

What love looks like

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Most Sunday mornings, I'm the first person to arrive at our church building. There is often last-minute printing to do (I have learned that our church printer can be a temperamental beast, and it's best to leave enough time to properly engage the hostilities), last-minute prepping for the high school Sunday school class I lead, and a handful of other odds and ends to ensure are in place before things get rolling around 9:45. But my wife and daughter were at a swim meet, and it turned out that my teenage son's heart was not quickened by the prospect of getting up early to arrive at his dad's customary time. So the lights were on when I arrived at church. Which was unusual.

What was even more unusual was the scene that greeted me when I walked in the front door. Two hunched over figures with their backs to me were rolling up their sleeping bags, gathering backpacks, and preparing to depart. A church member was there with them. I was more than a little surprised. My son kind of just stood there with his guitar and stared. "This is ____ and ____," our church member said. "They spent last night in the front entrance. They're just getting ready to head out."

Right.

I looked outside the front door. We have a kind of plexiglass shelter constructed outside our front doors to provide a bit of respite from the bracing west winds that are part and parcel of life in southern Alberta. I emphasize the "a bit" part of the previous sentence. When the winds are at their merciless worst, it can still be pretty miserable in that shelter. It was pretty windy the night before, and the temperature was probably in the 5-degree-Celsius range. So, not very warm, and not very calm. I looked at the hard concrete where these two people had spent the previous night. I shivered.

I asked them who they were and where they had come from. They had come from the interior of British Columbia, they said, and were trying to get to Ontario. They were hitchhiking. Our church is located near a major intersection and a major east-west

highway. They must have wandered over late Saturday night, looking for somewhere, *anywhere* to lay their heads for the night. “What’s in Ontario?” I asked them. Turns out they both had family there. They had lost their jobs for “mental health reasons” and wanted to get somewhere where they had more support.” “You’ve got a long way to go,” I offered, limply. “Yeah,” the guy responded, eyes avoiding my gaze. We stood there for a moment, looking at each other, none of us evidently knowing what to say.

And then, they were off, wandering back out to the highway, looking for a ride for the next stretch of a long, long journey. I later found out that the people in our church who had arrived before me had opened the door for them when they saw them sleeping in the entrance, had shown them to the washrooms so they could clean up, had perhaps even taken them across the street for coffee, if the Tim Hortons cups were any indication. And I was very pleased about this.

But I was not as pleased with my own response. I had arrived at church exhausted. It had been a long week and weekend, and I had slept very poorly. My sermon seemed to me a bit of a haphazard offering and I had struggled with it right up until that very morning. I was running a bit late, there were things to print, stuff to check, *things to do*. And I didn’t really have the time for these two dear people trying to collect their tired, weary selves in our church entrance. It’s not as though I ignored them or was unkind or anything like that. But I almost certainly could have given more of myself. No, check that, I *certainly* could have. But I didn’t.

To make matters worse, the gospel text that I later stood up to preach on—the gospel text that I had struggled to find anything interesting or useful to say anything about right up until about an hour prior to the service—was Matthew 22:34-46 which contain Jesus’ famous words about the greatest commandment:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: *‘Love your neighbor as yourself.*

My neighbor. As myself. Right.

I didn’t have the courage to ask the famous question mouthed by the legal expert in Luke 10: *And who is my neighbor?* I knew darn well who my neighbor was. I was pretty sure I had last seen them trudging away from our church toward the highway.

Should I have invited them in? Taken them for breakfast? Given them whatever cash I had in my wallet? Bought them a bus ticket? They certainly weren't asking for anything. Indeed, they seemed rather eager to be on their way. Maybe they just wanted to get out of there. Maybe they were embarrassed. I don't know. But that's kind of the point. I didn't take the time to find out. I had churchy things to do, so I offered a few lame platitudes and said, in essence, "[Go, be warm and well fed.](#)" Christ have mercy. Forgive us, *forgive me*. I so often have no idea what I'm doing (or failing to do).

Christ, have mercy.

Later that morning, after our worship service was done, my son asked me a question. "Hey dad, if you were here last night, would you have let them sleep in the church overnight?" I thought, for a moment. I swallowed hard. "Yeah," I told him, "I think I would. I don't think I would have left them alone, but maybe I would have stayed overnight with them, just to keep them company." *That's what love looks like*, I thought, but did not say.

He thought for a minute, looked at me and nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Sounds good."

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