

KINGDOM  **conversations**

THE LEAST OF THESE

**PRACTICING A FAITH
WITHOUT MARGINS**

ANGIE WARD, GENERAL EDITOR

Sixteen years spent pastoring a beloved but profoundly wounded Detroit neighborhood is simply one of the many reasons I connected so deeply with this collection of essays. Brandon Washington's call to let go of a "truncated" gospel that ignores the cross's mandate to live reconciled. Ben Virgo's reminder that those who change history are not those who try hard—but those whose lives are rooted in the love of Christ. Danielle Strickland's call to an evil-fighting activism flowing from hearts that weep alongside the broken. And so much more! This volume compels us from the biblical text and the heart of Jesus to respond with passion to Dr. King's historic invitation: "If you can't fly, run; if you can't run, walk; if you can't walk, crawl; but by all means keep moving"—in solidarity with the God whose love moves him to see every son and daughter's pain and do all to heal us and set us free.

J. KEVIN BUTCHER, executive director of Rooted Ministries and author of *Free and Choose and Choose Again*

Angie Ward and the contributors of *The Least of These* make a passionate plea to Christians to examine our responsibility and action toward the most vulnerable in our society. The stories written in this critical volume open our eyes and ears to listen, learn, and love one another so that we can transform the world. I recommend this book to anyone who seeks to embody the good news of God's love.

GRACE JI-SUN KIM, professor of theology at Earlham School of Religion, author of over twenty-one books (most recently, *Invisible*), editor of *Keeping Hope Alive*, and host of *The Christian Century's Madang* podcast

The collective wisdom of this book points us toward both hope and courage. I needed to be reminded that when we engage with the pain of our neighbors, we always find a God who is with us all; perhaps you do too. Highly recommend.

TIM SOERENS, author of *Everywhere You Look*

This book reminds me to see my own neediness in the mirror. The undocumented, the homeless, and many living in the shadows of

unseenness—I could be them in a heartbeat; I am them. This book causes me to see the great need to match my doctrine with my service. This book makes me question if I am “showing my faith by my works” or just sitting in my castle with the drawbridge pulled up—until my day of need comes. Then who will help me? If we do not step up, who will? This book hurts where I need it. It’s time to be real.

DR. ALEJANDRO MANDES, author of *Embracing the New Samaria* and executive director of EFCAs All People Initiative

The Least of These is an incredible compilation that focuses on the humanity of all people. The authors are leaders and practitioners who challenge us to know and do life with people who live at the margins. It even challenges the idea of margins to encounter each person as an equal part of the community.

REV. DR. LEROY BARBER, executive director of Neighborhood Economics and cofounder of The Voices Project

The authors of *The Least of These* thoughtfully invite us to consider how we see ourselves in relationship to our neighbors and push us to reconsider how our religious practices do not always align with how we ought to be in relationship with others. In a time when so many Christians are deconstructing their faith, these authors provide guideposts for those of us ready to start again and again.

KATHY KHANG, author of *Raise Your Voice*

The Least of These is a sacred gift to the church. The authors of these essays come together not just to exhort the church to love and draw near to God’s preferred people but also to reveal how their relationships and experiences with those on the margins have transformed their own lives. This book is a beautiful invitation to draw near, love, and be changed.

KAREN GONZÁLEZ, author of *Beyond Welcome: Centering Immigrants in Our Christian Response to Immigration*

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with Tyndale House Publishers.



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INTRODUCTION

NEARLY EVERY DAY, I take my dog on a walk around my neighborhood in my adopted city of Denver. In just a two-mile loop, I see so many needs. There's a man in a wheelchair struggling to cross the street before the traffic lights change. There is a single mother among a group of grocery-store coworkers, picketing for a better wage in frigid temperatures outside the store. There are the diverse riders of the public transportation system waiting at the bus stops on several corners along my route.

There are college students with Black Lives Matter signs displayed in the windows of their dorms and rental houses, and students of all colors, ethnicities, and sexual identities making their way to and from class, sporting events, and watering holes. There is a homeless family huddled under the minimal shelter of the side entry to a local church, the entirety of their possessions contained in a shopping cart, the young children trying to stay warm in ragged sleeping bags. I walk past the elementary school that serves students

from low-income families just blocks from the well-resourced school that proudly displays banners announcing all their state and national awards for high achievement. There are several neighbors with mental illness, their porches and yards piled high with clutter. And there are refugee families eking out a living with government assistance and praying their kids have a chance for something better.

Just two miles. So many different people. So many needs. So many on the margins. So many dividing lines. Honestly, it's often overwhelming. I'm tempted to just return home, shut my front door, and insulate myself. After all, where would I start? Who needs my assistance the most? And what, really, can I do? What can I give? Money? Time? My means, while greater than many around me, still seem so meager, so pathetically inadequate. Still, it seems I should do *something*. What is my personal responsibility? And what is the role of my church, of *the* church?

In this third entry in the Kingdom Conversations series, we wrestle with these difficult issues and questions. We know that in a fallen and broken world there will always be pain and poverty, sickness and sadness. Yet as followers of Christ we are called to bring hope and healing to those who hurt, and there ought not be margins in the Kingdom of God. What, therefore, is our responsibility to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing this side of eternity? With so many needs everywhere we look, where do we start? And what can we learn from those we deem as less fortunate than ourselves, but who in fact may hold the keys to the Kingdom of God?

I am delighted with and humbled by the voices we have

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curated for this particular conversation. Each of the contributors in this book has personal experience with, passion for, and proximity to the pressing needs around us. They challenge and help each and all of us be better prepared to love and serve those whom the world often neglects.

Lisa Rodriguez-Watson opens by asking, “Who Is My Neighbor?,” pointing out our tendency to distance ourselves from those in need and reminding us that by serving the least of these, we serve our Savior himself. David Hionides follows with an overview of the theology of the *imago Dei*—the image of God—and of human dignity. What does it mean for those on either side of human-made margins that *all* human beings bear the image of their creator?

From there, Ben Virgo takes us on a historical journey, using lessons from English history to show how ordinary people have ministered extraordinary, world-changing compassion in Jesus’ name. Next, Dennis R. Edwards digs into a comprehensive examination of what the Scriptures teach about social justice, while Brandon Washington reminds us that social justice is not merely one outworking of the gospel; it is central to the gospel message.

Jonathan (“Pastah J”) Brooks helps us turn the corner from theory and theology to practice, painting a picture of how compassion is developed through proximity and personal relationship. Daniel Aaron Harris then lays out a practical theology of a multi-ability church in which all women and men, regardless of ability or status, are created, called, connected, and commissioned.

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Danielle Strickland calls us to engage the needs of the world, first through lament, and then by replacing lies with truth, fear with love, and separation with connection. Aubrey Sampson extends the call to the church, exhorting the body of Christ to serve as communities of glad hope bringers. Finally, Christiana Rice reminds us of our consolation in the hope of Christ, our deliverer.

As disciples of Christ, may we never forget, never, never turn away, never shirk responsibility to minister compassion and justice in the name of Jesus.

Angie Ward
GENERAL EDITOR

1

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Lisa Rodriguez-Watson

“MY NAME IS JERRY,” he said with a strong southern Louisiana accent, “but most people call me Junior.” His smile was genuine, almost childlike, and bore the truth of decades of neglect. “My name is Lisa,” I said as we shook hands on my front porch. Junior’s aged, wiry frame and gentle demeanor were disarming. He and I went quickly from strangers to neighbors. “Do you have any work for me?” he inquired. “I can sweep your porch and sidewalk,” he continued. “No, Junior, I think the porch and sidewalk are okay today,” I responded with what felt like a noticeable lack of confidence. “Well, that’s okay, Ms. Lisa. I’ll be back again soon. I just was gonna run to the store and get some Buglers. It’s nice to

know you. I'll see you again." Junior rode off contentedly on his bike, while I remained curious and cautious on my porch.

Junior was one of my first and best teachers of loving my neighbor. At the time, I was living in downtown Fresno directing an urban program for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Junior was well known and loved by the many cycles of students and interns who came through the program. Multiple times a week, Junior would come asking for work and money. Honestly, I often tired of his impromptu knocks at my door, which felt like disruptions to the important work I had to do of training students to be ministers in the inner city and writing fundraising letters to donors.

One day, still early in my time there on L Street in downtown Fresno, I saw Junior riding up on his bicycle and stepping onto the porch. It was just after Thanksgiving, so even though I was busy with my ministry tasks, I was ready to generously offer the leftovers I had in the fridge and send him on his way. When Junior knocked on the door, I answered and we exchanged greetings. Instead of asking for food or money, as was his custom, he made a very unusual request. "Do you have a razor?" Perplexed at his unique request, I must have stuttered momentarily. "Uh, a razor? Like to shave with?" I muttered. "Yes, a razor for shaving," he kindly responded.

What about the abundance of food I was ready to give? Why wasn't he asking for what *I* wanted to share? Why my razor? I had kind of splurged and gotten a nice one, and I didn't particularly feel like sharing it. All these thoughts were

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on a collision course with the passage I had read from James earlier that morning:

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? . . .

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. . . .

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

JAMES 2:5, 8, 14-16

With the verses from James ringing in my ears, I told Junior to hang on a minute. Reluctant in my spirit but willing in my flesh, I walked from my front door to my bathroom and got him my fancy green razor. Once back at the door, I handed it over to him, and along with the razor I surrendered a bit of my immature entitlement. Having done my duty, I went back to my desk to continue writing lessons and letters.

I occasionally peeked out the window to my front-porch steps to see how his shaving was going. He didn't have water

or soap or shaving cream, all things I considered requirements for a proper shave. Curiosity got the best of me, and I went outside to check on him.

“How’s it going, Junior?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m fine, Ms. Lisa,” he replied while wiping the razor on his sweatshirt.

“Do you want some water or something?”

“Oh, yes ma’am, that would be very nice. Junior would appreciate it.” I had grown accustomed to and fond of the way he commonly referred to himself in the third person.

“Here you go, Junior,” I said as I returned with a cup of water and sat it next to him on the porch steps, ready to return inside.

“Do you know how to shave?” he followed up.

“Well, Junior, I guess so, but I’ve never shaved a person’s face.” I responded slowly and nervously.

“Will you shave my face?” he replied, unfazed by my lack of experience and obvious trepidation.

“Um. I guess so,” was the best response I could muster as I sat down next to him on my front-porch steps and began to shave his face.

My nervousness wore off quickly because I could tell he trusted me, and somehow, I sensed that I could trust him too. I shaved his face carefully so as not to injure or harm him. I shaved his face carefully because there was something about those moments that felt truly sacred.

We had a great conversation while we sat on the steps. He shared what it was like growing up as an African American in

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Lake Charles, Louisiana, in the 1930s. He recounted stories of his mom and him sharecropping throughout Louisiana and Arkansas. I discovered that he lived a few blocks away in a boarding house. Curious how he made ends meet, I asked about his income and learned that he had been on disability for many years before now receiving regular Social Security checks. I learned that he could read, though not well. I learned that his mom had died in Fresno not far from where we were sitting. As I was finishing up his shave, I asked my neighbor-turning-friend, “Junior, when is your birthday?” His response came quickly and joyfully, “December the 25th.”

“Really? December 25th?” I asked, surprised and excited.

“Yes, that’s right. Junior’s birthday is December 25th,” he confirmed.

“Do you know who you share a birthday with, Junior?” I replied.

“Yes, I share a birthday with Jesus,” he responded confidently.

There was a Jesus-ness about Junior that was undeniable. Perhaps it took the coincidence of a shared birthday to force to the surface of my consciousness the profound truth revealed in Jesus’ words from Matthew 25:40: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” When I took time to care for Junior, an aged, materially poor man with a mental disability, it was as if I were taking care of Jesus. How that works out theologically, I may not fully understand. What I do know is that

Jesus has chosen to tether his identity to those who are poor and on the margins. When we encounter the least of these, we find Jesus, but oftentimes we must fix our eyes to see past his “distressing disguise.”¹

Junior and I remained friends for several more years. Despite my excellent shaving skills, he never asked me to shave his face again, though I would have in a heartbeat. Most times he asked for work, for food, or for money. Sometimes I met his needs, and other times I didn't. With each response, I tried to be faithful to Jesus. Some days when Junior came by, he didn't ask for anything. He simply wanted to visit and share friendship.

Junior wasn't a teacher just to me; he taught all the students and interns who came through the program. He never expounded the Scriptures. He never lectured about how to effectively love the poor. He showed up, and we learned. We fumbled forward together.

Late into his days on earth, Junior taught us how to love the sick and dying. He contracted cancer, and his body began to wither. We took him to doctors' appointments when he remembered to tell us about them. We cooked meals for him. We let him rest on our couches when he needed a cool, safe place to be comfortable in the Fresno summer heat. We prayed for him and sang the songs he asked us to sing when he was suffering and in pain. Eventually, when he became too frail to walk up the steps to his second-floor home, we carried him in our arms. We carried him because in so many ways he had carried us through the years. He had carried us out of

our selfishness and entitlement. He had carried us out of a frenetic pace of busyness. He had carried us into greater generosity, deeper presence, and more meaningful relationship.

Who Is Worthy?

The breezy corridor of the small hospital in Nigeria where I worked was where I had my first encounter with Ruth.² I was immediately impressed by her strength and beauty. It wasn't so much her physical attributes that stood out to me, but more her sense of resolve and courage that shone through her eyes and smile as she ministered to the patients.

Ruth, like many “least of these,” lives within intersections of vulnerability. She is a widow, she is poor, she is a single mom, and she lives positively with HIV. Her story, though marked with tragedy, also echoes with the beauty of redemption.

Ruth lived a relatively stable, middle-class life. She had a good education. She found love and was married. Together she and her husband had a son. Ruth was a faithful, good wife and mother. Years into marriage and motherhood, she began experiencing prolonged sicknesses that eventually led her to be tested for HIV. Her positive diagnosis was devastating not only because of its health consequences but also for its social ramifications. It revealed her husband's infidelity. Despite her own faithfulness, Ruth now carried a disease that he contracted from another lover and passed on to her.

Her husband's health declined more quickly than hers. His HIV deteriorated into AIDS and eventually took his life.

When this happened, Ruth's suffering increased exponentially. As was a fairly common custom, her in-laws blamed her for her husband's death and subsequently stripped her of everything. Her car, her home (including all her possessions), and most devastatingly, her son were all taken from her. She was left with nothing but anguish, the stigma of HIV, and a body wasting away with disease.

By God's grace, her story doesn't end with shame and destitution. A confluence of circumstances that included a Nigerian Christian doctor, a program implemented by then President George W. Bush, and a local hospital/clinic that restored hope through medical and social support groups provided Ruth with not only the medications she needed to recover but the affirmation of her dignity and value regardless of her disease status. The community surrounded her with hope and tangible assistance. She learned valuable job skills and after some time took on a pastoral role in her community. Her relationship with her son was also eventually reestablished.

The strength and beauty that welled up from her sense of dignity and purpose resulted from being seen by a God who is near to and identifies with the brokenhearted. Moreover, those who took seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:36, "I was sick and you looked after me," made it possible for me to know Ruth and bear witness to the beautiful redemption story that played out in her life.

Even as I convey Ruth's story, I am aware of the risk of sharing it.

Though it poses no danger to her, it runs the risk of being

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overlooked and squandered. Her story is centered in a place that is incredibly distant for most of us. Her sickness is one that perhaps still carries a stigma for some since it is primarily transmitted through sexual contact. A faraway place combined with a somewhat controversial sickness is a perfect recipe for disregard.

But, friend, disregard and distance aren't options for those of us who are members of one body (1 Corinthians 12:12). We are reminded by Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church, "God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Corinthians 12:24-26). Ruth is a neighbor who cannot be disregarded. She is a part of the body of Christ, and her story is our story.

If we will have eyes to see Ruth as a neighbor, then surely we can see those in our own communities who, like Ruth, are among the least of these and deserving of God's care and concern. The intersections of vulnerability in Ruth's story of poverty, loss, and infirmity are intersections we come across daily in the lives of people who are near to us. We have Ruths in our midst. You have Ruths in your midst: in your church, in your office, on your block.

Who knows but that the Ruths in your life will not only serve as a vehicle for you to be God's love to them but also for your own life to be transformed? The truth is that we are renewed and liberated together, and our redemption is

bound up with one another's through the work of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection. We are bound together, and we need one another.

Will we have eyes to see and hearts courageous enough to respond? Can we hold space for those both proximate and distant? Will we be moved to action on behalf of those who have sicknesses that hold stigma and those who don't hold stigma? Rather than determining the "least of these" as worthy or unworthy based on our personal criteria, the question is *Will we be found worthy of the high calling we have received in Jesus to demonstrate God's compassionate care for the vulnerable?*

The Dusty Jericho Road

It was the middle of dry season when I met Pablo.³ I still remember the dusty roads leading up to the compound where he had been staying as an asylum seeker just south of the US border in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Upon arriving, our group walked around the property that had once been a school. Small, bright-yellow cement buildings with green trim and green roofs were spaced out around a vast field of dirt and dust. Those small buildings once housed children who had come to school to learn. There was a playground of sorts in the center. It was bordered by semicircle tire remnants that had lost their vibrant pink, yellow, and blue paint colors. The tires were placed on their ends and secured firmly into the ground so that the children would know the bounds of the field and could enjoy the challenge of jumping from

one tire top to the next. Two seesaws, one swing set, and two soccer goals made an otherwise giant dust patch a play place for the children who had journeyed with their families *al norte* (to the north).

After walking around the property, we were ushered into a dimly lit room with white-and-black-checked tile floors and metal folding chairs arranged in a circle. Children's drawings hung around the room like clinging promises of hope. They were signs of both resistance to and defiance against even the darkest of despairs. Emily Dickinson wrote, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers - / That perches in the soul - / And sings the tune without the words - / and never stops - at all -." ⁴ The coloring pages of the migrant children had hope feathers, and they adorned the walls of that dimly lit room.

We were introduced to Pablo, a young man in his twenties. There was kindness in his face, though it was obvious that he had traveled a long, hard road.

Pablo chronicled his story through our translator. He was supporting a political candidate who was running against a long-time corrupt leader. One tragic day he witnessed the beating and attempted violation of a young girl by members of the opposing politician's staff. He intervened to save her. He immediately began to receive threats. His older brother, who joined him in supporting the new political candidate, suffered a brutal, near-death beating at the hands of supporters of the corrupt politician. Pablo began to also receive threats against his wife and children, and he knew he must leave in order to keep them safe. His

wife was pregnant at the time. Amid her own grief at the tremendous loss she would experience, she posed a perfectly human and still agonizing question: “Why did you have to intervene when they were hurting that little girl? You didn’t even know her.” Pablo responded, “If I had a daughter, I would want someone to do for her what I did for that child. I would want someone to step in. I would want her to be protected.”

Torn between the awful realities of endangering their lives with his presence or living without those he loved most dearly in this life, he did the unimaginable. Pablo said goodbye to his wife and two young sons. He made his way north with a letter from the political leader he supported that affirmed the endangerment of his life. This was his greatest proof of being a political asylee.

Upon arriving at the US southern border, Pablo requested asylum and was ordered to return to Mexico to await his immigration hearings. This immediate denial of admittance to an asylum seeker was due to a policy called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPPs) that required nearly all asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while awaiting their court dates. They were legally not allowed to work and faced extremely dangerous conditions at the border. The National Immigration Forum explains:

A Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) report found that 75% of migrants returned to Mexico under MPP had been a victim of an attempted kidnapping, and

nearly 80% of migrants enrolled in MPP that were treated by an MSF mental health clinic at the border had been the victim of violence.⁵

As dusty and desolate as it was, being at this migrant shelter was a blessing for Pablo. While he experienced occasional minor violence at the hands of locals, he had the comfort of a roof over his head and the safety of four solid walls to sleep within. Many other migrants were in far more vulnerable situations, living in tents under bridges and along busy streets in Ciudad Juárez. Still, the days were long and difficult, waiting, wondering, hoping, and living in the liminal space of unbelonging. He didn't belong in Mexico, he no longer belonged in Guatemala, and he was wondering if he could belong in America.

Pablo had been in touch with his wife a few times during his months-long stay at the shelter. She missed him desperately and longed for his return. His court date was three weeks from the time of my team's visit. He concluded his story and pleaded for us to be praying for a positive outcome to his court hearing. Finally, he shared that his wife had given birth. To a daughter.

The journey from Central American countries to the US southern border is a modern-day Jericho Road. Often those who travel it are desperate and feel forced to choose between tremendously difficult circumstances. The promise of potential, with no guarantees of prosperity or security, merely the possibility of them, is sufficient reason for the thousands of

migrants who journey north. I don't know the outcome of Pablo's case. It's almost certain he was denied asylum despite the endangerment to his life.

Imagine for a moment, however, if Pablo had made it through our borders either with or without authorization. What if he showed up in your community? Would you see him? How would you perceive him? What internal resistances surface for you as you imagine Pablo in your context?

God's preferential concern for the poor and the immigrant is clear in Scripture. We are to love them as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:34). The pressing question is *What does love look like? How does it take action?* Love is nothing if it is merely sentimental. God did not love us sentimentally from a distance, with no action or consequence. He loved sacrificially in and through the person of Jesus.

Options abound for ways to demonstrate a faithful Christian response to the Pablos in our communities and at our borders. You can demonstrate hospitality and welcome by supporting organizations that work with migrant shelters just south of the border. Taking a learning trip to the border to visit these organizations would be an even more tangible and transformative experience.

In reality, very few of us are proximate to the border, and proximity matters to our discipleship and our witness. Faithfulness can look like volunteering to teach English or provide childcare for parents learning English after arriving in our country. Solidarity can take the form of helping those who need trustworthy lawyers find good legal

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counsel or connecting the newly arrived to resettlement and immigrant support agencies like World Relief, Lutheran Social Services, and Catholic Charities. Further actions could involve gaining a deeper understanding of the US immigration system and its need for comprehensive and fair reform, then taking steps to advocate for that type of reform. On a local level, helping ensure adequate ESL services are provided for immigrant children in school systems would be a representation of God's love and concern for these vulnerable neighbors.

We are God's hands and feet in this world. When we demonstrate biblical hospitality (*philoxenia*), literally love of strangers, we are told in Hebrews that we may be entertaining angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2). There are Pablos in our communities. There are Pablos still awaiting permission to make their way to our communities. As Christians, it is our duty and privilege to care for our immigrant and refugee neighbors. How will you see and respond to this beautiful responsibility and opportunity? When we consider the question *Who is my neighbor?*, do we see immigrants as our neighbors? Do we also see beyond our borders and recognize as our neighbors those who come in migrant caravans, those who live in tents under the bridges just on the other side of the Rio Grande?

God's eyes do not see the Rio Grande or any other border as the delineation between "neighbor" and "not neighbor." As people who have set our hearts on the ways of God and being fashioned increasingly in the likeness of Christ, we

are invited to see with God's eyes and love our immigrant neighbors as ourselves. In this way, the power of God's love is demonstrated to those in need and we are transformed by our encounters with the stranger we invite in (Matthew 25:43).

Dismantling the Barriers

The "least of these" are all around us. What's more, they *are* us. When we engage in acts of compassion, we take steps toward centering the margins. Father Greg Boyle says it this way: "Compassion isn't just about feeling the pain of others; it's about bringing them in toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then, in compassion, margins get erased. 'Be compassionate as God is compassionate,' means the dismantling of barriers that exclude."⁶

Will we be those who dismantle the barriers of exclusion? Will we see the least of these as our neighbors and love them? Where will you begin? How can you meet and serve Jesus in even his most distressing disguises?