

Know the News

By Mark Bergin

When I was a kid, my parents sent me to a private Christian school. Looking back, I can remember just about all of my classmates coming from pretty affluent homes. Everyone always seemed to have nice clothes and the latest ninja turtle trapper keeper. And we were good kids, too, always participating in the Christmas canned food drive, the free coat giveaway, or whatever other charity initiative the school put on.

But when I hit the sixth grade, my folks couldn't afford private school anymore. I remember hearing that I'd be moving to the public school just down the road. I was terrified. You see, within the private school world, there tends to be a culture of fear regarding what goes on in public schools. You'll hear parents or teachers make comments about how those schools were filled with little hellions and how could any responsible parent send their kids there.

So I remember being pretty scared on my first day. It was a different world. A lot of the kids came from broken homes. Some wore rattier clothes. And some often showed up on an empty stomach. I was taken aback at first and was sure that I could never relate to a lot of these kids. I mean, these were the kids that we had collected canned food for or given our old coats to. They were different than me.

But over the course of that first year, something changed. As I started hanging out with these kids, I stopped seeing them as charity cases and started seeing them as peers, friends even. I remember one friend in particular who lived in a tiny broken down shack just a few blocks from our school. He always came to class smelling a little like cat urine. As I got to know him, I learned that he lived with his single mom and her 20-plus cats in a home no bigger than a typical suburban bedroom. But it didn't matter; he was my friend. And I didn't need to wait for the holiday canned food drive to help him out. If he needed food, I shared my lunch with him. If he needed a break from his insane living arrangement, I invited him over to sleep at my house for a few days.

I didn't do those things because I felt guilty for having so much when he had so little or because I was a particularly charitable person. I did them because I knew him and I loved him. He was my friend.

We can all probably relate to that in some way, that we tend to have the most compassion for people who are in our lives, people we actually know. That's why when we see an ad on television to help starving kids in Africa or when we watch the news and see the needs in our own city, we're not moved to compassion the way we would be if we personally knew the hurting people in the story. We might feel a little guilty and maybe even write a check. But the only way to really care, to really understand the pain people are in and show true compassion, is to go live there. We've got to leave our comfortable middle class heavens and go befriend the marginalized, the poverty-stricken, the drug-addicted.

That can be scary. But isn't that what Jesus did with us? Immortal, invisible, eternal God, setting aside his divine rights, setting aside his comfortable place with the father, and leaving heaven to

come be with us. Sometimes we think of Jesus as floating around the earth two feet off the ground in the power of his divinity. Nothing could be further from the truth. The scriptures tell us that he humbled himself and became fully man. That he experienced vulnerability and hunger and fear and cold. He relates to us. He understands how poor and needy all of us really are. And he has compassion because he knows us and loves us.

That couldn't have been easy, to leave spiritual bliss and dive headlong into the mess of humanity. But Jesus took that plunge for us. And he now invites us to take that same plunge for others, no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

Calling it like I see it for Primetime America, I'm Mark Bergin.