

Foreword

A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

—MARTIN LUTHER, *HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION*

I CAN'T REMEMBER HOW IT was that I acquired a small “World’s Greatest Christian” trophy—a Precious Moments atrocity: little girl on her knees in prayer, the ridiculous title engraved on a brass plate attached to the wooden block beneath her. But I do remember when I lost her. She was left on a windowsill in an Embassy Suites hotel room in Dallas the summer of 2009. I remember because I was devastated by the loss. She had come in remarkably handy in the two short years she was mine.

I had developed a practice, while out with friends, of placing her in front of the person who said the most Christian thing.

Mark Stenberg was the “World’s Greatest Christian” more than once. I guess it took just that one extra percentage point. My own Christianity and that of our friends would so often be hovering around 45 or 50 percent, but Mark, he’d bring up Jesus, or grace, or forgiveness of sins, and *Bam!*, there she was, sitting in front of his 51 percent Christian ass once again.

My congregation, House for All Sinners & Saints, and I, their pastor, owe a lot to Mark Stenberg, along with his colleagues Debbie Blue and Russell Rathbun, with whom he founded House

of Mercy, and Kae Evenson, with whom he founded Mercy Seat. These four pastors and the churches they founded are the Beatles from whom I've stolen most of my guitar riffs. They were the first people I'd ever met who dared to entertain the delusional hope that I, having met them and spent time in their churches, would also come to share: that perhaps I could serve as a parish pastor and not have to pretend to be someone else in order to do it; that scripture and Jesus could be taken seriously and this could be done without taking *ourselves* too seriously; that we could have our irony and our religion too; that the categories of liberal and conservative need not apply; and that church music didn't have to be embarrassing.

In a time when the church seems obsessed with being either relevant or purpose driven, Mark and his friends chose a third way: to be both irrelevant and purposeless. The pastoring and preaching done by my friend Mark is not meant to be self-satisfied Evangelicalism dressed up with designer jeans and light shows, nor is it a baptized version of self-improvement and corporate campaigns for personal excellence. Mark knows that when Christianity becomes a means to an end—a system through which we earn Precious Moments trophies for coolness, avoidance of suffering, personal morality, community service, or cultural standing—it has lost its true power.

There is a theological word for what happens when what we do and teach and live as Christians is an end in and of itself, and not a means to an end. That word is *freedom*. And out of freedom come healing and beauty. From freedom comes the capacity to see God in suffering and to belly-laugh in the middle of church. From freedom comes the permission to be the jagged, lovely creatures we are in the presence of a God who loves us madly.

Freedom is what I see in Mark and his work. He is unafraid to call a thing what it is. And for this I am exceedingly grateful. If only I still had that trophy, he'd get it again right about now.

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