

“Manifest Destiny Revised”
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“Don’t cry! More white people will come next week.”

These words exploded in my mind as I struggled with the lock on the back of our u-haul trailer. I stood breathless for a few moments as I attempted to wrap my brain around what God had just spoken to me through an eight-year old girl from the projects of New Orleans.

All around me, my group of spoiled, privileged affluent teenagers were crying and holding on to impoverished children they had met only days before and would never see again. As this surreal scene unfolded, children were gambling on a porch across the street while and grown men were drinking 40’s and cleaning their knives on their shirts.

For me, time stopped still as I stood in the middle of the street, astounded at my own lack of insight. Our church had paid a small fortune to send this group of wealthy teenagers halfway across the country to “change the world”.

We had come to change the world, one person at a time.

However, standing in the sweltering Bayou heat, I came to realize that it was the world changing us...one person at a time. Each person that we encountered was a divine appointment from God to teach us what it means to have His heart.

Over the years, I have seen this scene replayed with the homeless living on the river, with Mexicans living in the desert, with the elderly in assisted living or nursing homes.

In each case, we would spend months preparing to take our much and share it with those who had little. As we worked, they would gladly take our much and show us how little it really was.

It has always been such for those of us who have been blessed with being born into wealth and privilege. Our own power makes us drunk with delusion that everyone else on the planet would love to change places with us. We imagine those in poverty in river slums of Ho Chi Minh city staring up at the stars wishing they were in the western world driving a Toyota enjoying a Diet Coke.

I am sure in places, this may be the case. However, I have to imagine that in many places, people have absolutely no idea what the western world is like. They struggle daily with finding food and clean water, health issues, and finding employment. Feeding hungry mouths is a daily companion rather than hope. Money isn’t stashed away in the savings

account for the future move to America. It is daily spent to scratch out a meager existence.

I once was eating lunch with a friend who made a racial slur against Mexicans, suggesting that I hire them to do some work around the house since they will work for “next to nothing”. Seething, I asked him how he thought he came to live in the United States. How are we so privileged to live in the wealth of the western world?

He responded with a shrug, as if to say, why care? We’re here and that’s all that matters.

I have to come to call this attitude *Manifest Destiny Revised*. Whereas our ancestors considered it their obvious destiny to settle the Americas at any cost to the original inhabitants, it seems that many people believe it is their manifest destiny to be born into extreme wealth and privilege and spend a lifetime hoarding the resources the rest of the world is longing for.

For me, my mind and can comprehend only one reason.

Divine Providence.

For whatever reason, God chose to place us here in extravagant wealth and to place others in abject poverty.

How is that fair?

Recently, I spent a weekend with a missionary from Zambia who is currently working in a church near London. Knowing that he grew up in a small village with no running water or electricity, I asked him to share his greatest struggles adjusting to life in England. He shared the rage he felt as he saw those who had so much take it for granted as he knew those who lived in his village had so little. He shared with me that he stood out under the stars after dinner at a youth retreat screaming at God “How is this fair?” He shared that the food that was thrown away from dinner would feed many in his village and it would be the best meal they would eat all year.

It seems to me that we are left with two choices.

Arrogance and Condescension

Or

Humility and Brokenness

On the street in New Orleans that afternoon, I felt God invading my arrogance and breaking my condescending spirit. I sensed Him as close as my breath in one of the most unsuspecting places in the world—a place of total poverty. I had not sensed Him as

strongly in all of the worship services, summer camps, Bible studies that I had poured so much of my time and resources into over the years.

There among dirty needles, kids with no underwear or shoes, and memorials to those murdered, God became my Emmanuel. It dawned on me that He had been there all along, long before my group arrived. He was born among the poorest of humankind, lived as a homeless man, and was buried in a borrowed grave. He cast his lot among the have-nots, and I was whoring myself out with the richest people on the planet.

I knew from that time on to serve Him I would have to seek him among those he cares most about—the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the forgotten, the broken, the abandoned, the exploited, the lost.

I wasn't sure what these revelations would mean for me, but I was excited to embrace the move of the Holy Spirit within me. I knew I could never return to my old way of thinking.

Many years have passed and God has led me by his power to establish ministry contexts that teach His people to love what He loves and hate what He hates. Let me share three major changes God has impressed upon my heart.

Go...to be a blessing and to be blessed, not to be the answer.

In the west, we live in a culture that measures success by progress made and problems solved. Instead of counting conversions and baptisms, we must commit to simply be present with people in need. If we go thinking that we have all of the answers and those we serve we have none, we are sorely mistaken and will miss out on our own blessing.

In Genesis 12, God made this promise to Abram,

"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

From the beginning of His covenant promise, God has been sending His children out to be a blessing to others. But how should we define "being a blessing"? Simply bringing our western mindset and pre-scripted Gospel presentations to those who need a Savior?

That's not the way Jesus chose to come. He chose to be Emmanuel-God with us. To fully embrace the heart of God, we must think in the same way. We must become the presence of God for those who are in need of a Savior.

The reality is that we will never end poverty so pretending that we are making a huge difference is just a lot of self-preserving posturing. We become the blessing of God when we sit down with those in need bringing a listening ear, hugs, smiles, understanding tears.

Go...to be the hands and feet and heart of God, not to be the Savior.

Once we have planted ourselves into the lives of those in need, we can follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit to bring relief to their suffering. When Jesus came among us, He spent his earthly ministry meeting physical needs as well as spiritual needs. When we take groups into the projects, slums, or ghettos of the world preaching the Gospel but not addressing the physical suffering I believe we are out of step with the dance of the Holy Spirit.

John 10:10 states “I have come that they may have life and have to the full.” We must bring hope of this “full life” when came in the name of the Lord. Some think this verse points to an eternity in heaven, but what about life here on earth? Can we experience an amazing life in the love of God before we graduate into eternity? When we surrender to be the hands and feet of Jesus, we are willing to bring hope in whatever way He leads. For some this hope will be food, for some medical care, for others shelter, and still others clean water.

We must always keep in mind that Jesus is the Savior of the world. The triune God is an expert of reaching the hearts of His people. We are simply instruments in His hands. I am always amazed when people are labeled as expert in some field in ministry because of a few decades in ministry when God has been up to this for eternity. We are in desperate need of dropping the charade that somehow we are highly skilled in reaching the hearts of people. In humility, we can cry out for God to give us the privilege to be associated with His beautiful name. When we surrender our hands and feet unashamedly to Jesus, the He will use us to bless others in His name

Go...and listen more than you speak.

A few summers ago, I had the opportunity to lead a group of high school students on a mission trip to Juarez, Mexico. In the months preceding our trip, our group met together weekly for discussion and prayer. As we talked each week, it was obvious that our students were very eager to take the hope of Jesus to Mexican children in poverty. One week, as we were studying the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, I read Mother Theresa’s quote, “In the poor we find Jesus in a distressing disguise”. As we considered the implications of meeting with Jesus face to face in the Mexican desert, God began to change our attitudes towards caring for the “least of these” really meant. We gained a greater desire to hear from Jesus in the lives of the poor than we had to speak into their lives. We knew we would have many opportunities to speak the truth of God’s love, but we made a commitment that day that we would listen more than we would speak. That summer, we clearly heard God speak to us over homemade tacos in the Mexican desert. Though the language was different, Jesus had no difficulty communicating with us through the lives of a family living in a school bus.

Sometimes I think I spend too much time trying to hear the voice of God in places where he probably isn't speaking very loudly. Though I am sure Jesus is present in the 'burbs, I am learning that He makes His home among the poor, the suffering, the forgotten-the least of these. Over the years, God has spoken to me through the smiles of the elderly in nursing homes, through the cries of lonely American teenagers displaced in Europe, through the hungry stomachs of the homeless in soup kitchens, and through the honest words of an eight year old girl in the projects of New Orleans.