

EDITORIAL

ASSAULTED BY GOD

If you have a relationship with Jesus, the day has either already come or is on its way when He will slap you upside the head with His passion for broken, marginalized people. Perhaps He will whisper to you. But for others of us, God's zeal for hurting people will come as an assault as much as an assignment.

That's certainly how it happened to me, smug and clueless as a college senior and a newlywed. Amanda and I got home one night in our palatial apartment in Kings Mountain, North Carolina, to discover an urgent message on our machine. It was from Aisha, who was one of my best friends from high school. Her father, who had for years suffered from HIV but was now in the final stages of full-blown AIDS, was dying. She wanted me to come to the hospital.

Neither my years growing up in a parsonage nor my years casually sniffing around religion classes at Gardner-Webb University prepared me for the shell of a man I encountered when I walked into that room. In his mid-40s but looking as if he was over 100, Aisha's father, Harold, was unrecognizable from the last time I saw him. I'm

Pentecostal, so I did the only thing I knew how to do: pray for his healing. Sadly, there was no Oral Roberts miracle finish in that hospital room—we watched Harold die a slow and painful death those next few days. But there was a miraculous transformation in me.

Harold was not like me, by ethnicity or life experience. But in his hauntingly hollowed face, I saw Jesus. Up to that point, I had lived blissfully ignorant of the real suffering that people faced all around me. In Harold, I was confronted with the harshness of life beyond my carefully constructed world.

I also saw Jesus in the social worker named Michelle, a foul-mouthed, chain-smoking woman in her 50s who was taking care of Harold since long before I came onto the scene. She was a theological challenge for me, cussing with a fluidity I had never encountered in any man (even when she was talking to me about the Scriptures). What was I supposed to do with the fact that even with her many offences to my culture, her life demonstrated that she seemed to understand something about the Gospels that I didn't?

After Harold passed, I participated in the funeral by

reading Scripture, an alien in a Catholic ceremony that incorporated both their traditional liturgy and African-American free worship. When it was over, Michelle complimented me and told what a great pastor I would become. But her sincere words came not as comfort, but as daggers. For that was the day I realized I didn't know anything about the ministry. That was the day the real learning started.

To this day I do not claim to have figured out the unique sense of God's presence that I find when I'm around marginalized people, nor have I arrived at a place where I am loving them well enough. And, of course, the more He reveals about both His heart and my own, the more I understand myself as the outcast desperately in need of Him.

At least now when I need to find God, I know where to start looking.



Jonathan Martin
Editor