

"I Can't Trust the Church"

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Last week our church opened its doors as a cooling shelter during the extreme heat advisory. From 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, we offered three meals a day and a cool place to stay for anyone without air conditioning or experiencing housing insecurity.

Only one person came.

We had done the same thing this past winter—a warming shelter for 19 days when temperatures stayed below freezing. That time, we housed up to six people, including overnight accommodations. This time, in the scorching heat, just one.

Some were disappointed. I wasn't.

We would rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it. We will always err on the side of offering a safe space. And the supplies—both food and monetary donations—still fed our community through our emergency food pantry, our outdoor blessing box, and our twice-monthly grocery distribution. It was a win all around. The kind of win I believe Jesus offers us.

But then came the conversation that broke my heart.

One of our church members was talking with a woman who had come to both our warming and cooling shelters. The woman mentioned she'd been trying to convince some of her homeless friends to join her—to get in from the elements, to have a meal, to rest in safety.

The moment she mentioned it was at a church; they stopped her cold.

They weren't comfortable coming to a church.

Their fear? There would be a price to pay. They'd have to sit through a pitch about salvation. They'd be judged. They'd be talked to about their worthiness. They'd have to look a certain way, act a certain way, believe a certain way to be truly welcome.

And my heart sank.

Because it's not that their expectation is unfounded.

Many churches have created exactly this kind of quid pro quo arrangement. "All are welcome here"—as long as you sit quietly, dress appropriately, and don't make us uncomfortable. I've seen it in our own local churches. "Welcoming" congregations that still whisper about people. That segregate. That reserve the right to decide who's really welcome and who's just tolerated.

The perception exists because the reality exists.

Until we show through our actions that it's different, that perception will remain. We can deny it all we want. But people believe what they see, not what we say.

This isn't a new problem.

In Matthew 11, Jesus names it directly: *"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' Yet the Human One came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'"*

Judgment has been the church's shadow for 2,000 years. John was too austere. Jesus was too inclusive. Neither could win. And we've continued the pattern ever since—evaluating, critiquing, withholding love until people meet our standards.

Jesus calls us to be part of the solution. To stop judging. To stop withholding help. To love without conditions.

I thought about this again when I was reminded of Father Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit priest who founded Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles—the world's largest gang intervention, rehabilitation, and re-entry program.

Father Boyle began his work in 1986 as pastor of Dolores Mission Church in Boyle Heights, one of the poorest Catholic parishes in Los Angeles and the area with the highest concentration of gang activity in the city. During the "decade of death" in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he buried dozens of young people killed by gang violence.

His response wasn't to preach at them. It wasn't to demand they clean up their lives before they could come to church.

His response was "Radical Kinship."

Father Boyle's core philosophy is simple: there is no "us" and "them." There is only us. His approach revolves around treating deeply traumatized and stigmatized gang members with unconditional love, tenderness, and respect—allowing them to heal from past wounds.

When someone walks into Father Boyle's church, they are welcomed with unconditional love. He doesn't go out seeking gang members to convert. He offers them a place. A safe place. And when they come, they are met with love—no strings attached.

It took years. But the word spread. People came. And they're still coming.

Jobs have been created. Businesses built. Opportunities opened for people society had written off as hopeless. All because one church decided to live like Jesus—to love without conditions, to welcome without judgment, to offer kinship instead of charity.

This past Sunday, I preached a sermon called "Come See About Me." The premise was simple: if someone came to observe us for 90 days, what would they conclude about Jesus?

I shared one of my favorite stories—from Isak Dinesen's memoir, "Out of Africa"—about a boy named Kitau.

Kitau, a young Kikuyu boy, appeared at Dinesen's door in Nairobi asking to work as a domestic servant. She hired him, and he served admirably for about three months.

Then he surprised her by asking for a letter of recommendation to work for a Muslim man named Sheik Ali bin Salim in Mombasa.

Dinesen was fond of Kitau and offered to raise his pay to keep him. He refused.

He explained his true motive: he was trying to decide which faith to follow—Islam or Christianity. His plan was to spend three months observing Dinesen to see exactly how a Christian lived up close. Then he would spend three months with Sheik Ali to observe Muslim life and behavior before making his final decision.

He wanted to come and see what the Christian faith really was about.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Who would people say Jesus is if they came and observed you for 90 days?

We will continue to open our doors for every need we can. We will be present and ready for every opportunity to serve. Because that's who we believe Jesus to be, and thus who we are called to be.

But it can't just be us.

My hope and prayer—for those reading this who are involved in a church, and for those who aren't—is that we all do the same. That we live authentically as Jesus lived. That we stop withholding love until people meet our standards. That we offer kinship, not charity. That we welcome without conditions.

If we did that—if churches across our community truly lived this way—maybe people would start trusting the church again.

Maybe those experiencing homelessness would walk through our doors without fear.

Maybe the whispers would stop.

Maybe the judgment would end.

Maybe we'd see growing churches all around us—not because of better programs or hipper worship styles, but because people encountered the living Christ in us.

That's the church I believe Jesus calls us to be.

That's the church worth trusting.

That's the church we get to be.