

# Desiring the Undesirables

## *Compassionate Ministry with the Hungry and Homeless*

By Rudy Rasmus

**W**here did we ever get the notion that certain people—created out of the same substance as the rest of us—could be considered “undesirable” in the church? People may look different, have unique ideas of appropriate hygiene, live under very different social and economic conditions, and even have varying levels of sanity, but at the end of the day we are always more alike than we are different. Joy and pain, laughter and tears, doubt and belief, fear and love are parts of the human experience common to all people.

Several years ago, I accidentally embarked on an experiment designed to detect levels of judgment in polite society. I am a college-educated pastor of a 9,000-member church in downtown Houston, Texas. I do not wear suits, I do not display the trappings of material success, I drive a pickup truck, and my beard is braided into three braids with decorative beads dangling from each of the braids. I call my beard “the filter” because it helps me detect judgmental people at a distance—not for the purposes of avoiding the judgmental person, but

instead to help them redefine their boundaries and subjective conclusions once they have had a chance to get to know me.

I believe marginalized people have a built-in radar to detect the level of acceptance we offer them. We don't have to say whether we love them or reject them. They sense it. We don't have to make a sign that says we accept them the way they are. They know it instinctively. Our rejection of those who may not meet society's standard of appropriateness is almost always a result of the messages we received as children from those who were charged with our safety. Those messages then get reinforced throughout our lives.

### *Responding in Fear or Love*

I spent my formative years in my Auntie Mae Mae's neighborhood grocery store. The



world converged there everyday. The well to do and the poor, the drunk and the sober, the educated and uneducated, and everyone else would enter the doors to encounter unconditional acceptance. My Auntie Mae Mae taught me that people respond to each other in one of two ways: in fear or in love.

When a drunken guy walked through the door of Allen Food Market, he knew my aunt's response to him wouldn't be fear. He could count on Auntie Mae Mae loving him. She wasn't afraid that he would try to steal something, that another customer would be offended by her acceptance of him, or that he might become too dependent on her. He just appreciated being accepted. There is always inherent risk in unconditional acceptance, but she never allowed any of the possibilities to cloud her commitment to show genuine acceptance and respect to each person who walked through her door. Her love conquered all fears.

Fear is at the heart of exclusion, and fear perpetuates our desire to be distant from people who aren't like us. But love is a tremendously powerful force. Auntie Mae Mae treated each person like he or she was the most important person in the world. The Apostle John wrote, "Perfect love casts out fear" (John 4:18). I saw that truth demonstrated every afternoon at Allen Food Market. Many of

the people who came in scared me. They looked strange, smelled bad, and acted weird, but Auntie Mae Mae looked past all of that to see the intrinsic value of each person. She pushed aside any fears, and she showed love to them.

Our choice in every encounter is always either to fear or to love the unknown person. If fear is equivalent to "no" then love is a total "yes" which manifests itself in four significant ways: attention, acceptance, affection, and allowing other people to be who they are. Jesus succinctly put this love into words in Matthew 22:39 when he reminded the Pharisees to "Love your neighbor as yourself."

## *The Church's Response*

Sadly, the church struggles as much as anyone to welcome and love our neighbors as Jesus said we should. That task becomes even more difficult when our neighbors don't look like we think they should look, smell like we think they should smell, act like we think they should act, or have a different life orientation from us. We often drive by hurting, hungry, and hopeless people every

day without giving them a second thought, but when God touches our hearts and motivates us to care for "the least of these," we suddenly feel the need to get involved—in fact, we *have to* get involved because we have a sense of urgency to help them. Before launching out in the area of society's perceived undesirables, we must first do our homework, clarify our goals, and find good resources so that our efforts will be successful.

To be most effective with those who have been marginalized in society for whatever reason, consider incorporating these five "Cs":



- **Common Sense.** Staff and volunteer safety is essential. The places where the marginalized live are often tough places with real risks. Many people who are obviously challenged are unstable because they suffer from chronic mental illness. Be aware of your surroundings and serve in teams, with a good blend of men and women to ensure that no one's safety is put at risk. Early in our work with homeless people around St. John's we hired security guards to serve during our homeless outreach activities.

- **Collaboration.** If it's rolling, don't reinvent the wheel. Local government and non-profit agencies offer a wide variety of resources for hungry, homeless, and people living in the

margins of society, such as mental health services, clothing, food, and legal assistance. Find out what help is already available, and partner with agencies that share your goals. These agencies have often been providing assistance to the disadvantaged in your community for years. Enlist them to train your volunteers, and ask for their advice as you clarify your strategy for your ministry.

- **Commitment.** Serving those on the margins should be more than a field trip to see the ducks in their natural habitat. People on the street may look like they don't have a clue, but they can tell if people who come to help them genuinely care, or if they are just on a one-time social experiment to earn a merit badge. For this reason, be sure that the leaders of the church "own" this ministry and give plenty of emotional, spiritual, and tangible support to those who are helping the homeless. Blending spiritual care with physical assistance is a powerful ministry, but most homeless people trust others very reluctantly. It will take time and tenacity to earn their trust.

- **Consistency.** If you don't plan to continue... don't start! Look for people, agencies, and corporate partners who will join you

for the long haul in this ministry. People on the street need to see familiar faces on a regular basis so they can believe that you truly care about them. As they see you and your team as consistent and reliable, you'll earn their respect. At that point, they might listen to your message of hope and forgiveness, and they might take steps based on your loving advice.

- **Contributions.** Wherever your heart is... that's where your cash is! Donations to this ministry come in all shapes, in all sizes, and from all sources. St. John's has a corporate partner whose employees give their time one day each month to feed the homeless and many individual supporters who see the ministry as their personal outreach effort. Look for additional sources of help from other non-profits and businesses in your community. When people realize how much people in the margins need help, their hearts are touched and they open the doors to their resources to assist them. Make the need known, and ask people to be generous.

### Returning to Christ's Call

Earlier this year, newspapers reported that "...more than a quarter of adult Americans have left the faith of their childhood to join another religion or no religion." The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" details the volatility of American religious life in light of the 44 percent of Americans who have switched religious affiliations or have walked away from church. What this research misses are the millions of people in this country who have fallen from the limelight of demographic research as a result of poverty, prison, and disenfranchisement and are often considered the undesirables of society.

The church, once at the center of life in most towns and cities, has lost its place of influence because it has become a fortress of the favored instead of a community of care. The church has forgotten the mandate of its founder that "what ever was done for the least of these" was also done for Him."

Bryant Myers, in *Walking with the Poor*, asserts that the two-tiered approach of the world is a "false dichotomy that separates evangelism as spiritual activity of the church from the social action of the physical realm." One of the challenges facing the church today is a result of the separation of the spiritual activity of the church and the material and economic realities that impact the spiritual, emotional, social, and material empowerment of the whole person and the entire community.

An authentic response to the message of Christ requires us to overcome our fear of the oppressed and disenfranchised, responding instead in love. Try it and watch the world beat a path to your door. □



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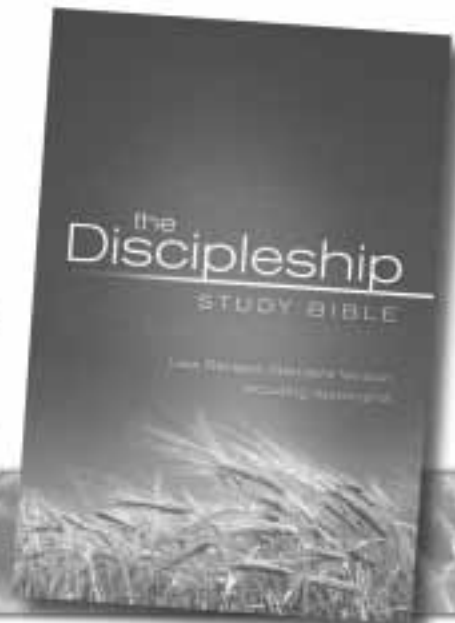
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