



pre-release sampler

from belonging



mike

to becoming



clarensau

*the power of loving people
like Jesus did*



mike clarensau

from belonging
to becoming

the power of loving people
like jesus did

 Influence



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A final look

preface

They say that imitation is the greatest form of flattery. Despite not knowing who “they” are, most of us must believe “their” words are true. When a television show becomes a hit, other networks produce shows trying to catch the same lightning in a bottle. Football coaches redesign their playbooks after the scripts of last year’s champion, and shoppers rush to the store to get their copy of the dress, techno-gadget, or automobile that has garnered the latest applause.

Copying the successful can also slide into the life of the church. Conferences crank out notebooks, and publishers produce countless books and DVDs, that offer the formula which one church has used successfully. And so a lot of us come running, hoping the same mixture will quench our parched throats. I have my own collection of such stories. Autobiographies make great reading, even if I never seem to be able to live the same amazing results.

This is not one of those books.

Yes, there’s a story to tell—even more than one as we learn about other believers who have gone down similar paths. But while there’s a passion to share, and some principles for each of us to grasp, the story I want you to discover and live out is yours, not mine.

Yes, there are truths I’ve finally grasped, but they will irrigate your fields through rows that differ from mine. It’s your fields and your harvest that must grow. The weather you face each day won’t match the cycle of storm clouds and sunshine I’ve faced. It’s your harvest I hope to develop, not mine.

I want you to understand the moments and stories that changed my heart and my flock in extraordinary ways. But how that passion will shape your road lands on God’s shoulders, as well as the creative insights of those who love Him with you. The reason I’ve written my story is to help you discover yours.

To understand the intent of this book, you must do more than read it. You must engage it—allowing its concepts to trickle deep into your own understanding of the heart and practice of ministry. Each chapter concludes with questions that go beyond the desire to summarize. These questions seek to push you toward a path that is rising before you. Some questions will target

your heart. Others can help you chart a course with a group of Jesus' friends or the team that pursues His purposes with you.

To simply read this book will expose you to the things I learned when I began seeing my world through the eyes of an outsider. But my story alone can do little to shape yours unless you apply those lessons in ways that are unique to you. The greater work is the landscape before you. The questions I'll raise can help you find it for yourself. I'm not the expert for your corner of the globe. Only you, guided the wisdom of your Savior, can fulfill that role.

My dream for this book would cultivate your dream for ministry, in ways beyond which either one of us could even imagine.

Mike Clarensau

chapter one

*She wasn't supposed to be there ...
but she changed everything.*

I was burrowed awkwardly into an orange stadium seat near the top of an impressive sports arena. The 15,000 pastors and leaders I had joined for this convention sat around me, each dressed in his own idea of ministry-vogue relevance. The room looked like snapshots from a confused fashion catalog, a bad attempt to blend expensive suits and jeans with untucked shirts, all on the same page. We were tolerating the stadium chairs that evening so that we could benefit from the insights and wisdom broadcast from the tiny platform below. Sadly, this day had come before the advent of the multiple screens that give even those in restrooms the ability to see the speaker up close. No, on this night only a single large screen displayed the influential speakers for us in the rafters.

Like my 15,000 friends, I sat with Bible open and notepad handy. My wife sat next to me with her own notepad. She had already written more than I had so I glanced at her paper to see what I missed. After copying a few notes like a desperate middle-schooler struggling on a history test, I settled back into my orange chair to record my own thoughts.

At some point, I glanced down at my Bible, still opened to the text our speaker had chosen. Honestly, there's a lot I don't remember about that night. I recall the uncomfortable orange seat and the ceiling of that great auditorium (only inches from my head), but I don't remember the city we were in or the date of the event. I have an idea, but I've attended this same convention a dozen or so times, so remembering which one had bottom-squeezing orange chairs requires brain cells I can't spare.

I feel bad that I don't remember the speaker. I know he's a great man because you have to be in order to stand on that podium. I don't even remember his topic, or how long he spoke. My notes are gone too – though I'll bet my wife still has hers.

What I do remember was that his message was coming from somewhere on page 1055 of my Bible. I know that because that's where I found her—the woman who wasn't supposed to be there.

The woman who changed everything.

Over the years I've realized that some of my most lucid moments come when other people are talking, and my mind is somewhere else. As a pastor, I've had my share of bad ideas, but I've also had some great ones—some you might even describe as visionary, missional, or even incarnational. Those kinds of ideas usually hit me when someone else is preaching and my mind is elsewhere.

That's my version of multi-tasking.

However the guy preaching that night I sat in the vice-like orange chair brought me to page 1055, he set me up to see a woman and her story that changed everything for me.

Now you may be tempted to say that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing, and you'd be right. I was supposed to be listening intently and writing stuff down like my wife. You might think she would have elbowed me or given me one of those looks that grab my attention, but she didn't. She knows me well, and she knows what those seminal moments look like when a great idea is about to change our lives.

The other woman (the one described on page 1055 in my Bible) was also doing something she wasn't supposed to do. Maybe that's why her story grabbed my attention. In your Bible, you can find her story at the end of Luke 7. The paragraph heading, (that often-helpful-but-not-inspired phrase), introduces her story as Jesus Anointed By a Sinful Woman. Maybe whoever wrote that title didn't think much of her. How would you like to get your story in the Bible under a heading like that? At least Mary of Magdala got her name and hometown included in her story. This poor woman just got a label—somewhat accurate, but hardly affirming.

The story takes place in a Pharisee's house. Jesus had come to the house for dinner, invited by a man named Simon. Maybe you've heard a lot of bad things about the Pharisees. I'll just assume that you know to say "boo" (out loud) when they show up in Jesus' stories. They weren't all bad guys—at least one of them made a significant connection with Jesus—but this wasn't Nicodemus' house. It was Simon's, and as the story unfolds, you'll see that booing will seem like the right thing to do.

We can't be sure of Simon's intent that night. Did he have genuine questions for Jesus, or did he just want to make a name for himself by being the Pharisee who could twist Jesus' words into conversational origami? We can assume he didn't revere Jesus since he didn't welcome him with the normal treatments of a true guest of honor (vs. 44-46). But as to Simon's true intentions, that's hard to say.

We don't know Simon's actual agenda that night because only minutes into the story, the misplaced woman steals the show. Jesus and Simon's other guests seemed to have just joined their host at the low-dining table, probably reclining

on cushions. In this kind of setting, everybody could see what was going on, even those standing on the periphery. More than likely, a Pharisee hosting Jesus could draw a crowd. Jesus usually did that all by himself. But for a Pharisee to jump into the intellectual ring with God Incarnate must have offered a degree of intrigue too good to pass up. I'd try to get in, even if I had an uncomfortable seat. That night, I would have written everything down. I'm glad Luke eventually did.

Apparently the woman filtered in with the others along the wall. Her presence adds to the probability of a large outer crowd since I would guess that if Simon had seen her coming in, he would have called security. Surely one of his servants would have earned some points with the boss by keeping the riff-raff out.

Instead, somehow, she slipped in.

And she got in close, real close. As I sat in my orange chair that night, I pictured her pushing her way through the crowd, with soft sobs failing to rise above the crowd noise. In fact, by the time Simon saw her, she was already making a scene around Jesus' feet. This was not supposed to happen, at least not in Simon's mind. His dinner party was being hijacked by a prostitute and her out-of-control emotions.

Pastors know what those moments feel like. We've had carefully-planned services interrupted by some outsider we didn't even see until they were halfway down the aisle, fully engaged in some sort of spontaneous dance, flag waving, tambourine slappin', or some other expression of worship that goes beyond our current congregational tastes.

Apparently dumb-founded and paralyzed, Simon seems to have decided to let Jesus deal with this. After all, he might have been thinking, it's my house, but this is His crowd. Surely He'll have the decency to get her under control and out of the house.

So now you're up-to-speed on the action and perhaps wondering what happens next. Or maybe you know the story and you're saying, "Mike, what's the big deal?" I'd read the story before too, but somehow on that night it leapt out of page 1055 making me forget all about John the Baptist's doubts, the widow's resurrected son, and every other story on that page. The big deal was what happened next. It's how this woman who wasn't supposed to be there changed everything for this easily-distracted pastor just months past his fortieth birthday.

Intentional or not, Simon's reticence to handle things forced Jesus to make a choice—to save Simon's dinner party or save the woman. Jesus could have done the expected thing and stopped her, bringing order and respectability to the Pharisee home where so many were watching—or He could rescue the woman from another round of the social humiliation she knew so well, and find a way

to affirm her awkward but well-intended actions. C'mon Jesus, Simon might have thought. It's either her or me!

Jesus chose her.

Jesus didn't waffle or play in the middle of the social highway. He didn't find a "win-win" for Simon and the woman. He clearly sided with her, affirming her deep gratitude for the truckloads of forgiveness she required. Simon got no blessing. Instead, Jesus revealed every slight the Pharisee had shown Him that night, only magnifying what his guests would be calling a social disaster before morning. Simon may have anticipated a night of religious jousting, some good-natured brawling over the tablets of Mosaic Law. Instead he got his theological nose bloodied. Jesus' rebuke told the table guests, the periphery, and the whispering crowd in the street that this woman belonged with Him, and that the host was the one on the outside looking in.

Belonging is the Beginning...

Conversations with the Pharisees, like the one Christ had with Simon, eventually got Jesus killed. Of course, Jesus' death was the signature moment of God's eternal plan and that our Savior willingly accepted the horrifying path in front of Him. For all of Satan's scheming, Jesus' actions on the Cross were of His own volition. He chose to set aside the comforts and glory of Heaven for the chance to bring us home with Him.

But when you get inside the heads of those who enjoyed pushing Jesus up Golgotha's hill, you can see how the moments like the one at Simon's house fueled their hatred. They weren't choosing to play ugly parts for the good of a bigger story. I've got a friend who does that. He plays the part of Satan in his church's version of "Heaven's Gates; Hell's Flames"—a drama that awakens people to the coming judgment. My friend is a good guy who is also skilled at portraying his dark character—and I'm fully convinced that he's going to heaven after his final performance. In contrast, the religious leaders who packed humanity's front row for the Crucifixion were different. They had their own motives for killing Jesus. He claimed to be God and He gave value to the wrong people: people like the penitent woman instead of people who felt no need to repent of anything.

How do you feel about a God who loves people you don't like? Oh, we know He's supposed to because He made them. But a few of us—especially those who think they know God—operate with a bit of functional superiority. From their point of view, there are those who belong to God and those who clearly don't. The easiest way to tell the difference is by how they act. Right? Except that seems to be the view from which Simon was sitting that night.

I grew up in church, a good church. I was loved by a great pastor, taught by some wonderful Sunday school teachers, and sang in a choir who put worship-

ping God ahead of performing for their friends. I memorized Bible verses, and could usually quote more than the other kids when there was an award Bible on the line, or a sofa-sized painting crafted by the amazing artist who taught my Sunday school class. My Mom helped me learn lots of verses and was very proud of me when I won that painting for the living room.

But somehow while I was learning everything I was supposed to learn in that great church, I also learned things God didn't want on the lesson plan. Somehow I thought that while God loved those people living under bridges or carousing in night clubs or being anywhere but with us in church on Sunday morning, He loved them with more of a "look, but don't touch" attitude. I saw those folks and felt bad for them, knowing that Heaven wasn't in their current plans. My pastor cried over them, but I responded with less emotion. If they'd just believe in Him and prove that by doing their best, then they could belong to Him like me!

So perhaps I can give Simon the benefit of the doubt here. Maybe when he saw the woman, he thought Hey, I'm glad you're making better choices ... good for you ... but, honestly, this dinner isn't for you, so ... there's the door. That's how I thought when I encountered someone like her.

That night in the grip of the orange seat I finally saw the significance of this woman's story for the first time. I had always applauded Jesus in His rescue-the-underdog kind of moments. I celebrated how Jesus could fix anybody. I had "booed" the humiliated Pharisee without realizing that we might be cut from the same cloth. I had not seen the most fundamental piece of Jesus' reach toward every individual—He embraced them first!

My wife watched as I scribbled *Belonging is the Beginning of Believing and Becoming* on the page, where earlier, I had begun writing sermon notes. I wasn't sure if I had read that phrase somewhere, seen it on a banner, or even ever heard it before. I don't think that night's speaker said it since he was somewhere else on page 1055. And while I'm not brazen enough to insist I coined that phrase, I am sure that I heard it for the first time when the Holy Spirit brought it to attention.

Jesus put the belonging first. In dinner parties, hillside chats, healing lines, and tax-collecting kiosks, He invited people to come be with Him, to follow Him, and belong to Him. He didn't wait for proclamations of faith or the ripening of repentance fruit. He extended loving connection to a tree-hugging tax guy, a bunch of untouchable lepers, a woman snatched from an adulterous bed, and a host of other black sheep. He plucked messed up people off the curb and gave them a seat on the bus—with all their nasty baggage in the cargo bins.

Jesus had more faith than we do. He seemed to think that if people walked with Him for a bit, they would come to believe in Him and choose to let Him redirect their doomed decision-making patterns. He somehow knew that lov-

ing them would keep them close until they were ready for the rescue He had come to bring.

I wonder if we're not that confident. In most churches, we're usually glad to say hello to broken humans, but we prefer to wait until they believe like us and start acting like us before we want them thinking that they belong with us. We have a reputation to guard.

But apparently Jesus didn't.

As my legs began to numb from the orange seat, I thought of how much easier it is to be like Simon the Pharisee than to think and act like Jesus. Simon and his guests had mastered what I'd call a "believe-then become-then belong" paradigm. Choose to believe what we believe and align your behaviors to our moral code, and then we'll consider offering you membership to our circle. They had even found ways to make the "become" stage so difficult that certain folks had little or no chance to be included. Women, like the intruder at Simon's house that night, would have never been invited—nor the men who pursued her.

I wanted to be mad at those Pharisees, but I knew that would be like screaming at a mirror. Every thought I'd had about the way church worked was attached to their paradigm. I wanted to re-engage with the night's sermon, weaving a few fig leaves together to hide behind. But the spotlight had found me, exposed my Simon-like tendencies, and there was nowhere to run.

By this point my wife knew something was up. My epiphany had been accompanied with the inability to sit still. She had already seen my scribbled sentence and nodded approvingly—giving me a look that said I want to talk about this. My wife has always been affirming of my efforts to understand God. We work hard at that together, but on that night she had not realized yet that the yellow stuff I was touching was pure gold. And, while I knew she would want to discuss it with me, she meant later—when the gifted speaker had concluded.

For the remaining twenty-five minutes of the evening's sermon, and the lengthy altar response that followed, I sat in my orange seat of revelation scouring other Jesus stories to confirm the validity of what I was thinking. Occasionally a few scowls from the row in front of me reminded me that I wasn't flipping Bible pages quietly enough, but it was hard to slow down. I found Matthew, Zaccheus, a female Samaritan, even Simon Peter invited on a journey and invited to keep company with Jesus long before they'd found the courage to proclaim Him as the Son of God. Their reputations were still caked in notorious grime, and yet Jesus seemed glad to have them around.

I realize that their salvation would not be secured until they crossed the threshold of saving faith, but Jesus didn't wait till that happened to start loving them. Jesus never qualified His love by saying, "I'm just doing missionary work."

He walked both sides of the street and was glad to share His meals with all kinds of people.

You can't read these stories without feeling the acceptance every person received from Him. He embraced them and loved them so wonderfully that the decision to follow Him was an easy one. They needed to be loved and He gave that love without the strings I had tied into knots. Letting people belong first was a radical idea and Jesus was willing to die for it.

In that hour of scouring the Jesus' stories, two intruders took turns pounding on my heart. The first was a personal indictment as I thought about how my whole worldview had been skewed. I tried to keep tears from interrupting my study, but couldn't prevent their flow to the edge of my chin. I had been the Pharisee in so many rescue stories Jesus had wanted to write, and I wondered how many of those I had ruined. My apologies to God were piling up. I volleyed back and forth between sorrow and cursing myself as I read story after story of Jesus' love—a love I had yet to fully grasp.

I found myself desperate for a way to satisfy multiple frustrations with arms-length encounters that Jesus Himself would have embraced. I hoped that promising to change, to wear these new lenses, could be an acceptable start, but almost three decades is a long time not to “get it.” I had a lot of turning around to do—more than that stupid orange chair could accommodate. I wasn't sure where to start or where any new steps could take me.

The second intruder kept asking What would happen if a church acted like Jesus? Like a lot of pastors, I can be quick to translate personal discovery into sermon material. I tried hard to let the indictment do its full work in my own heart before I launched into a ministry plan, but with every pang of guilt came a cup of wonder and excitement as to how such a vision could change a church. My denomination doesn't do much with penance, at least not in the way others might, but I found myself wondering if I committed to such a mission, I could make up for decades of dropping this ball. In any case, I knew that this woman wasn't supposed to be there, and I wasn't supposed to be reading her story, and yet she still managed to change everything for me.

What if we put the belonging first? What would happen if we loved people before they prayed a prayer or signed a commitment card. What if we added their names to our hearts before we could cross out the mistakes they had lived or show any signs of an impending new day?

How would their experience of us change if they came in our doors and felt like we wanted them to be there? It's easy to say we hate sin and love the sinner, but what if the sinner got to decide if that was happening? I doubt if there had been many in my path who would have given me the thumbs up.

What could happen?

From Belonging to Becoming

Now maybe you're thinking What's wrong with this guy? Everybody knows this stuff! Maybe they do. But I consider myself a somewhat-normal Christian and yet, this came as quite a shock to my system. I've met some other normal Christians who look like they could use a few nudges in this area too. In fact, I think many of us—if not most—don't realize how easy it is to slide into Pharisee-mode when it comes to our rules for engaging outsiders.

Maybe you are running down a quick list of reasons why it's better to keep women like the one in the story from bringing any of her recipes to your potluck. We'll walk through some of those, but can we dream a little first? What would happen if the people who ran into us ended up as completely changed as the people who ran into Jesus?

In my town, there's a bunch of people with slow-healing bruises from the last time they encountered a local gathering of disciples. They hardly seem ready or interested to engage the life-changing potential of our latest outreach campaign. Fact is, they don't look like an abundant harvest waiting to be picked. No, they're damaged and broken, many of them with Size-11 Pharisee boot prints on their backs.

That night I sat in my stadium chair realizing I had unconsciously stamped "Highly Unlikely" on thousands of foreheads, deeming them too much of whatever they were to ever become like Jesus. Honestly though, my judgment had more to do with how little they were like me—a filter that was growing less and less attractive by the minute.

I didn't even know how to help them. Our commonalities were few, and I couldn't even begin to guess how to heal their brokenness. Give me someone whose life mirrored mine, and I could easily bless them with the added value Jesus brings to my life. Like the guy selling carpet cleaner door-to-door, I could demonstrate success with little spots—but those deep, ground-in, odorous stains were way out of my league. The "Jesus" my life offered seemed anemic compared to the Jesus they required. Like Simon, I hadn't seen the size of my own need, and so I hadn't figured out how amazing the Savior could be.

What if we just loved them? The idea seemed to move me a safe distance from having to figure out how to fix them. Frankly, those occasions when I had tried to clean up someone else's problem hadn't been successful anyway. My efforts to hit them with a good Bible truth almost always knocked them out. I used a soft hammer, but the nails bent anyway, and threw themselves in the scrap heap.

If I could just focus on loving them, I wondered if they'd see Jesus and open up in ways He could help them. I wondered how things would be different if I just let Jesus change them, while I gave my best to welcoming them into my life.

What if we just loved them? That's what Jesus did. He didn't pretend to be interested in them to get them to attend His next teaching session, or act like He liked them until His better friends showed up. He stepped into their world with understanding, compassion, and a love that said, "I'm interested in you, in your life, your family, your heartaches, and all your other stuff." No wonder they said that no one taught like Him.

No other teacher wanted to know their names.

What could happen? I suppose the trail of prostitutes, tax-collectors, adulteresses and other notorious sinners following after Jesus offers a glimpse. Could their modern-day counterparts find new hope and a new home with us? I think of the thousands of people in hard-to-reach places, standing on the curb right beside us. Have we given up hope that they might crash our dinner parties? Have they lost any reason to show up?

One church's journey

If you know anything about change and the local church, you might think I faced a firestorm with my congregation when I got home. Any form of change will have most church folks drawing up battle lines, especially change that radically opens the doors wide to outsiders. Many a pastor has returned from a conference with full notebooks and new ideas, only to find his church family less than ready for the genius of his latest discovery—especially if he says it's going to rock their world.

Remarkably, the two hundred or so friends that made up Maranatha Worship Center in Wichita, Kansas, didn't light any torches or wave any pitchforks when their pastor returned. Like most congregations who have celebrated at least eight decades of church life, the age needle for most was pushed well beyond life's midpoint. Three babies in the nursery each week were no match for the three Sunday school classes dominated by adults with AARP cards. The best parking spots and sanctuary seats were clearly marked as property of the older attendees, which made sense since they were the ones coming in our door. Were it not for an aggressive youth pastor and dozens of teens in his midweek service (who never seemed to be able to find the building on Sundays), the median age would have been much higher than the early-to-mid fifties we calculated.

But somehow, the idea of radically loving people elevated no one's blood pressure. In fact, from the first day that I laid out my new understanding of Jesus, I found the expressions of affirmation and readiness overflowing. Did I mention what great people these folks are? Our Sunday school was in decline, our musical capacities more limited than most, and our hands had grown weary with serving. But just doing our best to love people—that felt like something we could do.

So we did.

From Belonging to Becoming

First we realized that we had to master the art of loving each other. It seemed reasonable to think that if we couldn't do that, then those who might walk in our door would be hard-pressed to believe we could do any better with them. I pictured the Apostle John saying something like, "If you can't love the guy in the next pew, how can you love the guy out there in the 'phew'!"

So we spent a year of Sunday nights praying together, sharing together, crying together, eating together, and just about anything else we could find to do together. Hurts and disagreements didn't have a chance against the avalanche of togetherness we launched. The more our hearts toward each other changed, the more our hearts grew with the love of Jesus, period.

God didn't wait until our year of practicing on each other was over before He started sending us new people to love. I say it that way because, at first, we did little to go out and find new people. In fact, they were coming in our door so fast that we decided God was working His own outreach program despite our one-year plan. Dozens of broken people ventured into church for the first time, or the first time in a long time, just because "something told them they should come in." What they found was a bunch of nice people who wanted to be their friends. I often wonder what God could do in a lot of churches if we'd just give Him some open hearts with which to work.

Young adults struggling to figure out the life in front of them found connection with people as old as their grandparents. People trapped in destructive habits discovered the kind of love their families could no longer muster, the kind that could nurture hope back into their lives. The abused found an unthreatening touch that demanded no revelations and sought no trophies for the ministry wall. Oh, and that woman came too. The woman from Luke 7. She walked in the door several times, and also to a welcoming embrace as her tears quietly dropped to our carpet.

I'd love to spend pages telling stories, but exploiting the tragedies of dear friends for the sake of an obvious point seems unnecessary, especially when the Bible offers all the examples we require. Knowing that sex workers and drug dealers were among the rescued will be enough. But it would be so much better for you to hear it from them. Those kind of stories could be written around you every day.

The power of belonging proved stronger than any life struggle. People began to see Jesus as a loving Savior rather than the condemning tyrant those with picket signs seemed to know. When they saw Him, they ran toward Him, leaving years of homosexuality, pornography, adultery, drug addiction, and alcoholism all behind. Even deacons and other leaders felt safe to acknowledge their weaknesses without fear of being judged. Single moms found genuine friendship and support. International students found dinner-ready parents and grandparents to ease their homesickness and share their dreams.

Within a few short years, this “experiment” in belonging had brought remarkable change to hundreds of new friends, and to the group of old friends who had dared risk their own comfort. Maranatha became a church teeming with young adults and young families. The church’s median age plummeted by two full decades with the birth of more than 200 babies and the parents these little cuties brought to church. Sixty nations could be counted among this remarkably diverse congregation, which had grown to four times larger than when the journey began.

Now don’t be misled. Loving people isn’t an exact science, grace can get kind of messy, and we certainly weren’t perfect in walking the talk. But giving our best to loving people freed God to bring the life-change only He can design. We just loved these new friends and showed them that He had the best plan for their lives. Soon enough they recognized Jesus and chose to follow Him—no matter whether they had been Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or atheist. Love brought the life change they had been afraid to explore. Sometimes it took a year or more of hanging out with us before those new life choices came. I’ll never forget what it felt like for a Muslim college student to introduce me to his Muslim friends as his pastor. Today he’s a follower of Jesus and some of those friends are too.

Looking in the mirror

Everything changed for us too—especially me. After that crazy night in the tight orange seat, I tried hard to look at the people I use to rush by. I paid attention to the waiter at the restaurant, the girl at the dry cleaners, the people in the hospital waiting room who had come to visit a loved one. Even in the briefest encounter, I could value them and care about their lives, and imagine them as my friends. They were more than a means to an end, or service providers paid to feed and clothe me. I stopped thinking like a customer and started wondering about their lives without the name badge, apron, or weird hat.

Now I’m not one of those Christians that makes other Christians uncomfortable by finding a way to engage random people in deep spiritual discussions. I don’t think much of any pick-up line that begins, “If you were to die tonight . . .” I don’t carry tracts or cleverly-designed business cards for random distribution. If you do, you’re brave and I applaud every conversion your efforts yield. But, I’m an introverted pastor (an unfortunate combination) who feels more at home in a library than on a street corner. So, I stopped wishing I could be confident enough to start evangelistic conversations. Instead, I just started being friendly and open and considerate of the look on someone’s face.

Somehow what I felt seemed to come through. The guy who sold me suits asked me about my church and brought his family. The young woman at the car dealership begged me for marriage advice and came to Maranatha to meet other young couples facing the same challenges. The girl behind the drugstore

From Belonging to Becoming

counter was among many we baptized, celebrating her discovery of Jesus' love. A young couple we waved at from a parade float decided they could fit into a church like ours. Now they're actively telling others about Jesus and looking to Him every day.

Today as I think of the sea of faces that fill our auditorium, I am amazed at their stories. These are people I would have never encountered before, but now they've found new life because someone in our group loved them when they had nothing to offer. That's what Jesus did, and even our messy efforts still managed to prove the superiority of His approach.

Other voices

Something similar has happened at People's Church in Oklahoma City too. Pastor Herbert Cooper will tell you how his view of love and grace began to change and rewrote the playbook for the amazing congregation he leads.

After many successful years of worldwide evangelistic ministry, Herbert and Tiffany Cooper set out to plant a multi-cultural church on the north side of Oklahoma's capitol city. In May 2002, sixty-five people joined the Coopers for the new church's first official service. Immediately, the church grew rapidly with powerful services led by the new pastor's proven pulpit ability. Herbert Cooper is one of my favorite speakers, so the growth of People's Church didn't surprise me a bit.

But life on the road had kept Pastor Cooper from encountering the deep struggles of sin and addiction many of his people were facing. As a pastor, those issues were now front and center nearly every day. During his first few years as pastor, things were changing rapidly at People's Church, but something even greater was changing inside the man leading this great church.

For Herbert Cooper, there was no balcony moment. Instead, he calls it a journey—but one that would leave his view of people just as radically altered as my own. As more and more broken people began finding refuge at People's Church, he realized that messages of love were more powerful allies than some of the approaches others had cheered on his evangelist's circuit. He noticed that people were ready to belong to his congregation before they were ready to believe.

That's exactly what they did. This growing congregation, situated in a prominent notch on America's narrowing Bible belt, found ways to open their doors wider than most. Addicts of all kinds found hope and friendship before they found sobriety. People trapped in nearly every sexual sin imaginable began discovering the kind of love that invited them every week to risk trusting the trustworthy again. Soon People's Church was lathered in a miraculous grace that left the most broken of its new friends whole and remade. People like the woman at Simon's house were welcomed and embraced with no reluctance.

Little wonder they began to find at People's Church the same kind of life change that woman had found with Jesus.

Of course, not everyone was ready for their church to change like that, but for the majority of the People's Church family, life change has become a thrilling mission. "More changed lives" is the rallying cry from the pulpit and the parking lot exit signs. It's more than a slogan for them—it's a way of life.

Recently tabbed as one of America's fastest-growing congregations, People's Church now welcomes more than four thousand in its weekend services, while its tenth birthday is still a year away. "For ninety-nine percent of our people, this is why they are here," Cooper will tell you. The broken aren't the only ones being changed. Many longtime Christians at People's Church have walked away from Simon's side of the room and rolled up their sleeves to embrace a new understanding. Like their pastor, they've witnessed the power of love and belonging to change lives. Like a lot of us, they wish it hadn't taken so long for them to see it.

Hearing Pastor Dary Northrop's story and the amazing journey of Timberline Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, underscores that my night in the orange chair wasn't a fluke. In fact, every time I tried to describe the revolution in my own heart, pastor friends would say, "You need to talk to Dary Northrop." When I finally did, I realized the power of belonging was greater than I had yet to imagine.

For Pastor Northrop, the words "Let Love Live" erupted in his thoughts as he searched for a phrase to explain Timberline's existence. He would never forget those words or even the spot where he stood in the old church building when he first heard the phrase that would radically change both his life and his congregation.

"We've learned to accept guests where they are, appreciate and listen to their journeys, and offer them friendship without contingencies," he explains. "I've discovered that the love of God is alive and well. It's people like me who sometimes mess it up."

People feel welcomed at Timberline. Each week, you'll find a number of non-believers who not only attend regularly, but have joined in the church's small-group ministry. They're watching, examining, and exploring the hope Jesus offers, and Timberline Church lets them do so in an environment of no-strings-attached love and friendship.

Like anywhere else, "Let Love Live" meant changes for the church and some of its long-time members. But concerns about tattoos, piercings, and other elements of the "look" of new friends have melted in the realization that Christianity wasn't intended to be an exclusive country club. "We have seen so many authentic relationships with Christ develop in people," Pastor Northrop gushes.

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Those words “Let Love Live” have guided Timberline’s emergence from a group of around two hundred in 1990 to the amazing congregation of more than six thousand today. A young woman’s unsolicited web post describing Timberline as “a mega-church with a mega-heart” says it best. No matter how many are in the room, Jesus’ love can still hit the smallest mark.

Stories like these in churches large and small are moving toward the front page. It’s about time. After decades where the Church’s political wings have flapped furiously, many are desperate for love to return to the center of the Sunday conversation. When it does, life-change quickly follows.

Not long ago, I watched an elderly pastor unpack his own trip down this road. His words couldn’t match the elegant expressions of some, but they dripped with a passion lubricated by the tears he couldn’t stop. His story wasn’t of thousands, but of only one—a young woman whose life seemed the mirror image of the woman in Luke 7. As he described his small group of elderly saints and their efforts to embrace this broken girl, I could almost see how Jesus must have smiled when the lame began to dance.

WWJG?

I remember going through a phase where I wondered, Where would Jesus go to church? In fact I spent seven consecutive Sundays wondering that out loud, offering my question as a sermon series and inflicting the minds of people who hoped He’d choose our place over the church across town. But even some of my friends told me they assumed Jesus would avoid today’s church altogether, preferring to spend His time in soup kitchens or some other setting where He could encounter the people we had overlooked. Even though we believed that, none of us increased our soup-kitchen hours. We just let the disappointing idea that Jesus would be somewhere else linger like an uncomfortable fact we had to accept.

I asked the same question of a bunch of pastors and was surprised to learn that many felt He would worship “somewhere else” too. Weary of the problems they encountered among their congregants or doubting the caliber of their own ministry efforts, these good guys figured Jesus would rather hang out with those who were “doing it better.”

Now maybe my question shows we all could use a little boost of self-worth, but honestly, no one thought Jesus would choose to attend with them! And yet Sunday after Sunday these same friends trotted off to familiar buildings with some form of His name on the sign, but no confidence that He’d join them if He had other options.

Jesus addressed His own attendance patterns when He said “where two or three gather in my name, I’m there!” The potential these words convey is beyond amazing. His presence isn’t tied to our performance, or the quality of what we can do, but to our willingness to come together in a way that connects

with who He is. That's the critical requirement. Are we gathered in His name, or the name of some other agenda?

Charles Sheldon's classic book *In His Steps* resurfaces every decade or so to remind us about the true nature of our Savior. There are more than 30 million copies floating around out there to show us that what Jesus would do, if He were with us now, is love people. He would start with those who aren't getting much love from anywhere else. That's why my friends expect to find Him at the soup kitchen rather than among steeples and stained glass. That's why my pastor friends think He'd be somewhere other than among the comfort-chasing cats they try to corral. The Angel that altered Mary and Joseph's plan insisted they name their child after His primary job description—saving sinful people. So gathering “in Jesus' name” must mean more than putting a fish symbol on our business cards. It must mean more than potlucks and hymn sings or bass guitars and laser lights. Somehow we must come together in the family business of saving sinful people. When we do, Jesus promises to sit right next to us.

What would Jesus do? is easily answered by looking at what Jesus actually did. It's safe to assume that He'd still be at it since the number of folks needing rescue from disastrous choices hasn't declined much. So if we want to connect with His passion and purpose, there appears to be plenty of opportunity.

This might be a hard question, but ask yourself who is comfortable with me? Notice the question didn't ask who you're comfortable being around, but the kind of people who would feel comfortable in your presence. For most of my life I think the answer would have been the same, no matter which way I asked the question. I preferred people who were like me, and apparently it showed, because those were the only people who seemed to want to be around me.

Jesus intrigues me when I see that boatloads of people, who were a million miles from being anything like Him, still wanted a seat on His front row. Yes, a lot of them were there because He offered medical miracles and could do some amazing stuff with limited loaves, but there were still remarkable stories of drastic life-change. They wanted to be with Him because He wanted to be with them. After a few faltering steps, I discovered that when people felt like I wanted to be with them, they were amazingly quick to want that too.

Love changes people. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. Jesus said love would be more than our *modus operandi*. Love would be the way people would connect us to Him. Somehow they would know we belong to Him when we love. The reverse is also true.

Honestly, it would be easier if all we had to do was to prove ourselves with good works or carefully avoid the unclean stuff. But Jesus put the premium on love, for one another, and for those who still stand outside our circles. He knew that no matter where we set up shop, there would be women like the one at Simon's house waiting for someone to be on her side.

Last Sunday your church told three lost souls to get lost. And you didn't even know it.

Many churches, even really good ones, have mastered the believe-and-become-before-you-belong paradigm of accepting people into their fellowship. We say: choose to believe what we believe, become like us in your behavior, and then you can belong here.

One day, Mike Clarensau asked himself the question: "What if we put belonging first, like Jesus did?" Christ welcomed people to follow Him without proclamations of faith or fruits of repentance. When Mike acted on that thought, his view of people changed, and his church set about loving people unconditionally. The congregation put belonging ahead of believing and becoming. When it did, people's lives and the life of the church were powerfully transformed—and more than a few got saved.

Mike Clarensau is senior director of Healthy Church Network for the Assemblies of God.

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