**THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE**

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In his transient ministry, Jesus sometimes found himself surrounded every which way he turned. Wherever he went, here came the people: on the flat plains, the rolling hills, the mountains, and the seas--here they came.

These people were invisible to the Jewish religious leaders of the day, but not to Jesus. They were invisible to the Roman soldiers, except when there was a riot, but they weren’t invisible to Jesus. The tax collectors never saw the people except when taxes were due. The rich young man walked right past the people, but Jesus didn’t. Pontius Pilot never even bothered to look for the invisible people, unless he was trying to exploit them in some new way. But Jesus not only saw them, he came to them and ministered.

Why was Jesus so popular with these crowds of social nobodies, anyway? He didn’t perform miracles for more than a hand full of them. He wasn’t rich, famous, or powerful, but still the people came in droves. They surrounded Jesus, for they sensed he was different from all the other “respectable” people of the day who typically ignored them or judged them.

In one of his sermons on the mount to these hordes of hard-pressed, hungry, discarded humanity, Jesus declared that the pure of heart would see God, and indeed they did in Jesus.

The invisibles knew better than to surround the visible somebodies of the day who enjoyed the power, wealth, and comforts of life. That’s why the downtrodden surrounded Jesus--he was on their side. He neither ignored, exploited, nor judged them. He loved them and served them. The invisibles were his people.

You can tell a lot about someone based on who they associate with, can’t you? Who they see and who they see right through. In the Bible we read how God surrounded Moses with complaining people. How John the Baptist surrounded himself with sand, locusts, and decadent rulers. How King David was surrounded with soldiers and other people’s wives and his son Solomon with gold and even more wives. Jacob found himself surrounded by both sheep and angels. And Jesus’ disciples often surrounded themselves with smelly fish. Obviously, different strokes for different folks.

So, here we are 21centuries later, and what are we surrounded by? Bills to pay and chores to do? Retail stores and credit cards? Sometimes, I find myself surrounded by lush green grass, but that’s only because I’m mowing it sweating in the hot sun. Most of the time, though, I seem to be surrounded by people catching up on their sleep in a Baylor classroom! Many Americans, however, lead more exciting lives, surrounded by brave soldiers, tough cops, superheroes, and even strange space aliens--all courtesy of their high definition television sets, of course.

Occasionally, though, God wants to surround our lives with something more meaningful, found only in his fields, where both visible and invisible people are spiritually harvested as they minister to one another. God’s harvest benefits the harvester as much as the harvested.

But curiously, in today’s 21st century harvest fields, we run into the very same invisible people who surrounded Jesus in our gospel lesson this morning. Well, guess what: They’re still with us, even more so. Just like the people in Galilee who sensed the unconditional love of Jesus, today’s downtrodden invisible people also sense the love of Jesus--maybe through imperfect Christians like us, or the remarkable Pope Francis.

God looks for loving, non-judgmental, forgiving people to minister in his harvest fields. That’s why the Bible says the fields are ripe unto harvest, but the Bible also says that laborers are few. God isn’t looking for successful, got-it-made people to labor in his fields, but rather for the stumbling and humbling who depend daily on God’s grace and help. Then they can pass on that grace and help to those God brings their way.

Many of God’s laborers are also invisible—just regular people. Some of them know from personal experience what a jail cell is like or a psychiatric hospital. Others remember living on the streets, or frequenting drug dealers, or selling themselves. They may have hid from an abusive relative, or illegally crossed a border where they worked illegally at a construction site for 2 bucks an hour. Countless others labor on behalf of a struggling relative or friend caught in a vortex of pain or despair.

God calls his children into his fields for varied, diverse, and mysterious reasons. That’s because God’s work goes in varied, diverse, and mysterious places, like emergency rooms; jails; unemployment offices and welfare lines; and battle fields. So many invisible people today are just barely surviving, much less thriving.

Without God’s help and grace, invisible people would have only themselves to depend upon, but certainly not steady jobs; or insurance policies; or pension plans; or credit cards; or nice cars; or college degrees; or savings accounts; or safe neighborhoods. They’re hoping for someone to embrace them as worthy human beings, just as the Galilean invisibles hoped two millenniums ago. Today, they may not even know about Jesus, but he’s looking for them all right, using the eyes, arms and legs, and sweat of the unnoticed laborers in his 21st century ripe spiritual fields.

And when we open our spiritual eyes, we’ll plainly see God’s harvesters at work all around us:

* Serving as surrogate parents for a troubled child
* Paying the past-due rent for someone struggling to find a job
* Feeding and boarding a family whose house blew away in a tornado
* Reassuring a destitute unwed mother that her child will be adopted by a loving couple
* Holding the hand of someone with suicidal thoughts
* Visiting brainwashed bikers in a county jail; or
* Taking a Mexican illegal to Wal-Mart to help him mail his meager paycheck back home to his family.

Many times, troubled people turn to Christ as a last resort. But over time, as they experience God’s love and grace through people like us, Christ may become their first resort. And hooray, the harvested becomes the harvester. Just like a barren tree tended by a master pruner that blooms and blossoms for the first time, producing nourishing fruit for hungry people. Thank goodness no one cut down that tree prematurely!

Recently my family and I joined gobs and mobs of invisible people at Parkland in Dallas. Many were suffering, some were afraid, and most were just plain exhausted. We also saw God reaping and sewing quite a harvest. Parkland’s 24/7/365 gi-normous emergency care facility performs many a miracle for for both rich and poor, the insured and uninsured, the psychotic, the self-destructive, the addicted, the mugged, and the molested and arrested. Parkland is there for anyone who needs medical help, no appointment or certain skin color required.

And it seems like practically everybody there finds ways to help each other out. The medical staff, the technicians, the administrators, the maintenance people, the patients, and the visiting family members all have to be there, so they make the best of it in their invisible ways: lots of raw emotion, encouragement, sharing and caring, lots of unconditional love, and lots of hope.

No, Parkland isn’t a church or religious citadel, and it surely has many institutional faults, but God is none-the-less at work there, using tough human circumstances to harvest the best humans have to offer: their service, their sacrifice, and their selfless love.

But, you don’t have to drive up to Big D to see God’s people at work. Right here in Waco we have Mission Waco, Caritas, Habitat for Humanity, and numerous other unnoticed harvest fields ablaze with a quiet spirit that revitalizes people to overcome human pain, panic, and problems. The laborers may be few, but they welcome you to join in Christ’s bountiful, beautiful, and beneficial harvest.

In closing, do you remember the famous verse in the book of Hebrews about a great cloud of heavenly witnesses--like Moses and Abraham and Noah-- looking down on you? I like to think that someday, among those famous heavenly witnesses, there might also be a not-so-famous, but familiar, face looking down at us. Someone you met in a harvest field somewhere, some time, somehow. And without even realizing it, you made a permanent good difference in their life. They never forgot you and look forward to reuniting with you one day in heaven.

It has always been God’s plan to use the invisible people of this world to unite mankind under Christ. That’s because it’s our love for one another that keeps this world going around. After all, it’s the pure in heart who see God at work in his fields. Christians work for free, but the spiritual wages are priceless. Come to think of it, it’s not so bad being invisible when you’re in God’s kingdom. And all of God’s children say, Amen!