

DAYS of HOPE

The Space Between by Jon Wells

My mistake was an understandable one. An oversight that was easy to make. A lot of folks would walk in the room with my simple expectations. Perhaps you would have been challenged with the truth, just as I was.

It makes sense for a missionary or a pastor to think this way; to expect that his job is to proselytize. *I just need to walk into the room and tell all of these kids, 'y'all just need to get saved.'* Make your peace with God. . . Be born again. . . Invite Jesus into your heart. . . become a Jesus follower. *However you prefer to phrase it, isn't that my job?* All these messed up kids, they suffer from countless forms of abuse; agonizing daily through a myriad of additional forms of mental illness and self-inflicted pain. They just need someone to introduce them to Jesus, right? Well, yes. Sometimes.

You can imagine my surprise to discover that they are already Christians. As in, 'yes, Pastor Jon, I already did pray that prayer, I already do believe, *and* I am a mess.' I have to admit here that this is not my first rodeo. This little issue has been challenging me from the earliest days of this work, which makes my oversight last night even more frustrating. How is it that a child might be a Jesus follower, and also a perpetual self-harmer? Another young man in the room is a Christian rage-o-holic who breaks windows and televisions when he gets riled up. Another is a believer who also acts out sexually around his peers. Is there such a thing as a Jesus follower with a conduct disorder?

(I understand that the more learned among us at this point will dive into endless theological debates about the quality and depth

of that poor kid's conversion experience. We would prefer to deliberate the merits of whether or not this kid ever really converted in the first place. We argue over assurance of salvation, rededication, and the work of the Spirit in their lives. *Perhaps his baptism was insufficient in some way.* But for a moment, just humor me and believe that is possible for one of these teens to be living in a world where they have sincerely and truly surrendered to Jesus and also they are wrestling with a deep and overwhelming challenge like an addiction or mental health diagnosis.)

I suppose many of us prefer to live in a world with really clear cut lines and categories. A world where all of the people in the Jesus club have got things figured out, problems resolved, addictions cured, and sins mastered. In that clear cut world, all of the people who are not in the Jesus club obviously do not have their challenges resolved. These outsiders are, as you might expect, addicts, drunkards, abusers, and worse. They need someone to walk in the room and tell them, 'Y'all need to get saved.' In that world of clear cut distinctions, we hear testimonies about how immediate and permanent change was ushered in by a simple prayer.

The first problem with the world of clear cut lines that so many of us have constructed is that there are tons of people living in the space between. Many of the kids I encounter in residential have attended church, observed the sacraments, and participated in the faith process. I have spoken with those who have walked down the Romans Road, praying their way

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We are currently scheduling speaking engagements. If you are interested in inviting one of our chaplains to come and share with your church, class, or community group, let us know!

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For over a year, Skyler Martin has been pioneering a chaplaincy work in Springfield, MO with Days of Hope, ministering to youth at the Great Circle campus and developing ties with congregations in that part of the state. This month Skyler will be transitioning into a full time position with Teen Challenge in the Branson area. His hard work is much appreciated by all of us at Days of Hope, as well as the youth and staff at the Great Circle facility in Springfield. Please remember to pray for Skyler in his new ministry, as well as direction in locating the right person to fill his shoes in the Springfield region.

Teachers Becoming Students by Skyler Martin

It is the common perception of many pastors and ministers that children, youth, and “unchurched” individuals are unlearned. They need proper training in doctrine, and must be trained up in the way that they ought to go. Certainly, there is an educational aspect of any adult-child relationship, but unlike public education or moral storytelling, the ministers who deliver the Gospel are not merely authorities and teachers. They are co-learners alongside those to whom they minister.

This is a message that Jesus delivers to his disciples in a particularly outrageous way when He takes a little child upon his knee. Jesus reminds his disciples that there is a proper posture that they are to take in following him – childlikeness. He does other strange things like calling the “poor in spirit” blessed and declaring that a blind man who is unable to physically see can actually see more clearly than those who are assured of their clear vision. Time after time, Jesus exalts the marginalized and outcasts beyond equality with the educated to the place of *teacher!* For Jesus, this blind man who perceived the Messiah, the little kids, and the poor in spirit were all teachers. They had insight above that of the official religious teachers of the day (the Pharisees) and anyone who would assume that they have spiritual answers to life’s problems.

For those of us who have been theologically educated, it can be difficult to come to terms with this aspect of Jesus’ teaching. The many answers that we have been given or have discovered for ourselves can very easily become blinders. These quick answers can keep us from seeing the reality that Paul shared with the Corinthians when he wrote, “...God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” In our zeal to “teach” the theologically weak, we may be missing our opportunity to learn.

This is something that I’ve become increasingly aware of in my time as a chaplain with Days of Hope. Especially toward the beginning of my work, I would show up in a cottage or chapel service full of things to say. I was prepared to educate kids with good theology, fresh from my latest wrestling in the Scriptures. But I have repeatedly found that if I will listen, these students are the ones doing most of the educating. I can very easily learn from them what it means to love, to persevere, and even to trust after being betrayed. Granted, this reverse education does not happen in a classroom or chapel. Instead, I find the presence of Christ already flourishing in the daily interactions with those to whom I imagined that I was going to “bring” it.

My favorite example of this came from a story that my 14-year-old friend Bethany told me. Bethany joined the campus co-ed basketball team that would travel to a local gym to play other teams. Bethany was physically disadvantaged as she walked with a limp and traveled much slower than her peers. “They won’t stop passing me the ball, Mr. Skyler! I’ve told them that if they want to win, they need to pass it to Trey!” After digging a little deeper I came to find out that Trey, an older student who was an incredible basketball player, had conspired with the rest of the

Names of students in his article have been changed to protect privacy

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through the ABCs of salvation, and still are in a really ugly situation. So many residential youth are sincere believers who look nothing like sincere believers. Their circumstances and behavior would not lead you to assume that they have embraced faith in Christ. What do you do with a profession of faith that comes from a child with so many obvious hang-ups? Those kids look at our clear cut lines and begin to question. *Does this Jesus thing work? Is there something wrong with me? Am I still an outsider?* I think a lot of us would be surprised if we knew how many of the folks that we consider outsiders actually

pray and engage in honest conversation with God on a regular basis.

The second problem with this carefully constructed world is that so many of us who are card-carrying members of the Jesus club are a little less 'resolved' than we would like to admit. Decades of work as a chaplain and a counselor have revealed that there are a lot more hidden addictions and life-controlling problems within the walls of the church than is readily apparent. I am the last person in the room to point a finger and accuse, but I will sadly confess that so many of us are still a work in progress. Notice how we graciously phrase our shortcomings in

kindly ways! We say 'nobody's perfect.' We admit to being a 'work in progress.' But the sad truth is that many of us, just like many of the residential kids I work with, live in the space between.

The third problem, as far as I can see, is that Jesus does not seem to be working in either of our carefully constructed spaces. The outsiders who reject the Gospel obviously have little use for Him. The insiders who purport to have things figured out have already done all of their Jesus work. But He is most needed in the space between. The space between in a place of suffering; a space of desperation.

So what do these kids need? They need encouragement to press into Jesus and press through the challenges they are facing. They need grace for their weakness, and time. It will take

time for them to 'work out their salvation' - a process that often requires more than a two minute prayer. They need someone in the room with enough maturity to recognize that they are wrestling with huge issues, someone who will hold their hand and reassure them that God is not afraid of their brokenness. Unfortunately, they so often get simple, repeated invitations into the club. Strangely enough, in my experience, these kids often comply- they join and rejoin and rejoin and rejoin the club, believing what they are told. *Club membership delivers, literally!*

Join the club and give your problems to Jesus. It saddens me to think of the number of youth who have admitted that they tried the 'Jesus thing' and it didn't work. What these kids need is someone who is willing to invite them into something deeper than simple nominal Christianity and begin to explore with them what it means to 'pick up my cross and follow Christ.' What if faith in Christ was something more than a quick fix? What are the implications of being a sincere believer *and* deeply wounded at the same time? People who are limping their way through the space between need a moment-by-moment revelation of the grace and redemption that flows from the cross. Instead they often get some Monday

morning quarterback throwing them advice from the sidelines. We are obsessed with heaven and hell. We are totally consumed with dissecting the quality and nature of their apparently-insufficient conversion. All the while they struggle.

I believe that Jesus was addressing the circumstance of these broken believers when he told the parable of the wheat and the tares. Instead of rushing into the field to start pulling weeds, the farm hands are instructed to leave the crop alone. The good crop is growing up alongside the thistles, but it is not our job to remedy this. We cannot always identify weed from wheat, and the pulling of weeds can damage the crop. The presence of the thistles does not negate the fact that there is a field of wheat growing. In a similar way, many of the kids we

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²⁴⁻²⁶ He told another story. "God's kingdom is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too.

²⁷ "The farmhands came to the farmer and said, 'Master, that was clean seed you planted, wasn't it? Where did these thistles come from?'

²⁸ "He answered, 'Some enemy did this.' "The farmhands asked, 'Should we weed out the thistles?'

²⁹⁻³⁰ "He said, 'No, if you weed the thistles, you'll pull up the wheat, too. Let them grow together until harvest time. Then I'll instruct the harvesters to pull up the thistles and tie them in bundles for the fire, then gather the wheat and put it in the barn.'"

-Matthew 13

The Space Between continued . . .

minister to have a fledgling faith that is struggling to grow in their lives, right alongside the ugly thorns and weeds that an enemy has planted in the night. For many of them (and many of us) it is a lifetime's work extricating the thistles from the wheat. This complex work is better suited to the grace and patience of a Heavenly Father than our own short sighted remedies. In the end, God alone will judge the results.

God, give us the patience to allow You to do the deep work needed in the lives of those who are struggling, and the wisdom to bring grace instead of condemnation to those who are living in the space between.

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Teachers Becoming Students continued . . .

team to pass the ball to Bethany until she made a shot. It didn't matter how long it took. Until Bethany scored, Trey insisted that no-one else got to shoot. With a giant grin on her face, Bethany told me, "We just keep losing games. They keep passing me the ball!" I was instantly moved by the compassion of Trey to set aside his own skill and love of the game to champion Bethany and to insist that she be valued on the team. Though Trey was not verbally educating me, his actions were a picture of Christ setting aside His glory with the Father, to accommodate humanity in their weakness that they may be made participants with Him in the glorious union between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! This experience and many others like it have opened my eyes to see that God is present in the places that I tend to expect Him the least. Just as Jesus exalted children, a blind man, and the spiritually impoverished to teach the "wise," he has used at-risk youth multiple times to teach me.

What does all this mean though? The idea that God wants us to be eager to listen and half as zealous to teach may feel scary to many ministers whose identity and daily work seem threatened by such a prospect. I understand this as it can be disorienting to see pastoral work this way.

The threat does not come from some new way of doing ministry, but from the reality of *God's omnipresence*. Do we truly believe that God's presence is in all places and people, at all times? If we acknowledge this truth, we are left with a new task. We are not blazing new trails for God's mission. We are not providing people with something they haven't got. We are not those with the secret medicine for a sick world. Instead we are those who bear witness to the presence of God everywhere that we find it. We approach all situations and people with eyes open so that we can catch a glimpse of Christ in the face of another person and declare with love what it is that we see. Perhaps that is my biggest take-away from my work as a chaplain with Days of Hope: Ministers are not professionals with answers, but co-learners with those whom they serve, eager to see and bear witness to the presence of the risen Christ wherever they are.