

Accompaniment: Witnessing God's Unconditional Love

Lisa Beech

"We need to show care for all life and for the life of everyone and thus to reveal the original and unconditional love of God, the source of the meaning of all life"
– Samaritanus Bonus

I know intellectually about God's compassionate and unconditional love. I believe it but I don't always feel it for myself. One of the joys of accompanying people in times of struggle is experiencing and witnessing God's love for them, which they also can't always feel and experience themselves.

Often at such times different Biblical accounts come to life for me – the loving Father running out to welcome his lost son before a word of apology is spoken; Christ inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner before any words of repentance are heard. At these times I experience the person of Jesus who described himself as coming not for the healthy but for the sick. I get to be a first-hand witness to the way in which God's unconditional love often precedes the change in people's hearts.

One time I experienced this was with a family at a Benefit Impact event, where benefit advocates gather to assist beneficiaries at a Work and Income office. This family had been waiting for some hours when I was asked to be their advocate – the father on crutches and the daughter in a wheelchair, supported by the mother who was working part-time while receiving some benefit income.

It became obvious that medical and disability costs ate into every area of their tiny household budget. A quick glance at their benefit print-out showed they were receiving little disability allowance and were repaying a large amount of debt. I felt confident putting this situation before the Work and Income case manager.

It turned out that the case manager had personal understanding of the family's medical conditions and asked both delicate and blunt questions which revealed needs I had never considered. The exhausted mother shared with intense embarrassment that her husband's and daughter's incontinence meant she had to handwash bedding and bed clothes several times a day. The large debt the family had was the result of a charge of benefit fraud when she had earned additional income which she hadn't declared. Her hands shook as she shared this, and she covered her face to hide her shame.

The case manager put through recommendations for increased disability allowance, as well as for assistance for a washing machine, additional bedding, and other equipment they needed. Then she surprised me, saying loudly, "Your advocate is insisting that all of this assistance is non-recoverable." It hadn't occurred to me to ask that the assistance was supplied as a grant rather than a loan. I jumped at the hint and said, "Yes, we expect this is non-recoverable," and the recommendation was accepted by her manager.

As we walked away from the desk, the mother asked if they

really didn't have to pay it back, and I said casually, without really thinking about the words I chose, "Yes, you had a great case manager, God was with us today." And she broke down and burst into tears, standing in the middle of the Work and Income office sobbing, "God doesn't care about us, we're sinners, we've committed benefit fraud."

God's love for her and her family was suddenly so vivid to me that it was as though the sun came out just to shine on them. Her skin seemed to glow with it. It seemed to me that I was looking into the burning bush, hearing God's voice saying *I have heard my people cry*.

At first, I didn't know how to tell her. She was still hiding her face and her tears from me. I could see that she couldn't feel the love that surrounded her, that seemed to fill the room. I felt my first words were stumbling, inadequate. "No, no, please, you have to know that God loves you."

The queue of beneficiaries waiting to see benefit advocates was long, and the organisers were keen to assign me to another family. But I had to wave them aside, to sit down with the sobbing, shaking mother. She told me she had been too ashamed to speak to anyone in her church or her family about her conviction for benefit fraud, and how it was only desperation that had driven her to the Work and Income Office that day. She spoke of being too ashamed to pray, to ask God for forgiveness.

Again, I stuttered and stumbled over the words, trying to explain to her how clearly I felt God's love for her and her family, how God saw and understood her poverty, how God forgave her, how God loved her for her care for her husband and daughter.

I think if I had been glib and smooth, she may not have believed me. But my struggle to explain to her what I was experiencing seemed to get through to her. Finally, she lifted her head and looked me in the eyes and said, "Well, I don't feel that God loves me, but I feel that you know God loves me." And she thanked me and left.

I tried to call her that evening, but the phone number she had given me was disconnected. I've long wanted to thank her, especially in those times when I am overcome by shame and a feeling that God's love is far from me.

We are meant to accompany each other. Faithful accompaniment involves us looking deeply into the eyes and heart of a person rather than focusing on what they may have done. Faithful accompaniment involves us seeing ourselves and others as God sees us. Sometimes I can see God's love for another person when they can't, and sometimes another person can see God's love for me when I can't. God didn't make us as isolated individuals, but as a community. God brings us to God through each other.

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