

“The Art of Jesus: He Receives Help”

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A few months ago I heard a song by a rock / folk type of band called the Dawes. I really like their music. But this particular song I have listened to over and over again the past few months and I'm not exactly sure why. It's titled: "A Little Bit of Everything." I bet I've listened to it fifty times.

I think I love it so much because I find one thing consistently true as I work with people, namely, that rarely is it one big thing that overcomes people in life. It's not one thing but a lot of things. It's a little bit of everything. And I know for myself that I sometimes struggle or get tangled up inside my mind, but rarely is it one gigantic crisis that torments me or brings me to my knees. Instead, it's a lot of things. It's a little bit of everything.

The first part of this song is set in San Francisco on the Golden Gate Bridge. And it goes like this . . .

*With his back against the San Francisco traffic
On the bridge's side that faces towards the jail.
Setting out to join a demographic
He hoists his first leg up over the rail.*

*A phone call is made; police cars show up quickly.
The sergeant slams his passenger door.
He says, "Hey son why don't you talk this through with me?
Just tell what you're doing it for."*

And then the man's response goes like this . . .

*"Oh, it's a little bit of everything
It's the mountains, it's the fog
It's the news at six o'clock
It's the death of my first dog."*

*It's the angels up above me
It's the song that they don't sing
It's a little bit of everything."*

And then the scene shifts to a homeless shelter, the kind you might find here in Los Angeles or in San Francisco. They're the kind of kitchens that serve broken down men and broken down women night after night after night. And the song goes on . . .

*There's an older man who stands in a buffet line,
He is smiling and he's holding out his plate,
And the further he looks back into his timeline,
That hard road always led him to today.*

*Making up for when his bright future had left him
Making up for the fact his only son is gone,
And letting everything out once, his server asks him:
"Have you figured out yet, what it is you want?"*

And he says . . .

*"I want a little bit of everything
The biscuits and the beans
Whatever helps me to forget about
The things that brought me to my knees.*

*So pile on those mashed potatoes
And an extra chicken wing
I'm having a little bit of everything."*

A little bit of everything. Yes, a little bit of everything. Not one big thing. But a little bit of everything.

I look at our painting this morning by the Dutch artist Hugo van der Goes and I see people helping Jesus. Jesus had been through everything. Betrayal. Mockery. Humiliation. Torture. Death. This Jesus figure is surrounded by love and compassion. Some are crying. Some are nearly hysterical. Others look away with grief. Too much to bear. But they are holding him. Touching him. The depth of feeling is palpable. The Roman soldiers have gone home. Pilate is already sitting down for his evening dinner. But here, in the aftermath of the crucifixion, friends try to pick up the pieces, including picking up the lifeless body of Jesus.

I know we tend to think of Jesus as the one who did most of the helping in life. After all, he was the servant of God. Yet, again and again people reached out to Jesus in order to give him help. And he let people help him. He was never beyond it. He was never above it. Jesus was never too good for it.

Some of us have tried to go through life thinking we don't need anyone but ourselves. We worship the myth of the self-sufficient American. Independence has become our god. But not Jesus. Yes, Jesus helped people. Of course he did. But he was also real enough to receive help from others. Jesus became so good at helping people because in fact he graciously allowed so many people to help him.

This is essential to our spiritual lives . . . if you've never had anyone give you a hand, I'm not sure you will ever know how to give a hand to another person. If you've never

been personally broken, I mean really broken by the vagaries of life, then how can you ever hope to help someone who is broken? If you've never been lost, I mean really lost inside the labyrinth of your life, lost inside the medieval castle of your spiritual and psychological consciousness, then how could you ever imagine helping another human being find his or her way? You can't do it.

You cannot fake compassion. Fake compassion stinks. It smells like a skunk that's been hit by a car and dead for three days. You can't fake concern. You can't fake connection. You can't offer empty advice. You either have compassion or you don't. And when you have it, it almost always comes from a wounded place inside our souls. We all get wounded in life. That's inevitable. But we can either allow our hurts to become reservoirs of poison or we turn them into reservoirs of compassion and wisdom.

A few years ago the Modern Art Museum in New York City featured the performance of an artist by the name of Marina Abramović. She is a remarkable artist. But her art was this: In the middle of the museum, she walked out every single day, dressed in a large flowing dress, and she sat down in a chair. There was a small table in front of her, and then there was another chair on the other side of the table, and one by one people would come and sit across from her.

No words were spoken. It was done in complete silence. But what started to happen was this: She was so present with people, so real with people, just looking into their eyes, looking into the depths of their souls, that people would begin to smile and laugh and cry and grieve – everything human inside them was touched by this artist – and it's because she radiated a presence of unconditional acceptance and compassion. The lines of people waiting to sit with her snaked all the way out to the New York City sidewalks. Why? It's because everyone carries a little bit of everything.

One of the most touching moments that takes place in the hours after the death of Jesus is that someone had to figure out what to do with his body. There was a man there, Joseph of Arimathea, and he had a personal gravesite. He had purchased it years before and reserved it for himself and his family. Think about that. It's a very personal thing to find a place for a family burial. Some families still talk about the family burial plot. My mother and grandparents and other family members are all buried in the same corner of the cemetery in my hometown.

But Joseph, whether he was a friend or innocent bystander, I don't know, but Joseph gives it up as a way of helping Jesus. Some cleaned up his body, wiping away the dirt and sweat and blood. Still others wrapped him in cotton clothes. Still others carried him to the tomb. But all of them were trying to help Jesus.

One of the most important things we can ever keep in mind is that if we stop and help a fellow human being, we are in fact helping Jesus. And if we love another human being, then we are loving Jesus. And if we show compassion and goodness and grace to

another human being, then we are sharing those same feelings with Jesus. He once said, "If you have helped one of the least of these, you have helped me."

The helping Jesus should not be lost right now in the debate about immigration in our country. Yes, we want the country to be safe. Of course we do. But I wish we would just say it: Jesus Christ is in the face of every immigrant that comes to our country. Jesus comes to America from Mexico. Jesus crosses the desert for a better life in Arizona and California. And if we're Christian, and if we believe in Christ, and if Christ is in the stranger, and if how we treat the stranger is equivalent to how we treat Christ, then let's just say it . . . We don't have an immigration problem in America; we have a Jesus problem!

Sometimes Jesus comes from Europe. Like Germany or France or Italy. And sometimes Jesus comes from the Middle East. Like Iran and Iraq and Syria. And sometimes Jesus comes from Central and South America. Like Honduras and Guatemala and Brazil. How we treat someone – regardless of where they come from – is how we are treating Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate immigrant. Jesus is the ultimate refugee. But Jesus is also the aspirational way in which we want to try to treat, need to treat, and should treat every single human being.

And that brings me back to that song by the Dawes . . . "A Little Bit of Everything." You see, just as Jesus helped people and people helped Jesus, especially in the last days of his life, we too have a chance to help others. We cannot save people. We cannot fix people. We cannot rescue people. I know that. Our helping has to be honed by honest boundaries.

But friends . . . on a daily basis . . . we have a chance to lighten the load of another human being. Sometimes it's a word. Sometimes it's listening. Sometimes it's a gesture of kindness. But my sense is that most of the people we meet on a daily basis are not going through one huge crisis, but they are struggling with a little bit of everything.

And so, if you don't remember anything else about this sermon, please remember this: When you're struggling with a little bit of everything, and some of us know this first hand, but when you're struggling with a little bit of everything, then a little bit of anything can make all the difference in the world. Or if you prefer, I offer these words of Mother Teresa: "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." That's what I'm talking about.

And so friends, don't focus on what you can't do this week . . . and don't get hung up on what you should be doing this week, and don't get snagged on what you would like to do this week . . . just use this next week of the Lenten season to do what you can to make life better for someone else. And know that every gesture of compassion you offer another human being, well, it's another way of loving the Christ within us all. I love you all. Amen.