



THE GOSPEL *According to Earl the Street Guy*

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We're all alike, right? Race and religion, gender and geography, class and career are just the window dressing. We're all human beings, created in God's image, none more valuable than another—all equal at the core. Jesus taught us this. The Pharisee and the leper are no different in God's eyes. The woman caught in adultery has the same worth, struggles, pain, and dreams as Mary, mother of God.

After twenty-four years as a pastor, I thought I'd finally learned this central lesson of Christianity 101. But the other day I was reminded that, deep in my soul, I believe I am a little better than some other people.

One afternoon, God decided to expose this unJesus-like part of me.

His tool? A man from the street named Earl.

It was pantry day and all kinds of folks who are struggling to make it filed into our church basement for bags of food or clothing they otherwise couldn't afford. Earl was sitting on the top step. I'd seen him a number of times before, and greeted him with "what up?" and a grin. And that's the point. I already knew Earl.

I knew he was homeless. I knew he drank every day. I knew he could run game and scam with the best. After all, he was street. I sat down beside him and immediately smelled "street"—a combination of booze and sidewalk and smoke and grease and unwashed clothes and skin. And I knew what

was going to come next when Earl, the street guy, began to talk to me.

He would talk street. First, the obligatory religious chatter: "You're not like those other pastors and I really like your sermons." Then a plea for help with his special circumstance, an excuse why he had to come to me and not Monique—our loving but nonsense outreach director—why he needed money and not food, why life had kept him down but he'd absolutely be coming to church on Sunday, going to rehab next week and could I please loan him two bucks?

I knew this was what was coming

I knew Earl. I knew he was street.

because, after all, I knew Earl. I knew he was street. This was what street guys did. This was the way they talked. Even more, this is who and what they are.

Did I love Earl? Sure. But I'd also summed him up. I had labeled, categorized, and classified him as "street." That's why I was stunned by what happened next. I asked him how he was doing. Not so good, he said. Then, instead of listing the usual maladies, injustices, and needs, Earl said, "A friend of mine just died."

I said I was sorry. He said thanks. That might have been the end of our conversation, but for some reason I leaned over and whispered, "Earl, I'm really very, very sorry." And then Earl the street guy did something very unstreet, so incredibly human. He laid his head on my shoulder and cried.

I asked if there was anything I could do. "Would you pray with me?" he asked. So I began to talk to God in Earl's ear. I thanked him for Earl's friend, for his life on this earth, and asked for the peace and comfort of Jesus Christ. More tears. All the while, Earl's head never left my shoulder.

It was only a moment. Fairly quickly, Earl wiped his nose and began to talk about something else. But the moment lasted for hours. And in those hours of a moment, I heard the voice of Jesus in ways I cannot fully describe. He spoke to me about summing folks up.

He asked me why I was surprised at

Earl's deep pain and genuine tears for his friend, as if his struggle with booze and real grief couldn't coexist in his body at the same time. Hadn't ego and anger long survived in me alongside true love for people and Jesus? Hadn't I longed to be known and accepted as simply human—not labeled by my struggle of the month? In those hours of a moment, the Jesus who loved Mother Teresa the same as Saddam Hussein, asked me, "Isn't Earl the same as you?"

The long and short of it is, a few Saturdays ago, the Lion of Judah ripped away another layer of my labeling, categorizing flesh. And I began to know Earl the street guy as my brother. A brother with the very same struggles, the very same pain, the very same tears as me. □

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