

Listening to God in unexpected places

A Preacher Walks into a Pub

JIM BLACK

I was sitting in my usual place for a Friday afternoon, studying for my sermon at the Lion and Eagle. It's an English pub where expatriates from the UK go to get a taste of home. They hang out, have a pint, and watch some soccer—though the patrons of the Lion and Eagle call it football.

God regularly shows up in this place. Over the years I have gotten to know the owners and regulars. The owner, Marty, is a tall, outgoing blonde American woman married to Pete, a shy, quiet English musician who was once a drummer for the rock band Deep Purple. Marty regularly introduces me as a pastor, which is quite a novelty to the customers and has resulted in many conversations and questions. It's never dull at the Lion and Eagle.

I try not to initiate any conversations but instead wait to see what God will do. On this particular afternoon I was reading a book of sermons by Frederick Buechner called *Secrets in the Dark*. One of the sermons was about the ways God reveals himself to us through people and situations. I was also mulling over a quote I had recently read, which said, "If you have ten minutes to share the gospel with a person, use the first nine minutes to ask questions and listen. Then you might have something meaningful to say."

I was having a bad day and was not particularly in the mood to see God reveal himself or to talk with anyone. And I was having trouble coming up with anything for Sunday's sermon.

While I sat reading, a song playing

on the sound system caught my attention. I recognized the voice of Leigh Nash, the singer from Sixpence None the Richer, a band who has made it big in the secular music world, but whose members are believers.

Nash was singing about her struggle to know and follow God, but no one else in the room seemed to be paying attention. I remember thinking that God was speaking in this pub, even if no one was listening.

Then a man sat down next to me and ordered a pint. He placed something on the bar in front of him, a cross made out of three large nails crudely welded together, with two more nails welded to the bottom for a base holding it up. I began to suspect that God was presenting me with an opportunity to talk to this man. So I asked, "What's that?" It was a dumb question, I knew, but he was kind and answered politely.

"It's a cross," he said. "My little boy loves crosses. He collects them. I didn't do a very good job welding the nails together, but my son is only four—he'll love it anyway."

I told him that the imperfect welds were perfect for a cross. I asked him what he did for a living. He told me he was a general handyman, mostly doing carpentry when he could get the work. He also helped a local artist create art out of junk they would find lying around. These nails were left over from a project they had been working on that day.

I then told him I was a pastor, and the usual surprised look came over his

face. I thanked him for sharing his gift, and said that the gift he had created for his son reflected the creativity and love of God's gift of his Son to us. He nodded his head with a smile, and a few minutes later told me he had to get home to his son. Then he left.

I always wonder if I've said the right things after an encounter like that. Did I say too much or not enough? Nothing eventful happened—the man didn't want to talk about God, and didn't fall on his knees and accept Jesus as his Savior in that moment. Just a quick exchange of words in the middle of a pub in the afternoon. I could only pray that it would make a difference somehow.

Later that night as I was walking my dogs and talking with God and reflecting on the day, a familiar verse popped into my head from Hebrews 13:2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." That verse made me wonder.

I'm not saying I met an angel. I'll never know what was actually going on in that small encounter. But I had the sudden realization that the whole thing had probably been for *my* benefit, to remind me to keep looking for God to show up in unexpected places. It's a lesson that I am slowly learning and trying to live out.

I also ended up with something to say in my sermon on Sunday. □

Jim Black is pastor of Hope Community Covenant Church in Boynton Beach, Florida.

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