

What a friend we have in Jesus

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January 22, 2015

We often like to speak, in Christian circles, about the God who descends, who comes down, who is somehow nearest to those on the bottom, those who find themselves on the wrong side of the score. The words roll off our churchy tongues almost too easily. *Friend of sinners . . . Blessed are the poor, those who mourn . . . A bruised reed he will not break . . . Man of sorrows, familiar with suffering . . . I have not come for the healthy but for the sick . . .* The list could go on and on. We are well-acquainted with the idea that Jesus seemed far more comfortable with the losers than he did with the winners.

I wonder if we really appreciate what this means. I wonder if we ever *really* grasp the significance of the way in which God conducted himself when he showed up as Jesus.

I suspect that some of us implicitly think that these attributes are kind of like the charitable side of God. Because we know, of course, that God is very, very big and very, very powerful and that God is the sovereign ruler over all that is. We know that God has a rather weighty list of tasks—universe supervision, the dispensation of blessings, supplying his creatures with suitably awesome evidence of his majesty in creation, providing the foundations for morality and aesthetics—to name just a few. And on top of all this impressive stuff, God also cares for the weak and the poor! How very good of God, we think.

But this special concern for those on those on the bottom is not a kind of brief interlude in the life and nature of God—as if God periodically pauses from ordinary, more God-like activities to spare a sentiment for the downtrodden. It expresses, I am convinced, the deepest, most transformative and powerful truth about who the God finally made fully known in Jesus Christ really is.

We could spend a lifetime plumbing the depths of what this actually means. But whatever else it might mean, it at least means that those whose primary experience in life is of not fitting or not belonging or failing to measure up or of constantly

struggling and straining are the ones who are, in some sense, closest to the very heart of God.

The refugee whose primary experience of the world is dislocation and disorientation.

The poor young woman who wonders how she will possibly feed her children.

The lonely kid on the playground who nobody bothers to try to understand.

The social outcast who smells bad and stutters so terribly that he can't have a normal conversation.

The orphans of war.

The couple coping with the devastating loss of a child.

Those who face mental and physical disabilities.

The old woman groping through the fog of dementia, wondering why she can't remember her husband's name or face.

The middle-aged man who has failed at everything he has tried in life.

The homeless and poor.

The neglected, the unattractive, the forgettable.

The ones whose actions make it virtually impossible to like them.

If we believe—truly believe!—that Jesus gives us the truest and most accurate picture of what God is like, then we are saying that *these* are the people that God understands and identifies with in a unique way. We are saying that sorrow, pain, and rejection are not human experiences that God is gracious enough to experience some temporary compassion over; rather, these are part of the very heart of who God is, the very heart of who and how God loves.

It means that God is a wounded lover, that there is a sadness that stretches over God's very self, that the one who made the world is nearest to those who regularly feel that this world has no room for them.

What Jesus shows us is that descent is part of the very ontology of God.

I thought of these things as I spent some time recently with a dying man. He is pretty nearly deaf, so I wrote a few things on a little white board and held it up for him. I asked him if he was at peace, if he was ready to go. I asked him if he was afraid. A small smile crept over the corners of his mouth, and he shook his head slowly. I smiled, too. *Of course he's not afraid, I thought. He's spent a lifetime with this God. He knows what this God is like and those to whom this God draws near.*

As I was leaving the care facility I passed through a mostly empty atrium. There was a woman at a piano, and an old man in a wheelchair. His square head was topped with wispy silver hair. He had a colorful checkered shirt and broad black suspenders. They made for an interesting sight, these two. Her back was to him as she played, and his wheelchair was sitting at a bit of angle, pointed off toward nowhere. Was it a chapel service? A sing-along? Was this old man the only one who had showed up? There had been a flu outbreak of some kind in the facility—perhaps he was the only one brave enough to venture out of his room.

But there he sat with this silver hair and his black suspenders. There he sat, singing out of key and at the top of his lungs.

What a friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear . . .

I stood and I watched this wondrous sight for a few minutes. *Here, I thought, is a choir truly fit for our king.*

Originally posted at [Rumblings](#)