requiem for the things that get in the way of who and what we are meant to be. For some, it's pride. For others', it's letting go of tradition and theology and doctrine and taking a hold of the unknown. We must become less focused on all kinds of religiosity or saving things like doctrine, because the very things we think that are helping the Body and those outside it are the very things that are getting in the way of healing those in need. And maybe, part of the Body is what needs to be healed before we can heal others. Part of that healing process is letting go of those things that are holding us back and then proactively moving forward into the lives of those hurting to bring healing.

This chapter is about you going out and living out your encounter with God. Jesus did not intend to start some organization that met together a few times a week. He started a movement. There is a reason why Paul calls it a body, because a body moves. It is about progression. Forward motion.

The prophet Jeremiah grabbed a plate and a spoon and fork and ate scripture like it was one of his meals. He ate scripture. It was a metaphor for how we are supposed to ingest the truth. And in doing so, as we digest it, it digests us. We are transformed by it. Not because we read it. Eating is an action we do to live. Jeremiah is saying that if we eat truth it will in turn consume us which will in turn consume those around us. So. Close this book. Ask the hard questions. Let go. And go to live out what you believe. Go and change the world. Embrace soul-altering conflict. And join the movement of Jesus...He is waiting...