



The Monkey and the Fish

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Liquid

The desire for safety stands against every noble human endeavor.

— Tacitus, Roman philosopher

I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.

— Malcolm X

The rebellious, disrespectful, disillusioned, and demanding Prodigal Son is the focus of one of the most glorious moments in the Gospels. Yet the real highlight of that passage in Luke 15 is the radically gracious, generous, and forgiving father.

I love that story because it's Eastern in its cultural tone. Normally, an Eastern father would never run toward his son. The typical Eastern son, with head bowed, would be quick to demonstrate obeisance to his father. However, this father is different. This father runs and, in what is considered by many to be the most intimate portrait of love in the Bible,

kisses his son over and over again. Most versions of the Bible don't translate these repeated kisses. The kisses of the father. Kisses that entwine forgiveness, celebration, and blessing.

The world longs for such kisses from the Father.

No one should be in a better position to fulfill this longing than the church. Who can give a better kiss than the church? A kiss without strings attached. A supernatural kiss that can set captives free. A kiss that inspires prodigals to remember real love and to come back home.

I sometimes think how sweet it would be if that were the reaction of every person, every family, every neighbor, every community, even every country, whenever they come into contact with those of us who follow Jesus, who make up the church.

I think it could happen.

I believe that today God is calling us in the church to become a different kind of movement, known for our kisses of compassion rather than our condemnations.

I'm not sure there's ever been a better opportunity for those of us in the church to do so. A historic coming together of many unusual forces are shaping today's global village. Our world is marked by unprecedented degrees of multiculturalism, social advocacy, international collaboration and interdependence, and technology-driven outbreaks of freedom, unity, and community. They provide an intersection, a *kairos* moment, in which the church can shine.

From its first moments, the church has held the promise of being an expression of God's presence on this earth. No other entity has greater potential to bring about real and

sustainable change for good, whether we're talking about individual lives or the world at large.

But something's wrong. In North America, there has been a steady decline in church attendance, church giving, and church participation, a pattern we've already seen unfold in Europe, once the seat of Christianity's global expansion. These are signs of a much larger problem: the erosion of the significance of the church in the public square and in people's personal lives. In the spring of 2006, a national poll in America indicated that only 17 percent of Americans said going to church is essential for a life of faith.

Altered States

Around the world, things are changing fast these days, and in ways that seemed unthinkable only a few years ago. Just ask any of the people who attended a recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. This annual gathering draws some of the most influential people in the world, including people from all fields—religion, politics, media, business, you name it. There was plenty of talk about novel business strategies and potential political partnerships. But people who are students of culture couldn't help but notice that new topics and questions are looming large in the most important conversations taking place today. There are conversations about how China is upending the world economy and culture, and about how China is eclipsing the United States in so many ways. There are conversations about how grassroots social change around the globe—which is being fueled by the internet's vast potential for helping people leap barriers

of time, distance, and culture—is far outstripping institutional approaches to crises and problem-solving, whether the institution is political or religious or otherwise.

There are conversations about how the world demands that business not only be good for profits but also be good for the planet and good for people. In business, it used to be that one bottom line—profit—separated the good from the bad. Now there are at least two bottom lines to attend to: profit and cause. This new reality, this new way of doing things, has huge ramifications for the thinking, methods, and game plans of for-profit organizations and business entities of all kinds. Many in the corporate and nonprofit domains are pretty sleep-deprived these days trying to figure out this new world we live in and what it means to be cause-oriented and socially conscious with their gains. This is in large part because they recognize the profitability of cause marketing.

What does all of this have to do with those of us in the church? Well, just as the spheres of commerce and government are being fundamentally reshaped by globalism, so is the domain of the church. Again, it's not new but a wake-up call to return to our roots, our calling as lovers of the marginalized.

Globalism applies to the many colossal shifts occurring in the world today because of an intense interdependence that countries, cultures, and people are experiencing with one another. The world is shrinking. By the day, it seems. Distances that once took months to cover now take hours. People and cultures unknown to us, let alone ever personally encountered by us, are an integral part of the fabric of our lives. For example, experts have said that if you take out

the undocumented worker in places like California, that will wreak havoc on our economy. People in politics and business, in education and the arts, people throughout all of our institutions, are finding it difficult to keep up with the way the world is changing, to understand what's happening and why, and to adapt.

I love the church. But the church historically has proven slow to embrace necessary change and to adapt to ethnic, sociological, and cultural shifts. It's like we know we're unhealthy but we don't want to go to the doctor to take care of the problem. And I don't think it has been any different with globalism. I'm concerned that with globalism, the nature and scope of the changes taking place in the world are so sweeping and the pace of change so unrelenting that we're becoming increasingly out of touch with the reality of our sickness.

At the risk of oversimplifying things, globalism truly is what historians call a disruptive force, because it's making for a very different, new world: culturally, economically, socially, technologically, commercially, and politically.

There are difficult, troubling aspects to this reshaping, but also wonderful possibilities. For instance, the collective threats posed worldwide by terrorism, pandemics, rogue military leaders, political and social corruption, environmental complexities, and racism are frightening and daunting. But I also see an unprecedented potential for creative international and cross-cultural collaboration because we are living in a cause-driven culture. It's now hip to be advocates of justice and compassion. In fact, people everywhere are hungering