

**"A Little Lower than Angels"**  
**by Kelley O'Connor**  
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What is man and woman that you bother with them; why take a second look their way? You made them not quite as high as angels, bright with Eden's dawn light; Then you put them in charge of your entire handcrafted world. That's part of today's reading taken from the message.

When Gail and I went to the CATCH workshop we were asked three questions. Why do people need Jesus? Why do people need the church? and why do people need our church? There were a lot of pastors and lay people there that day and the room got real quiet when we were asked those questions.

We think we know the answers to those questions but it's hard to put into words. We all say we love Jesus and we understand that our goal is to be more like him. But when we have to say exactly who he is for us it's difficult, it's complicated, it's complex.

It seems like it should be easy. Most of us had some moment when we accepted Jesus as our way to understand our God. We accepted him into our heart and into our life and we were changed by that decision. And even after we made that decision we wrestled with who he was and how we should respond to his love for us and his love for us all.

New Christians are always fun to watch, even annoying at times, because they're so enthusiastic! They seem to know all the answers and all their prayers seem to get answered and they are vocal about their love and filled with such joy! I really do love meeting new Christians, especially young ones because they remind me of my years in MYF and Young Life.

In about the eighth grade I started going to Young Life and I was already involved in MYF so Sunday morning I went to church, Sunday night to MYF, Tuesday night to Young Life and Thursday night to Campaigners which was a bible study connected to Young Life. I was enthusiastic, even in my own little introverted ways. I was filled to full most all the time and prayed constantly. I didn't carry a Bible to school, like some of my friends, because that seemed kind of showy or weird because it wasn't like I had time to read it during the school day. But other than that I was pretty much a Bible thumping Jesus freak and proud of it.

I stayed involved in church and young life and MYF a long time, until I went away to college really. There the Methodist church was a long walk from my dorm, and with a regular 2:00 am bedtime it was very difficult to get up in time to get there before the service started.

Besides my church life didn't really fit in with my school life. The words we spoke in creeds and liturgies had lost their meaning. They didn't speak to me like they had before - they actually didn't speak to me at all. I wasn't in a faith crisis but I was in a church crises. I was away from it for the first time in my life and I wasn't really missing it.

After about a year and a half of going away to school I decided to move back to my hometown and get an apartment with a friend and go to school at a local extension of the university. When I finally got back into my routine I started back to church.

This time, I think because I had taken a break, I heard the words to the creeds and liturgies in a whole new way. The words practically leapt off the page and into my heart. I had a whole new enthusiasm. I wanted to be fully immersed in the life of the church so I started to work with the youth and spend more time working on programs and serving on committees.

The thing was that this time, unlike the first time, I realized I was called to actually live life as a Christian and I began to see that it wasn't going to be easy. If I chose to follow Jesus, I began understanding what that might mean. I mean, Jesus did say pick up your cross. He did say the first must be last and servant to all. He did say I might die and I would have to tell people about him and share this hard message as well as the one about how much he loved everyone.

But then I looked around and found that there were a lot of people in the church saying the same thing I was every Sunday, but they didn't seem to live out the things they said. They came to church on Sunday and they looked real nice and they even were real nice. But that was it. No one was actually feeding the hungry or clothing the poor. No one was actually touching lives outside the church. They were still locking up the warm church building when there were cold homeless people standing outside. It was like no one believed what they were saying. It was like they were exempt or something- they showed up, knew the words, liked each other. Some of them even took a class or two. But no one was feeding the hungry. No one was clothing the poor. No one was doing what we were being told we were supposed to do. Not even the pastor.

And then I realized. To do those things is so much harder than to say those things. After all homeless people stink. And they don't have any manners. And they speak out at all the wrong times and say all the wrong things. And they make the church smell funny. If they're drunk enough they might even pee on the floor or fall asleep and start snoring during the sermon.

So it made sense, in a way, that that kind of thing didn't belong in a beautiful sanctuary. People who were clean and knew how to behave – that's who belonged in the sanctuary, they're the ones who should be standing on Holy Ground.

That Christmas, on Christmas eve, I heard a sermon that changed my life. It wasn't long. It wasn't shouted or even said with much enthusiasm – but it jumped inside of me and never let me go. The sermon was about the shepherds on the hills outside of Bethlehem. Those shepherds weren't the kind you picture – you know the kind with rosy cheeks who lovingly guard their sheep as if they were family members. There were those kind of shepherds but these were not them. You see there were thousands of sheep outside of Bethlehem, near Jerusalem. They were waiting to either be meat for the market or a sacrifice on the altar. The shepherds watching them were hired hands. They had no connection with the sheep. These shepherds were illiterate, unaware of the laws of cleanliness, didn't know the prayers or the rules of the temple. They were filthy, cheating, liars. They weren't even allowed to testify in court because it was just assumed they would lie.

But those shepherds were the only ones invited to the birth of Jesus. They were the ones the angels sang to and announced the birth to and told to go and see. And the angels didn't tell them to go and shower and brush their teeth and put on clean clothes and repent and ask forgiveness and ask Jesus into their hearts, and THEN go see their savior. No they were told to go, just as they were. Dirty, rotten, stinking, thieving, liars were told to go and see their savior – the one sent to THEM. To them, of all people, for God's sake.

And then I got it. I realized why the church had become so complacent. Why the church had become so sterile.

It was because it was too hard. It was too much work. God was asking too much of nice clean people.

And I began wondering that night if I had it in me to be a Christian. Sterile Christianity didn't work for me any more. I knew that if I stayed in this gig I

would have to live out the good news. And realize the good news had already come to me – I had to take it out to others and sometimes they would stink and reek of alcohol and misbehave and drive me crazy. I began to realize my heart might be broken over and over – I might see very little return on my investment.

But I knew I had to invest.

This is the message for the Hebrews that we heard in our reading this morning.

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who seemed to be losing their initial enthusiasm for the faith. It isn't clear why, but I think we can look at our own experience and find enough reasons: competition from a world to whom Jesus didn't seem that important, trying to live out a faith that is a hand-me-down – not really our own, but our parent's faith; the inability to live the "victorious life" that we think we should be living; the inability to see the light at the end of the tunnel – to see that our faith has and can continue to make a difference in the lives of others and in the world but that it's hard.

For hope to be sustained, we have to buy our own message and get excited about what it means for our lives.

Yes, the excitement is like the excitement one feels when bungee jumping, or diving off a high dive. It's a little scary – because it means leaving the sanctuary. It means talking to people whose odor makes us gag and behavior makes us recoil. It means offering a hand shake or a hug to someone who is hungry and filthy and dying for someone to care. And those people will let us down again and again. But every once in a while someone will come around and they will allow the good news to change their life and their heart. And then they'll become one of those annoying new Christians that will remind us of pure joy and give us a taste of the kingdom right then and there.

And in that moment we'll know why God made us a little lower than angels, why God is mindful of humankind. Because we are the servants that can help God get the word out. The message that God loves us to pieces. You see we are the hands and feet of the Christ. We may not always understand how it works. We may think we can't, or we won't know what to say. Or that we can't risk our tidy little lives. But we can. It's what we're called to do. It's what we must do. With God all things are possible – even us becoming more bold. Even us reaching out and changing lives in Rohnert Park. We are after

all loved and loving, cared for and compassionate, blessed and generous. And I feel sorry for anyone who isn't us!

May we live into the life of Christianity – the life that calls us out of this safe and beautiful sanctuary, into the streets of our community and into the lives of those who need us. Amen.