

Autistic child's gift teaches lesson about God's love; leads to church start_100404

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THORNDALE-Some people think the days of miracles are past, but Pastor Larry Griffith says he knows better. He's seen God use a child's toy to start a church.

Griffith took a step of faith when he prepared to travel to Brazil with Evangelist Sammy Tippit this summer, leaving behind his pregnant wife.

"One of the hardest things I've ever had to do was get on that plane instead of staying with her," Griffith said.

But he still felt God's leading to go. He received confirmation as he said his goodbyes to his two sons.

His oldest son, Dallas, is 9 years old. He also is autistic. His father says Dallas lives primarily in his own world, and the key components of that world are his little toy Hot Wheels cars.

“He is very possessive of his toy cars and had his favorite one that he always kept with him-his security blanket-in his hand,” Griffith recalled.

While some autistic children are not very vocal, Dallas is. Dallas asked his father to bring him back a car from his trip.

“Part of the price you pay for being a preacher's kid is that everything is a life lesson,” Griffith said.

“So I preceded to tell him that I would try, but I wasn't sure if I would be able to or not. And he should remember that in Brazil, the children were very poor, and many of them had never had even one car or any other toy.”

Dallas stood before his father for a few seconds and then held out the hand that held his most precious possession.

“He told me to give it to a boy in Brazil. My wife and I were dumbfounded and just stood there in tears,” Griffith said.

Autistic children tend to be self-centered and reluctant to share, he explained.

“We knew at that moment that God was up to something very special,” he said.

The flight from Texas to Sao Paulo, Brazil, was a long one, and all the way there, Griffith's thoughts were drawn back to his son's gift of his most prized possession.

“I began to see that as a picture of what God has done for us-the way he gave his son that we might have eternal life,” he said.

In Brazil, he preached at First Baptist Church in Jarra, and he recounted the story of his son's gift.

In the midst of telling that story and relating to the congregation how it was a picture of God's love, he asked if a 9-year-old boy were present.

A boy named Jefferson came to the front. Griffith presented Jefferson with the first toy he ever possessed on behalf of his son, Dallas, who was giving the first gift he ever gave.

"The congregation just wept," Griffith said.

After the service, four men said they had been impressed that they needed to share the story of God's gift of love with people in a nearby neighborhood that had no church.

One of the men owned a garage where he worked on cars and said it could serve as a church for the community.

The next day, Griffith and the four men went door-to-door through an impoverished neighborhood. The residents' poverty had hardened their hearts toward God, he said.

"They said, 'God doesn't love me.' But as we shared the story of Dallas' gift and God's gift of his Son, we would see hearts melt, and 27 people gave their hearts to Christ that first day," Griffith recalled.

The men decided that with so many making professions of faith in Christ, the meetings in the garage could not wait until the next Sunday but needed to start that night.

Each of the 27 who had made commitments to Christ was present.

Griffith and the men continued witnessing to the people and telling the story of a boy's gift and how it mirrored God's gift. By the end of the week, 131 people had made professions of faith in Christ.

When Sunday came, the garage overflowed with people.

“It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen God do—start a church with an 88-cent car,” Griffith said.

The church in the garage still doesn't have a name. Charter members have to go through paperwork and receive city approval before they have an official name.

But unofficially, Griffith has his own name for the congregation.

“I call it First Baptist Church of Dallas.”

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