

Read gospel in English. Introduce Joel. Joel reads gospel in Spanish.

I have a picture of God in my mind and even thought I know it's not true I always picture Jesus speaking English when he was on earth. Hearing scripture read in another language, like Joel did in Spanish today, gives me a fuller picture of God. John had created a picture of what the Messiah should look like and when Jesus **doesn't** look like or do what John had expected John feels disappointed, maybe even anger. Many Jews in Jesus' time created a picture of a Messiah that would redeem Israel from Roman oppression. Rome occupies Israel, there are vast social inequities between the few with wealth and stature and the many who **don't** have those things. The Jews picture a Messiah that frees them from Rome's oppression. What Jesus has been doing was miraculous—raising the dead, giving sight to the blind—but it **wasn't** the picture they had created so they ask, "Should we look elsewhere?" They say, "This **doesn't** look like the kingdom of heaven. This still looks like the kingdom of **Rome**." My experience is that at times I'm like John asking, "Where is the kingdom? Where is my version of what I want God to **do**?"

Joel you grew up in a Christian home, you went to a Lutheran school, have you ever found that the world around you **isn't** matching up with your picture of what God is like?

Joel: Yah, growing up it was mom, dad and my three brothers. My house had expectations you needed to follow. Part of that was go to college get married and have your first kid by 22 years old and do work that

serves God—my dad was a pastor and my brother is a professor at a Lutheran College. My picture of how God was supposed to work in your life was clear, although I internally questioned, I was really good at knowing how to get all the praise—in High School I got all the good grades, did really well at sports and theater. But two sets of experiences really shook my picture of God. First, a few weeks after I graduated from high school my brother was diagnosed with brain cancer and four months later, September 16, 2001, he died. This was a shock wave in my family, we all coped in our own ways, but I put my time into my friendships at college and increasingly I used my Spanish skills. I started working with the immigrant community at a local church and giving rides and also studying teaching. I had always believed but there was this experience of being gripped by something stronger than myself.

Over the years of college I was still largely living in that picture of God that was created in my childhood and adolescence and as I neared the end of my undergrad I learned of an opportunity to go to Columbia and teach in a church school—this was totally part of that picture, in fact while down there I started seriously dating a woman and my parents came down and met her. But all the while I was teaching these students—God created you. You are loved and awesome. You are your best when **you're** being yourself—I knew I **wasn't** living what I was telling these kids and what I believed. Ever sense about first grade I knew I was gay, but I also knew my church **didn't** have gay as part of their picture of God, gay was a sin, so I lied. And I could do that because I knew that was the path of least resistance I knew, then I would fit in

and that they would love me, but you can't lie to kids and I knew if I had kids and one day they asked me, "Dad, are you gay?" and all the while I'd been telling them, "God love you and God made you wonderfully. You are special and you need to live what God created you to be." It was like Jesus told John I'm giving sight to the blind, don't you see the amazing miracles around you. I saw. My picture of God changed.

Thank you, Joel - that's a powerful story. I can only imagine that not telling people who you were, was very hard but also then when you told people you met with lots of closed doors. One of the things we've been talking a lot about here at Peace in the last months is the power of conversation. The power of listening to people that we might not agree with but still loving them and treating them with all the love that Jesus showed people. You being vulnerable and sharing your story has created a holy space here. Thank you.

One of the other things we have been talking about the last couple of weeks is Kara Powell's book *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. This week as I was reading I had my own Jesus and John moment; a time where I heard Jesus saying, "I'm giving sight to the blind and raising the dead— why don't you see?" It was a story that did it: Ariana craved a sense of belonging, her parents were divorced and the conflict between them consumed much of their emotion. Ariana's emotional abandonment became physical when due to her immigration status her mom was deported back to Costa Rica. Through her church, Ariana came face to face with

empathy in a human form. Denise was a single mom who felt like she could relate to Ariana. When Denise heard about a cheerleading competition Ariana had she went and sat in the stands. Ariana was so touched she began texting Denise prayer requests. Soon they started sharing meals and Denise did her best to make it to all of Ariana's cheerleading.

For most high school seniors, prom is something looked forward to, but Ariana was dreading it. Since her mom wasn't around, she had no one to go shopping with her and to help her with hair and makeup. Denise had taken enough steps toward Ariana that Ariana decided to take a big risk; she asked Denise to help her. Denise cleared her schedule, found a babysitter for her own daughter and the two shopped all the local secondhand stores until they found the perfect dress. What could have been a time for despair for Ariana was transformed into a time of delight. On Prom night, Denise went over to finesse hair and makeup and Ariana's mom joined them by video conference, Skype. Ariana's mom, through tears, thanked Denise for being there, for being "mom" for prom. This story refocused my picture, it gave sight to my blindness. Reading Kara's book I have been thinking this is about Peace, about helping young people discover and love Peace, but it's not about Peace it's about the young people, it's about the people who aren't here yet. What I love about Jesus, what has changed my life about Jesus, is that amazingly radical miraculous love and having experienced that love, nothing can be more awesome then to have the privilege and joy to love like that. I want to be a part of a Jesus-group of radical lovers. At the core of the church, at the core of the my faith is Love God

and love others. Faith can be complicated, but it is also that simple.

Joel as I watch you interact with people I know that loving Jesus and loving others is at the core of who you are. How do you live that out in your everyday life as a kindergarten teacher? I mean, when the rubber hits the road, what does Jesus' love do to you and look like in your public school classroom?

Joel: I work very hard to get all the kids reading and loving math and science, but at the end of the day at the end of the year if kids can know and say, "I'm special. I'm valuable for being **me**." If they can know I care about them....

Wow, that is powerful and joyful message. I'm so grateful for the way you live out **Jesus'** love and make, my **daughters'** school a fun, safe and loving place and how that work and your life is making this world a better place, more trustworthy place all. Joel, thank you for sharing your story this morning. Amen.