

Loved by my family and gifted with a few close friendships, as a young girl, I still felt slightly out of place. At home, at school and at social events. Though I had never experienced being ostracized like some of my classmates, something was missing. At the tender age of about eleven I wasn't able to recognize that gnawing within, let alone articulate it. About that same time, after some years of disengagement from church due to negative experiences, my mom decided that we needed to reconnect. Within the faith community something clicked; I had finally found my niche, a place where I didn't feel like the abnormal one. Witnessing people's acts of faith, especially as certain relationships developed, I found myself curiously drawn to the God who was casting out the corrosive essence of emptiness. Like the demon possessed daughter, my life was launched in a drastically different direction.

A married man, aged 39 years, believed in the existence of God. And though he had been baptized and raised in very large family with a Catholic background, and had had his own children baptized, he wasn't very active in the church. When his family decided to start attending worship with a Lutheran congregation, he wasn't outright told to stand in the corner or sit at a member's feet, but it was clear that folks who touted belief in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ did *not* want him around. With a last name that carried a tarnished reputation, and clothes that weren't dirty but were also not the latest brand name trends, snubs and icy glares were what greeted this child of God as he attempted to find his way back into the faith community for his family's sake.

In the midst of a successful diplomatic career, a woman receives an email inviting her to the 120th anniversary celebration of a church that her missionary great-grandfather founded in Osaka, Japan. Growing up, her relationship with God and the church was akin to playing with a

yo-yo. And during her young adult and middle age years, as she explains, "...I held religion firmly at arm's length. When I considered its divisive impact on human affairs, as well as the hypocrisy that flourishes even among the so-called faithful, I felt it wasn't for me. Like so many in modern secular society, I considered myself spiritual but shunned most of the practices and beliefs associated with organized religion. Sometimes, though, I longed for an outlet for spiritual feelings harbored deep inside." During the anniversary service, her thoughts wandered back to how her great-grandfather must have struggled while leading worship the Sun after the death of his 14-year-old daughter who played organ there. Pulled by an unseen force, more visits to Japan followed, with new friends and further discoveries. And as she spoke at the commemoration of another church her great-grandfather had started and delved deeper into his work as a writer and theologian, she gained a clearer picture of how he had influenced the people he had served. As she states, "My life in Paris was great in many ways, yet something was missing...in 1999...I finally embarked on a book about my great-grandfather. I knew that if I hoped to understand what drew him into ministry in Japan, I needed to learn more about Christianity. So, for the first time, I began to read the Bible in a meaningful way, under the guidance of two devout relatives. A long-suppressed inner flame burned brighter as I read and contemplated the Scriptures. For the first time, I felt I understood the true meaning of faith, as hope in things unseen. I understood, too, how Jesus taught us what it means to be God's people, loving one another as we love ourselves. Only through love can we help bring God's kingdom to life on earth as it is in heaven. When I further considered the enduring faith of Japanese Christians whose ancestors were taught by missionaries like my great-grandfather, the spiritual yearning I had felt much of my life gained a new focus." As she expresses, against all odds, his example helped launch her own journey of faith.

As a pastor had begun his call with an inner-city congregation, people expressed a strong desire to grow and survive. In response, the ordained minister began going around door to door in the neighborhood asking people to come to worship. Attracted by the invitation, they started making their way through the doors. Over a few years-time that number grew to many families. However, these folks from the surrounding area didn't look like the existing members, and so disciples who professed faith in the one who healed a culturally and ethnically dissimilar girl eventually pushed them back out.

Over this past year, people have expressed to me their vision to see Trinity grow and thrive, to become vibrant again. Both James and Mark force us, in light of that dream, to seriously think about, "In what ways does our faith and actions, and lack thereof, either draw or repel others?" Faith, like medicine, has absolutely no effect if it is not applied in loving and thankful response for God's liberating grace that we have freely received.

Faith in which Jesus says to you and me, "Ephphatha. Be opened, my son. Be opened, my daughter. For I offer you more than mere crumbs. I offer you my heart. The heart that beat as our Father sculpted you and all of humankind from the earth. The heart that cooed as my human mother held me for the first time. The heart that drew people of all races and origins. The heart that sought escape from notice for just a moment to catch my breath. The heart that wept in agony, mourning and anger. The heart that bled upon the cross. The heart that cries for justice for the oppressed and food for the hungry. The heart that frees the imprisoned and raises those who are bowed down. The heart that delights in you. The heart that pulls you into the Spirit's lifeforce. The heart that seeks a nest within you so that it may meet and embrace other along the way." Amen.