

Explore the Bible Series for November 11: The call to be Jesus

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The call to be Jesus

- Matthew 19:1-15

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A couple of years ago, I received a phone call late Friday afternoon, before leaving from work to head home for the weekend. It was a friend from church.

“Travis, I need a favor from you.”

It had been an unusually long week for me at work, and I was looking forward to the weekend before me. In my mind, I was already searching for an excuse to pardon me: “I am not feeling well; I’m busy this weekend with home projects; we have Little League baseball games to attend.” I had several excuses lined up ready to go, anything to spare me.

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“Yes, OK, what is it?” I said, hoping it was something that would not require too much effort or commitment on my part.

“This weekend several churches downtown are putting on an outdoor interactive play for children. We’re dramatizing the life of Christ from Palm Sunday to the Passover meal.”

There was a pause.

“Yes,” I replied. My friend probably needed someone to help set up scenes or read from the Bible. I already felt a cold coming over me. My boys did have Little League games Saturday afternoon. The yard always needed work.

“I know this is rather late and all, but we need your help tomorrow morning during the play.”

I winced and said, “OK, what is it you need me to do?”

“Would you be Jesus?”

There was another pause. I was speechless. How does one say no to a request like that? It seemed none of the excuses I had prepared seemed legitimate. After all, who is ever too busy to be Jesus? I accepted the part.

That Saturday morning I put on my sandals, threw on my robe and sash, loaded my kids into the minivan and drove downtown to play Jesus.

Being like Jesus

The Passion play was set up in several stages, and to my disappointment, I was not the only Jesus in town. There was another. He was shorter, though, and had black hair and a black beard. I was taller with brown hair and a brown beard. The other actor played Jesus for all the scenes except mine. I was filling in as Jesus during the time when the little children came to him.

I wondered if having two radically different looking Jesuses would be too confusing for the children. After all, there is just one Jesus. I figured they would identify more with the other Jesus since they would see him more often that morning. Nevertheless, I played my part.

My routine went like this: As I sat there on a box of hay teaching my disciples, several women brought their children to me. These women and children were actors, too. My disciples began sending these people away, chastising them for coming to me. I stood up and rebuked the disciples, saying: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14).

As I finished my line, I then placed my hands on their heads and greeted each child that had a part in the play. As I was uttering the line "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these," and as I was stretching my arms out to indicate the children in the play, I turned to look at the audience and found 30 sets of eyes staring back at me, all various ages ranging 10 and under.

We had not rehearsed our parts with an audience watching. I realized I was interpreting the very life and ministry of Jesus before these little ones who had come to watch the play, and I had just indicated that the kingdom of heaven belonged to children such as those who were in the play. Immediately, almost as if it were instinctive, I spread my arms wider to

include the children in the audience who were watching.

They all smiled, and I walked over to touch them on the heads and bless them as well. I realized I was now committed to touching and blessing every child. My greatest fear was that I would miss one. They each came closer to me, all wide-mouthed and teeth showing. One woman even rushed from the back of the crowd to the front with her infant and toddler so that I would not miss her children.

Surprised by Jesus

The morning was exhausting. I saw about 10 sets of 30 kids. After I had finished my part, I blended in with the rest of the crowd that gathered to watch the final scene where the other Jesus broke bread with his disciples.

James walked off the tractor bed where Jesus and the disciples were sharing their meal and addressed the entire audience: "Dear friends, Jesus told us that evening that the Son of Man would be taken away, tried before authorities, crucified, dead and buried. But after the third day, he will be raised again. He told us that we, his disciples, would suffer trials and persecutions for following him. He told us not to lose hope, for one day, my friends, he will come again and be in our midst. So have hope, you who follow Christ, for he has risen and will come again."

As I was standing there among the rest of the audience listening to James speak, a little girl caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. She was staring at me. I looked at her. She smiled. She looked up at her mother who was paying attention to the play. She looked at me. At her mother. Then back to me. The girl tugged at her mother's shirt. Her mother looked down at her and said: "What is it?"

“It’s Jesus.”

“What?”

“It’s Jesus. He’s come again. He’s right there,” the little girl whispered to her mother, stressing each word emphatically, as she pointed in my direction. Her mother laughed, and I did too.

For whatever reason, even though she had spent more time with the other Jesus, even though he spoke more often than I, that little girl identified more with the Jesus who took time to welcome her into the kingdom of heaven. She related to the Jesus who blessed her and gave her personal attention.

As my family and I were walking back to our minivan to go home, I recalled the words of Jesus that follow my lines in the play: “Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:4-5). During the ride home, I thought about what the little girl had said to her mother; it made me chuckle again. I wonder if she’ll ever know that it was actually she who, on that day, was Jesus to me.

Discussion questions

- Have you ever been the presence of Christ to others?
- Has anyone been the presence of Christ to you?
- What did Jesus mean when he said the kingdom of heaven belonged to children?
- Why did Jesus strongly rebuke the disciples?

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