

Our Story...
Sociologist Ray Oldenburg's book *The Great Good Place* suggests that the...

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

CULTURE SHOCKED

I had heard the beautiful story of Willow Creek's beginnings as a bunch of young people who were pretty disillusioned with the church. They went door to door selling tomatoes and asking people how they felt about this peculiar thing called church. If folks they talked with were happily connected to a congregation, then they encouraged them to continue and moved on. If the folks they met were discouraged about or hostile toward church, then they would talk with them, explaining that they had something in common and were embarking on an adventure of trying to give birth to a new way of being church. Rooted in the vision of the early church and with the book of Acts on their lips, they started—small, sloppy, passionate. Now some thirty years later, they are one of the nation's largest congregations, with over twenty thousand folks coming onto the 150-acre campus each week. Now, forty years in, they are still rockin'—with eight regional campuses in Chicago and thousands of Willow Creek Association congregations around the globe.

Eastern College had agreed to let me do my final academic work at Wheaton College, which was just a half hour from the church, while I served my internship. So I took a light load of classes, anticipating diving headlong into work at Willow, where I worked in the early beginnings of their Axis services geared toward folks in their twenties, who were strikingly absent from most congregations. I also did some urban-plunge work busting folks out of the suburban bubble and spent most of my days leading high school students in the little thousand-person student ministry. And every chance I got, I would head into downtown Chicago to hang out in inner city Lawndale, go to Uptown, or chill with the homeless guys who lived under Lower Wacker Drive.

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

I must say Wheaton wasn't the easiest place to be. There were beautiful breaths of fresh air and some folks who were radically seeking after God, and some great pranks (which I had better not mention in detail here, as they may still be looking for the culprits—ask me later). After ten years, I think I'm in the clear to mention one little prank at Wheaton. At Christmas, Wheaton has traditionally placed a huge lighted "JOY" sign atop one of the highest buildings on campus. One particular year, a large "POOP" sign was placed in front of the "JOY" sign, perhaps to remind folks of the original smell of the manger that first Christmas. However, the pranksters underestimated the size of the "JOY" sign and failed to make their cover-up large enough. So folks all over Wheaton saw a bright light that read, "POOPY." I may or may not know who did that. I also may or may not know the folks who put a tennis-ball shooter in the middle of the pipe organ so that folks were pelted by tennis balls during convocation. But even for this East Tennessee boy, it was very homogeneous, privileged, and white. So many people looked and thought the same way, it seemed like we were being robbed of the gift of diversity. I kept hearing Wheaton referred to as the "Harvard of Christian schools" and wasn't sure how God felt about that, since God seems to prefer to use foolish things to confound the wise. Not to mention they still had that pesky no-dancing rule at Wheaton back then. The times, they are a changin'. Wheaton no longer has that pesky no-dancing rule. You can now get your groove on at Wheaton.

My roommate at Wheaton, no doubt divinely appointed (with a little humor), was the head of the ROTC and happened to be one of the only nonwhite students at Wheaton. He explained to me that the only way he was able to attend Wheaton was with the ROTC scholarship, along with its

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

I'll never forget one businessman I met who, upon hearing about my trip to Calcutta said, "Wow, that's a terrible place that makes you come home and say, 'God bless America.'" I gently replied to him, "Actually, Calcutta is a beautiful place that makes you come home and say 'God bless Calcutta.'" He just sort of stared at me blankly.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

Just a few days after I returned from Calcutta, I headed to Willow Creek Community Church in the verdant Chicago suburbs, where I had arranged a one-year internship. The previous year, I had been doing a Bible study whose central premise was that rather than waiting around for God's special plan for your life, you should just go find where God is at work and join in. That made sense to me, so I did. (I didn't even finish the study.) Essentially, that's what led me to spend the summer in Calcutta and then to spend a year at Willow Creek.¹ God appeared to be powerfully at work in both places, but I had no idea how difficult the transition would be. Needless to say, when I walked into the atrium where they have a food court on the megachurch "campus," I knew I was a long way from the leper colony in India. The worlds of poverty and wealth collided, and I guess I felt a little dose of what the experts call culture shock. According to Mother Teresa, it is among the wealthy that we can find the most terrible poverty of all—loneliness. So perhaps I was still among the poorest of the poor, but these poor folks had some cash!

¹. <http://willowcreek.org>.

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

mandatory US military service requirement, and he wasn't even from the US. We talked a lot about war and peace. He explained to me that he did not believe Christians should go to war. We had some good times together, including a debate we hosted (okay, rigged) for all of the ROTC cadets in which we "debated" just-war theory and surprisingly came out agreeing that when Jesus said, "Love your enemies," he meant not to kill them. I wish I could say that was the end of the ROTC at Wheaton. That's still in process. Although I must applaud Wheaton's decision to change its name from the Wheaton Crusaders to the Wheaton Thunder. As of 2016, Wheaton does still have an ROTC. Still working on that. It's helpful to know that Wheaton's founder and first president, Jonathan Blanchard, was a wild man—social reformer, abolitionist, a revolutionary of the best kind (also the namesake of one of Wheaton's main buildings, Blanchard Hall). No doubt Blanchard would continue shaking some things up today. In recent years, Wheaton has pioneered some stellar conversations on subjects like immigration and the death penalty through its Center for Applied Christian Ethics (CACE). Students also recently made national news for having a die-in and bringing attention to racial injustice in the US.

POOR LITTLE RICH MAN

The year I was at Wheaton, Rich Mullins was also there on a sabbatical of sorts. Rich Mullins was a popular Christian singer-songwriter who died a few years back in a car wreck. Before I met him, I probably wouldn't have cared very much, as I knew so little about him. The only song I knew by him was a worship song called "Awesome God," which I found a little old school, and I didn't care much for the part about God having "lightning in his fists," as it

Our Story...
Sociologist Ray Oldenburg's book *The Great Good Place* suggests that to land

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

sounded a little more like the Greek god Zeus than Yahweh. My friend Joe used to sing his own cover of the song, which I'd better not repeat here since it got him banned from playing at college coffeeshouses (and Zondervan won't let me). Suffice it to say that it had something to do with God kicking some serious butt. But then I heard that Rich Mullins was a pretty crazy dude who hitchhiked a lot, went barefoot all the time, and liked St. Francis of Assisi (my newfound hero), so I became secretly intrigued. My resident assistant at Wheaton told me Rich had come to the school largely because he was writing a musical inspired by the life of Francis, and that he was going to audition for a part. Hmm . . . I was even more intrigued. Looking for any opportunity to nurture the relationship with my RA (you never know when that will come in handy, especially at Wheaton), I asked if I could come along. So we went. Rich and the Ragamuffins (his band) were there as folks auditioned. I sat back, studied a bit, and watched. Some folks were dismissed and others were called back to read again. As fewer and fewer were left, my friend being one of them, they found they needed an "extra" reader. At the time, I had multicolored hair and I was wearing ripped jeans and a Rage Against the Machine shirt sporting a black American flag with the words "Evil Empire." I think they thought I was cute, not really matching the Wheaton prototype. So I was drafted to help read as the extra for the last auditions.

After I had read a few lines, they had the nerve to say to me, "We just need you to read plainly; lose the accent." What? *Lose the accent?* (Again, born and raised in Tennessee . . .) So I smarted off to them in good ole friendly banter, and they soon discovered that my accent was not an attempt at character development. Looking back, it's a little weird to think how quickly we hit it off. They asked

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

me to go ahead and actually audition for the play. I told them I didn't have enough time for a play; they said neither did they. I told them I don't sing. They told me to try. So I agreed.

Rich had been playing an old hymn on the keyboard, and they would go down the line and each auditioner would sing the chorus in turn, so I hopped into the lineup. Hampered by my lack of rhythm and my tone-deafness, I had no idea when to come in, but I tried to fake it. Each attempt, I was several beats too late or too early, and I tried two or three times before giving up, with everyone heehawing. They all made fun of me, and it wasn't long until they invited me to join the show. They assured me there was one part that required no musical skill, and that the show was just as much about community as talent. So several months later, I ended up lip-syncing in the musical.

Meanwhile, I had a blast hanging out with Rich and the Kid Brothers of St. Frank, as they came to call themselves. Rich was one of those folks who assured me that the Gospels were not just for Mother Teresa and St. Francis, and that the Sermon on the Mount is as meaningful today as it was two thousand years ago.

I will never forget one of the chapel services where Rich spoke while I was at Wheaton. (Let me confess, I had stayed up all night playing Monopoly and slept through the whole thing, but I got the tape and listened to it later.) Rich stood up in chapel and said, "You guys are all into that born again thing, which is great. We do need to be born again, since Jesus said that to a guy named Nicodemus. But if you tell me I have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God, I can tell you that you have to sell everything you have and give it to the poor, because Jesus said that to one guy too . . . [And he paused in the awkward silence.] But

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

"It's why God invented highlighters, so we can I guess that the parts we like and ignore the rest." Ha! If Rich highlight the parts we like and ignore the rest. Ha! If Rich hadn't died, he probably would've joined the list of notorious blacklisted chapel speakers. Since this book's original release, I've been able to reconnect with some of the band and some of Rich's closest friends and family. I joined them and some ofuffin Retreat to celebrate his life. (They may have on a Ragamuse.) To this day, one of my favorite things to do more of those is listen to a recording I have of one of Rich's on a chill day. It's something special. You can get it here: <http://lastconcerts.kidbrothers.org/product/rich-mullins-live-dvd/>. Rich Mullins at his best.

Mullins at his

INTERRUPTED

uff with Rich at Wheaton was just like a bonus, So all this stuff back on it, the whole experience seemed and as I look closely fit into the whole journey out there in to mysterious and Willow world.

Chicago and when I had come to Chicago in the first place was The reason, so nearly every day I was making the half-Willow Creek, the drive from Barrington to Wheaton became very familiar. I spent the time processing thoughts, became very familiar. I spent the time processing thoughts, recording many of my reflections on a handheld recorder as I drove. I had no idea how difficult it would be to live in the world of Whlums of Calcutta. I was working in one of the wealthiest congregations in the world and performing a play at the Harvard Francis (which people would pay fifteen dollars to see). Define irony. I would be eating in Willow Creek's food court. Sometimes I was incredibly frustrated trying to understand how these extremes could exist in and angry, wondering

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

the same world, let alone in the same church. Sometimes I just got cynical. That was the easiest thing to feel, as cynicism takes very little energy.

But it was hard to stay cynical, as I met more and more beautiful people. Many late nights, I would crash at the home of Sibyl and Dick Towner, both of whom were longtime members and leaders at Willow, and we quickly became good friends. Sibyl and Dick exuded a joy of childhood sweethearts that was so contagious people flooded into their home to feel the warmth of community. Dick and Sibyl came to our wedding and continue to inspire me, though they are no longer a part of Willow Creek (in the official sense, anyway . . . they moved). The first day I walked into their house, I saw one of Mother Teresa's books placed prominently in the center of the living room, and I knew everything would be okay. I quickly learned of Sibyl's love for Mother Teresa and ended up giving her a book that Mother Teresa had signed for me. Dick had been the financial director at Willow Creek for several years. He did their teaching on stewardship and money, and so we had many delightful hours of theological sparring and laughter. The more I met folks just like Dick and Sibyl at Willow, the more I saw how sincere they were. They cared for people and put stagnant nominal Christianity to shame. They took tremendous risks to invite people to experience love, grace, and community. They let homeless folks sleep inside the building on cold nights. They had an auto ministry to give cars to folks who needed them. Mechanics would volunteer their time, caring for single mothers who needed help with their cars. Front-row parking spaces were reserved for single moms. I saw the hospitality of the early Christians in a bizarre new context. It was still weird having a food court in the building, but then I discovered that they wanted

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

people to be able to have dinner together as a family (granted, a big family) rather than to have to go to the mall or to franchises, and that the profits from the food court went to world hunger relief. They even made the courageous step to make sure all their coffee was fairly traded.² So I learned not to be so quick to judge. I truly felt that God was alive at Willow Creek, and it would have been very easy to write them off had I not.

But as I went back and forth to the Willow campus, there still seemed such a chasm between the good folks of the suburbs and the suffering masses in Calcutta or Lower Wacker. I ended up meeting with one of the founders of Willow, who shared with raw honesty how good they are at caring for the poor in their midst but how detached and insular that can become. He questioned whether it was enough to care for the poor that they happened to bump into in the suburbs. I could feel his heart, and I could still hear the echo of my teacher, Tony Campolo, back at Eastern College: "Jesus never says to the poor, 'Come find the church,' but he says to those of us in the church, 'Go into the world and find the poor, hungry, homeless, imprisoned,'"

2. The United States consumes one-fifth of all the world's coffee, making it the largest consumer in the world. But few Americans realize that agricultural workers in the coffee industry often toil in what can be described as "sweatshops in the fields." Many small coffee farmers receive prices for their coffee that are less than the costs of production, forcing them into a cycle of poverty and debt.

Fair Trade is a viable solution to this crisis, assuring consumers that the coffee we drink was purchased under fair conditions. To become Fair Trade certified, an importer must meet stringent international criteria: paying a minimum price per pound of \$1.26, providing much needed credit to farmers, and providing technical assistance such as help transitioning to organic farming. Fair Trade for coffee farmers means community development, health, education, and environmental stewardship. Check out www.globalexchange.org and <http://www.puravidacoffee.com>.

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

Jesus in his disguises." I couldn't help but wonder if we had highlighted only some of the verses in our Bibles, like Rich had said. I saw all the thousands of people who were becoming believers and it brought me great joy. And yet I could not help but wonder with Dorothy Day, "Have we even begun to be Christians?" I read Scriptures like Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus tells us that ultimately we will be separated into two groups of people, sheep and goats, and the criteria will be how we cared for the poor, hungry, imprisoned, naked masses. I could not help but ask, When all is said and done and the thousands of Christians I was with are gathered before the throne, will we all be with the sheep?

I heard one of the teaching pastors at Willow Creek speak on the rich young ruler text that Rich had talked about in Wheaton's chapel. The teaching pastor said, "Now this doesn't mean you have to go sell your rollerblades and golf clubs," and he went on to "contextualize" the teaching to show that we just need to be careful not to make idols of our things. I wasn't so sure about that. Jesus doesn't tell the man to be a better steward, or to treat his workers fairly, or not to make money an idol. He tells this highly educated and devoutly religious young man that he lacks one thing: giving up everything he owns to give to the poor. Rich Mullins used to say that's because there are a lot of people coming to the Banquet, and God doesn't want all the luggage to deal with.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE CROSS

I decided to look a little closer at some of the rich young ruler text, which appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.³

3. Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-30; Luke 18:18-30.

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

After Jesus' teaching that you must enter the kingdom like a little kid, a wealthy man comes up and asks Jesus what he needs to do, and Jesus tells him he lacks one little thing. ("Lacks" is an interesting word to use, since the rich man thought he had everything.) And what might that one thing be? You can almost see him get excited. Then Jesus drops the big one: "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor!" The man's face sinks and he walks away with his riches.

I think it broke Jesus' heart to let the man walk away. The text says that Jesus looks at him and "loves him" as he walks away. But Jesus doesn't run after the man saying, "Hey, it's a journey, just give half," or, "Start with 10 percent." He simply lets the man choose his wealth.

In our culture of "seeker sensitivity" and radical inclusivity, the great temptation is to compromise the cost of discipleship in order to draw a larger crowd. With the most sincere hearts, we do not want to see anyone walk away from Jesus because of the discomfort of his cross, so we clip the claws on the Lion a little, we clean up a bit the bloody Passion we are called to follow. I think this is why the disciples react as they do. They protest in awe, "Who then can be saved?" ("Why must you make it so hard? We need some rich folks here, Jesus, we're trying to build a movement.") And yet Jesus lets him walk away.

Jesus doesn't exclude rich people; he just lets them know their rebirth will cost them everything they have. The story is not so much about whether rich folks are welcome as it is about the nature of the kingdom of God, which has an ethic and economy diametrically opposed to those of the world. Rather than accumulating stuff for oneself, followers of Jesus abandon everything, trusting in God alone for providence.

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

Willow Creek has helped coin the language of “seeker sensitivity,” the idea that congregations need to carve out spaces for spiritual seekers to journey toward God, which is a good thing. And I am the first to say that we need more safe places, especially in the church, where folks can ask tough questions and seek truth together in humility and grace. I long for people to fall in love with God and each other, and so I’m a big fan of being radically inclusive, whether that means not turning off transsexuals or folks who drive SUVs. But I also became aware of how delicate that venture can prove to be. The temptation we face is to compromise the cost of discipleship, and in the process, the Christian identity can get lost. We don’t want folks to walk away. We’re driven by a sincere longing for others to know God’s love and grace and to experience Christian community. And yet we can end up merely cheapening the very thing we want folks to experience. This is the “cheap grace”⁴ that spiritual writer and fellow revolutionary Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the most deadly enemy of the church.” And he knew all too well the cost of discipleship; after all, it led to his execution in 1945 for his participation in the Protestant resistance against Hitler.

Funny that one of the first stories of the early church in Acts is the bizarre tale of a couple named Ananias and Sapphira, who withhold a portion of their possessions from the common offering and then lie about it. Peter confronts them in a way that seems quite rude (not very seeker sensitive), and then on top of it God strikes them dead (not very

4. The allure of cheap grace is not limited to seeker-sensitive megachurches. It is attractive to many progressive Christian circles, in which cheap grace has many different faces, and hopefully this recognition will cause us to be a little more graceful with those we might accuse of cheapening it.

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

tolerant or inclusive). Perhaps we should be thankful that God isn’t into that anymore, otherwise we’d have much smaller congregations. We would like to include people like the rich ruler and Ananias and Sapphira, but we would end up with the sort of Christianity that arose after Constantine, in which everyone can be a Christian but no one knows what a Christian is anymore.⁵ Yet over and over in the Scriptures, Jesus warns people of the cost of discipleship, that it will cost them everything they have ever hoped for and believed in—their biological families, their possessions, even their very lives. He warns them to count the cost before putting their hand to the plow. And Jesus allows people to walk away.

It was very revealing when I asked someone why there were no crosses at Willow Creek, and he replied, “We try to be seeker sensitive, and the cross is not.” On the other side of the coin . . . I remember hearing a story about Clarence Jordan, a pecan farmer and theologian down in Georgia. He was speaking to a wealthy congregation that had an enormous gold cross. He asked how much they had paid for it. They explained that it was a gift from a wealthy donor and told him how much it was. When he heard how much it cost, he said, “Wow! Ya’ll got ripped off. Christians used to be able to get a cross for free!” Brilliant. To be fair, I know he was referring to the fact that many folks associate the pain of past church experiences with the traditional icons and

5. For many, the fourth-century reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, marks a significant point in church history. With the messy marriage of imperial power and the Christian cross, the Jesus movement shifted from persecuted to persecutor. Constantine flung open the door of the church to the rich and powerful, but it was at a great cost. Repentance, rebirth, and conversion were exchanged for cheap grace, and the very identity of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus was lost. People joined the church in droves, but Christian disciples were hard to come by.

music, hymnals and pews, so Willow Creek got rid of those cultural barriers. And while they proclaim and live the message of the cross in many beautiful ways, there is still something profoundly unsettling about a church that has no crosses. True, the cross is not always seeker sensitive. It is not comfortable. But it is the cornerstone of our faith, and I fear that when we remove the cross, we remove the central symbol of the nonviolence and grace of our Lover. If we remove the cross, we are in danger of promoting a very cheap grace. Perhaps it *should* make us uncomfortable. After all, it wasn't so comfy to get nailed there.

BECOMING LOVERS

I once heard the saying, "God comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable." In my suburban comfort, I increasingly felt disturbed by God. I became very uncomfortable in the comfortable suburbs. The beautiful thing was my discomfort arose not from a cynical judgmentalism but from a longing for something more. I did not want to settle for comfort. I did not want to settle for a life detached from the groaning of the slums or the beauty of playing in open fire hydrants and having block parties in the inner city. I wanted to see the community of Willow Creek shared with the lonely suffering masses that needed it so badly but would never make it to Barrington. The more I read the Bible, the more I felt my comfortable life interrupted.

So there I was my senior year in college, still feeling like I had no clue what I'd be doing after I graduated. After the musical with Rich, I knew I would not be performing on Broadway. (Lip-syncers are not in high demand.) And the more I read the Scriptures, the more uncertain I became about my plans for the future, or even of the

wisdom of making plans in the first place, since God seems to be in the business of messing them up. It didn't help that I was majoring in sociology, the study of human interaction. (How much more vague can you get, and what do you do with that degree?) And folks were asking me what I was going to do when I graduated from college. People always want to define you by what you do. I started saying, "I'm not too concerned with what I am going to do. I am more interested in who I am becoming. I want to be a lover of God and people."

I was convinced that what we do is not nearly as important as who we are. The question is not whether you will be a doctor or a lawyer but what kind of doctor or lawyer you will be. What would a twenty-year-old Jesus have said if they asked him, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" I don't know, maybe something like, "I'm going to turn the world upside-down. I'm going to hang out with prostitutes and tax collectors until people kill me." Or what would Peter have said? "Well, I was going to be a fisherman, but then I met this dude, and he messed all that up."

I remembered Mother Teresa saying, "Do not worry about your career. Concern yourself with your vocation, and that is to be lovers of Jesus." So I started calling myself a "vocational lover." Whenever I would fill out forms (there are many of them your senior year of college) that had a blank for profession, I'd just write "Lover." My high school reunion handbook just listed me as a career lover. I'm okay with that.

MY LOVER

And right after asking, "What are you going to do?" the next question always seemed to be, "Have you met a lady?" I would smart off: "Yes, I have met lots of ladies. About

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

every other person I meet is one." And they would stare blankly at me, disappointed. You've got to understand, I'm an only child and an only grandchild, on both sides—no first cousins—and I'm the only one to carry on the family line. So, much was at stake. There were great expectations, and I must admit that's a heavy burden for a young lad to shoulder. Folks wondered if I was gay or going to be a priest. Neither would have been good options in East Tennessee.

But it made sense to be single, and many of the people I had grown to admire had lived beautiful lives of singleness. And their lives would have been different had they been married (not bad, just different). Rich Mullins was one of those. One day over lunch, I asked Rich about why he was still single, and he looked at me funny. He said, "Open up the Bible." I assumed he was going to have me read the verses where Paul teaches that it is best to remain single and serve God (1 Corinthians 7). But we opened up to Matthew 19:10–12, just after Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, where the disciples say to Jesus, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." And Jesus tells them that some are eunuchs,⁶ and others have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, and "the one who can accept this should accept it." I had never considered that before.

The church had not taught me that. I distinctly remember one of the children's services from my United Methodist church. The pastor brought all of the kids to the altar, held up a framed portrait of a perfect traditional family with

6. If you don't know what a eunuch is, see the diagram in the appendix. Just kidding, check the phone book and call up a pastor and ask her or him; it should make for an interesting conversation.

WHEN COMFORT BECOMES UNCOMFORTABLE

a mommy, a daddy, and two kids. He talked about how important family is, and he prayed with all the children that they would meet that special person God had for them. I left that children's sermon deeply convicted that I had better keep my eyes open. I thought that if I did not meet that special someone, then either I was not seeking God, or they weren't seeking God, or perhaps they had died an early death, in which case I'd just have to cope. It was as if every good Christian should marry, and yet the more I looked at good Christians throughout history, the less sure I was about that. The singles ministry had always been a place to get hitched. Finding a date may not be the top reason teenagers go to youth group, but it's gotta make the top five. And I'll be the first to admit I thought strategically when we joined hands for prayer.

Somehow I had missed the fact that singleness was a beautiful means of discipleship and that church history is filled with folks who followed God as singles—Jesus, for one; many of the disciples and martyrs, Francis and Clare of Assisi, the desert monastics, to name a few others. What would Mother Teresa's life have looked like if she had been married? Well, certainly different (again, not bad, just different).

At first it was a rational thing; I was attracted to the idea of God as lover. And then I began to experience God as lover, and quickly I became attracted to the Lover. I read Hosea and got the sense that life is a romance with the divine. I started meeting with a Catholic monk, who had taken a vow of poverty and celibacy. He told me, "We can live without sex, but we cannot live without love, and God is love."

I had come to see God as lover and provider and to desire a life of singleness and poverty—not very reassuring

to my parents, who had sent me (their only child with no cousins) to college to get a top-notch education, meet a wifer-for-lifer, and become something important.

In May 2011, I got married to the lovely Katie Jo Brotherton in the old St. Ed's cathedral. I'll tell you more about that in the new section at the end.

THE AMERICAN JESUS

One of the last things I did in Chicago was write my senior thesis in sociology. Reading sociology while watching the church from a distance, I had become beguiled by pop Christianity and the market culture, so a thesis on "The American Jesus" seemed well on its way. I knew what Cornell West meant when he said, "We've taken the blood at the foot of the cross and turned it into Kool-Aid" and marketed it all over the world. Or as Rich Mullins sang, "They only want what they can own, but they can't own you." I found the classic sociologists articulating many of my thoughts on the commodification of God. Emile Durkheim, the classic forefather of sociology, wrote extensively about "totemism," the human tendency to form our conception of God in our own image. He said that oftentimes what human beings do, whether aboriginal tribes in the jungle or sophisticated clans (or not-so-sophisticated Klans) in industrial countries, is take the values and traditions that we most admire about ourselves and project them onto a totem. Eventually, we stand in awe of that totem and end up worshipping an incarnation of the things we love about ourselves. As George Bernard Shaw said, "God created us in his image, and we decided to return the favor." We create a Western conception of the Mediterranean peasant revolutionary who lived two thousand years ago, whom we can relate to and who cares about what we care about

(eats at McDonald's and votes Republican). Or as the punk-rock band Bad Religion puts it, "We've got the American Jesus; he helped build the president's estate."

During one of the short-term mission trips I had gone on, a group of children were preparing a skit from the gospel story they had read. They came up to me and said, "Shane, we need you to play Jesus, because you are white and from America." Ouch! God forgive us, Buddy Jesus has become a white American resembling Mr. Rogers. What have we done? The bad news was that I had grown very weary of this Jesus. The good news was that there is another Jesus. I decided that one of the best ways to discover the historical Jesus is to deconstruct the American totem, to take him off the totem pole we have nailed him to.

So I did a little survey, probing Christians about their (mis)conceptions of Jesus. It was fun just to see how many people think Jesus loved homosexuals or ate kosher. But I learned a striking thing from the survey. I asked participants who claimed to be "strong followers of Jesus" whether Jesus spent time with the poor. Nearly 80 percent said yes. Later in the survey, I sneaked in another question. I asked this same group of strong followers whether they spent time with the poor, and less than 2 percent said they did. I learned a powerful lesson: We can admire and worship Jesus without doing what he did. We can applaud what he preached and stood for without caring about the same things. We can adore his cross without taking up ours. I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor.

When the worlds of poverty and wealth collide, the resulting powerful fusion can change the world. But that

IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION

collision rarely happens. I could feel it happening inside of me. One of my punk-rock friends asked me why so many rich people like talking to me, and I said because I'm nice to them. He asked why I was nice to them. I said because I can see myself in them. That gives me a little patience and grace. I long for the Calcutta slums to meet the Chicago suburbs, for lepers to meet landowners and for each to see God's image in the other. It's no wonder that the footsteps of Jesus lead from the tax collectors to the lepers. I truly believe that when the poor meet the rich, riches will have no meaning. And when the rich meet the poor, we will see poverty come to an end.

CHAPTER 5

ANOTHER WAY OF DOING LIFE

If you ask most people what Christians believe, they can tell you, "Christians believe that Jesus is God's Son and that Jesus rose from the dead." But if you ask the average person how Christians live, they are struck silent. We have not shown the world another way of doing life. Christians pretty much live like everybody else; they just sprinkle a little Jesus in along the way. And doctrine is not very attractive, even if it's true. Few people are interested in a religion that has nothing to say to the world and offers them only life after death, when what people are really wondering is whether there is life before death.

As my teacher Tony Campolo used to ask, "Even if there were no heaven and there were no hell, would you still follow Jesus? Would you follow him for the life, joy, and fulfillment he gives you right now?" I am more and more convinced each day that I would. Don't get me wrong. I'm excited about the afterlife. We are going to party like there's no tomorrow (umm, and there won't be). And yet I am convinced that Jesus came not just to prepare us to die but to teach us how to live. Otherwise, much of Jesus' wisdom would prove quite unnecessary for the afterlife. After all, how hard could it be to love our enemies in heaven? And the kingdom that Jesus speaks so much about is not just something we hope for after we die but is something we