

Longtime Pastor Offers Secret to Helping Others Embrace True Faith

When I was a little boy, my grandmother Lela was my favorite grown-up. When I was with her, I felt emotionally safe—seen, accepted, valued and loved. So, naturally, I loved it when our family made the trek to Ohio to stay with her for a few days.

Most of the time when we visited, my grandma had several people staying with her who needed to feel safe like me. Her brother, my Great-Uncle Irion, was one of them. He was single and, as far as I could tell, didn't have many friends; even his other brothers and sisters didn't have much to do with him. When he wasn't at work, he stayed in his room, coming out only for meals. He didn't say much and didn't smile much, but he was always nice to me.

Eventually Irion died, and I grew up. A few years ago, I stumbled upon my uncle's set of century-old, high-school *Eclectic English Classics*—including works by Shakespeare, Eliot, Tennyson and Irving, most of which I had never read. Excited, I dove in, beginning with Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. As I read late one night, I was astounded by what I found on page 372—not from Scott's pen but from my then-17-year-old uncle's broken heart. In the yellowed upper margin, penciled in and around the chapter heading, he'd scrawled these words:

Irion V. Jacob—many days alone along life's pathway.

And there he was—my real Uncle Irion. Maybe not so reclusive after all. Or even all that quiet or strange. But simply, alone. Though not yet 20 years old—for many days, alone.

A few years ago, I attended a conference where psychiatrist Dr. Curt Thompson noted that we all take an anxious, grief-

filled journey down the birth canal, and each of us, without exception, enters the world alone. Immediately we're so naturally uncomfortable with our aloneness that our first newborn breath is a cry of longing to be connected; we desperately start "looking for someone looking for us ... with love and delight." Dr. Thompson reflected, "I'm 56 years old—and today, I still long for the same thing."

After almost seven decades on the planet, I've come to believe that my Uncle Irion is us. Along with Curt Thompson, I'm certain that regardless of background, ethnicity, gender, age, education or even apparent degree of success—deep inside, we *all* from the moment of conception to our last breath, are simply "looking for someone looking for us ... with love and delight." More than anything else in our human experience, we long to be seen, accepted, valued and loved.

Toni Morrison once said the reason she was such a great writer is because "when I was a little girl and walked into a room where my father was sitting, *his eyes would light up*." Author Donald Miller suggests that is exactly the kind of experience every first-century human being had when they met Jesus of Nazareth. Speaking of the lame and the blind, the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, Zacchaeus and many others, he says,

"Entire communities had shunned them and told them they were no good, but God, the King of the universe, comes walking down the street and looks them in the eye, holds their hands, embraces them, eats at their tables, in their homes, for all the town to see. That must have been the greatest moment of their lives." (*Searching for God Knows What*, Thomas Nelson, 2004, p. 129)

Miller goes on to suggest that being truly seen, accepted, valued and loved by Jesus was the primary reason so many of his earliest followers were "faithful to the end, even to their own deaths."

A couple years ago, I arrived early at the Detroit airport and decided to have dinner before my flight. My server was efficient and polite but distant—and I began to tune in to what I sensed was a sadness she carried as she moved from table to table. I felt overwhelming empathy for this daughter of God; there was no way I was going to head for my gate until I risked asking about her real life.

Twenty minutes later, I called for the check, left a tip and made my way to the front entrance, where I asked the host if he could find my waitress so I could speak with her. When she arrived, I said, “Miss, thank you so much for serving me—you were great! Would you allow me to share one thought with you before I catch my plane?” She nodded yes, so I continued, “I felt a deep sadness in you this evening. I have no idea what’s going on in your life, but I believe in a God who loves us so much—who loves *you* so much —and I think He wants you to know He sees you, He knows all about what is burdening you, He cares deeply, and He is with you. You are not alone.”

I slipped her an extra \$20 bill and whispered, “God bless you.” And then, in a flash, she began to sob. Her hands flew to her face, and she sprinted out the entrance and around the corner toward the airport ladies’ room. The restaurant host shot me a *What just happened?* look.

But I’m fairly certain I know what happened. Just beneath the surface of this precious daughter of God’s everyday life, she lived in significant pain—convinced no one saw, no one knew, no one cared.

Then she discovered—*God sees her. And the profound, comforting truth that she wasn’t invisible, unloved or alone* bypassed her defenses and touched her with his healing love in deeply wounded places in her spirit.

After nearly 40 years in pastoral ministry, I’m done with Western Christianity’s obsession with perfect church services,

outreach strategies and even our often shame-based compulsion to live perfect lives.

Because the truth is—*nobody really cares.*

Instead, what we *all* long for is to be seen, valued, accepted and loved. To know, really know, that we're not alone.

When followers of Jesus, *like Jesus*, begin to see as we are seen, accept as we are accepted, embrace as we are embraced, and love as we are loved—only then will our broken world, one wounded heart at a time, come home to the one who sees each of us with eternal love and delight. {eoa}

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