

Easter 7  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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## **A Mother's Vision**

In 1989 I was in a town on the coastal plains of Ecuador. The people of the town knew I liked birds of prey. Someone approached me and asked if I wanted to see an eagle. Sure, I wanted to see an eagle, so we jumped in a taxi and drove into one of the housing developments of the town. There, on a pile of construction gravel, picking at offal from the market, was a Harpy Eagle chick. It was as big as a small turkey already, even though it was only still covered in downy white feathers. It had a broken wing and a dislocated jaw. Loggers on the coast had felled her nest tree and she had sustained these injuries in the fall. Was I interested in buying it?

No, I wasn't interested in buying it, but when I arrived back in the city I contacted the appropriate people. They confiscated the illegally held bird, and eventually the bird ended up in a breeding project for Harpy Eagles at the Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho's satellite location in Panama. Our son, Landon, in his second summer in college, wrote a grant to fund a summer in Panama introducing Harpy Eagle chicks into the wilds of that country. He told me that the bird I had found was the biggest producer of chicks for the whole project. They had named her "Olafa," and she was known for her feisty spirit. In 2006 we went back to Ecuador. Landon had studied in Ecuador for a semester and had volunteered at a Center for Birds of Prey in Ecuador called Parque Condor. He assured me that Olafa was there. We visited, and there, in a very large flight cage with ladders for her to clamber around on, was a large female Harpy Eagle with a broken wing and a dislocated jaw. Olafa was home again. The whole project had only produced 34 chicks, of which she had mothered 16.

Why was she not still in Panama popping out fertile eggs and incubating them? The scope of the project was limited. It produced more than what was first targeted, and Olafa, being un-releasable, was returned to her native land. I find that wonderful that she is repatriated, and that she is educating the people of Ecuador about this magnificent bird, one of the Big Three Eagles of the world, and that I had a hand in it all, but I also find it a little sad. Harpy Eagles can live well into their 70's. In the wild they produce a chick every other year or so. By all accounts and purposes Olafa alone could have produced at least 30 chicks in her lifetime had she not fallen into the hands of the loggers. For whatever reasons, the vision of the project was limited.

All too often the Church suffers from too small a vision. We scribe out for ourselves a limited view of what God can be expected to do. We decide the kinds of people we want

in church with us, and the kinds we don't. We decide that our neighbors probably won't want to get involved in our Church and so we never invite them. We feel a pang of guilt over a homeless man on the corner, but we talk ourselves out of doing something for him. We drive in from the edges of town for Church without seeing those who live next door as possible participants in our family life. We look at the need in our own town and think that maybe ministries beyond our town are more than we ought to attempt. We set out to do it and we are often quite successful, but it always begs the question: What else might have been possible?

When I look at Jesus in today's Gospel lesson his sense of mission was world-wide. He could see beyond the 11 disciples after the crucifixion. He could see the great family tree of witness sprouting from this trunk, and extending down through time. First there was the 11, then the one to whom they witnessed, then the ones that second generation brought into the fold, and then the third and fourth generations, through the period of establishment of the Church, down through a hundred generations or more to you and me, and embracing the whole world. The Pew Research Center estimated the world's Christian population in 2010 at 2.2 billion, the largest single religious body in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' mission was characterized by three things.

1. His mission is realistic yet unlimited. There's a wonderful little story about what happened in heaven after the Ascension. The Son is giving the Father an after-action report. The Father says, "Well, Son, you did well down there."

"Thank you. It wasn't easy, but we got it all finished," replies the Son.

"Now, what is your plan," asks the Father.

The Son points down to the 11 in the upper room. "You see those 11 people there? That's my plan."

Jesus didn't begin with everyone, but he aimed at everyone eventually. The Mission of the Church is not irresponsible, but it is comprehensive.

2. It is not driven by budgets, it is provisioned by them. What did those 11 have? They had hearts full of fear, homes they were afraid to go back to and lives in ruins. The Spirit was given to them soon enough, and the Spirit made them brave witnesses, willing to be thrown the lions for the sake of Christ. Tradition holds that Peter asked to be crucified upside down so that he would not be equal to his Lord in his death. God does not call the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://qz.com/375495/there-will-be-as-many-muslims-in-the-world-as-christians-by-2050/>

equipped, God equips the called.

3. It is not ego-driven, it is driven by love. A long time ago I was trying to figure out whether or not God wanted to make me a priest. I made it a habit of talking to clergy wherever I went. Fr. Wally Ohl told me, "Clergy are broken like the bread and poured out like the wine." This November I will celebrate 25 years as a priest. Fr. Ohl was right. The ego will always be broken by ministry so that the bread of life and the Spirit of God might feed the world. This is not about us. The Church is the only institution that exists for those who are not yet part of it.

Today is Mother's Day. A mother's vision of her children is a good metaphor for Jesus' mission for the church. My mother had four children. She knew us all pretty well. She knew what we liked and what we didn't like and what would make us laugh or cry. One April Fool's Day she put red Jello in my glass and red Kool-Aid in the other kids' glasses. We all laughed when I had to eat my "Kool-Aid" with a spoon! Yet she always believed in our potential as she understood it. For her we were the world. Her vision for us really knew no limits. Though there were only four of us, she was convinced that we could make the world a better place. When our weaknesses stood in the way of our greatness I'm sure she shed private tears.

The church has children. We come in all sorts of sizes, shapes, ages and abilities. We all have our quirks and our inconsistencies, but in the long run, our potential is what God sees. By this shall all know that we are His disciples, if we love one another as he has loved us. This love is what brought Jesus out of the tomb into the resurrected life. It is the most powerful force in the world, and by the love of God we CAN make our world a better place. When our business stands between us and our greatness the mothering heart of God weeps for us.

My mother loved all of us with all her heart, yet none got less than all of her love. It's the crazy economy of a mother's love that giving it all to one does not mean another gets less. It's not a zero-sum game. All are winners. In the same way, the Kingdom of God is predicated on love, not a balanced budget. This does not mean we can be irresponsible with the resources we have, but it does mean that mission drives budget, not the other way around. In the long run, God's work will be done with the resources we have, and if we need more God will provide.

Finally, my mother lived through us. Sometimes that wasn't so fun, like when she wanted us to do something because of her, not us. (I think all parents to that to one degree or another.) On a deeper level it just told us that she was looking beyond her life to the effect in the world ours would have. When we joined the Episcopal Church it was

hard for her to accept. The sacramental approach to the faith and the hierarchy of the church were foreign to her and she couldn't understand them. She would wonder to me where she went wrong that we became Episcopalians. I confronted her once (as lovingly as I could.) "Mom, as long as you wonder where you went wrong you tell me you don't accept me as I am." She stopped, looked at me with big eyes of surprise, and from that moment on she accepted our new church home for us. When she visited my parishes she always participated fully. In the longest run, she wanted it to be about us, not her.

In the same way, the Kingdom is about the salvation of the world. Just as Jesus' life was poured out on the Cross for the world, we are to be poured out into the world full of the transforming power of the love of God, to give ourselves away, that the world may know that God loves them.