

[Imago Dei](#)

I love this story, and I included it in an essay on failure I wrote for *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*. I think it portrays Jeremiah 29:7—“seek the peace of the city.” It is a modern example of the way seeking peace leads to the spiritual and relational growth as demonstrated by Julian the Apostate’s complaint: “The religion of the Greeks does not yet prosper as I would wish....Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause?....For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [the name given by Julian to Christians] support our poor in addition to their own”

(<http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Julian.html>).

First, Donald Miller's perspective in *Blue Like Jazz* (pp. 134-136). After moving to Portland he started looking for a church to attend. As he prayed, a friend put him in touch with Rick McKinley who was starting a new church. [Note: The use of “fruit nuts” here might be jarring taken out of the context of the book. Guess you’ll just have to read the whole thing.]

[Rick] invited me to come. I could feel God was answering my prayer so I went. There were only about eight of us, mostly kids, mostly teens just out of high school. I felt like I was at a youth group, honestly. I didn’t think the thing was going to fly....

Pretty soon there were twenty or so of us, so we got this little chapel at a college near downtown and started having church....

We didn’t grow much, to be honest. We stayed at about thirty or so, all Christians who had moved to Imago from other churches. I know that numbers shouldn’t matter very much, but to be honest I kind of wanted Imago to grow because I wanted my friends at my old church to know we were successful; but we didn’t grow, we stayed at about thirty.

We’d meet on Sunday nights and then again on Wednesday nights for prayer....One night Rick showed up....and asked us if we thought we needed to repent and start loving people who were very different from us. We all told him yes, we did, but I don’t think any of us knew what that meant. Rick said he thought it meant we should live missional lives, that we should intentionally befriend people who are different from us. I didn’t like the sound of that, to be honest. I didn’t want to befriend somebody just to trick them into going to my church. Rick said that was not what he was talking about. He said he was talking about loving people just because they exist—homeless people and Gothic people and gays and fruit nuts. And then I liked the sound of it. I liked the idea of loving people just to love them, not to get them to come to church. If the subject of church came up, I could tell them about Imago, but until then, who cared. So we started praying every week that God would teach us to live missional lives, to notice people who needed to be loved.

Lots of people started coming to church after that. I don’t know why, honestly, except that we all agreed we would love people and be nice to them and listen and make friends. As we grew, we had to move into another building and then another one after that and then to another one until....All of this happened in a couple years, and now Imago has about five hundred people coming and lots of them look like rock stars, but they are brilliant and spiritual. I love the community so much it’s hard to describe. I have never felt such a feeling of family in

all my life. I felt like I had nothing in terms of community and God brought a community up out of the ground, out of pure nothing like a magic trick.

To read about the four things Donald likes about Imago—spirituality, art, community & authenticity—see pages 136-137.

And now Pastor Rick McKinley's perspective from *This Beautiful Mess: Practicing the Presence of the Kingdom of God* (pp. 50-53; underline added for emphasis):

One of the biggest challenges to following Jesus into His kingdom is not a lack of direction but a lack of desire. Most of us didn't really want to do it.

When the Imago Dei community numbered only about twenty and we were still meeting in a borrowed basement, it became pretty apparent to me that this was our problem. We didn't "want to," and not because we didn't understand what God was calling us to either. What part of loving your enemies or embracing a child is confusing? We knew what to do, but we couldn't bring ourselves to act.

We realized that if we wanted to live out the kingdom, we would need to get our hearts before God. Only His Spirit can create spiritual desire. As pastor, I couldn't make anyone in our little group, let alone myself, want the kingdom. We needed God to change us.

One night in the borrowed church, I got up and announced that we would start meeting each Wednesday night to repent and pray for Portland (not the coolest thing to invite your friends to). I printed out lists of every need I could think of in the city. The next Wednesday evening, we sat in a circle and prayed about those things. We had just enough desire to show up, pray, and get honest--and that's what we told God.

Things got honest real fast. "I hate my neighbor," one person prayed. "I don't think I love you, God," said another. We told God that we wanted to care, but didn't--not really. We told Him we were afraid to follow Him completely because we didn't want to look like idiots; we didn't want to risk losing our comforts. Of course, we were confessing realities most of us knew, but we'd been *just good enough* church folk not to say them aloud.

Week after week in that basement, we prayed for Portland and told God the truth about our own hearts. For six months we prayed. *Would anything change?* I wondered. *Was I failing as a church planter?* Bit by bit, degree by degree, we hauled on the steering wheel to our spiritual ship and waited to see what God would do.

Gradually something happened. I felt it. We all did. Something in us was turning. For the first time we were experiencing an authentic "want to." No gimmicks or games or seven steps. No flashy programs. But with God's help, we were beginning to embark on a new way of being and of seeing the world....

What if you found your own borrowed basement—anyplace where in solidarity with others you could seek His kingdom and His righteousness first? What if you started praying for the things around you that break His heart—even if they don't break yours yet? Ask him to show you the obvious needs you've been missing. Tell God the truth about your fears and desires.

Wait on Him. And hold on for the turning.

Imago Dei has continued to grow through love and service. Learn more on their website:
<http://www.imagodeicommunity.com/>.