

Missional Marker #4

Transforming Communities through Active Compassion and Justice

By Peter Sjoblom

Juan and Franky are brothers. They grew up in Humboldt Park in the mid seventies. They attended a church on the near northwest side and were involved in several different ministries I had the privilege of working with.

They were both quite charming, each in their own way. Franky was the quiet one, a deep thinker. Juan was Mr. Charisma, always quick with the word and a joke, very engaging. I had known them and their family for several months when I was startled by the news that they were both incarcerated on a Juvenile charge of murder.

I attended the trial, which seemed less like a trial and more like a business deal. Though Juan and Franky sat in the courtroom, most of the conversation centered around the district attorney and the public defender. A plea deal had been reached which placed both boys in juvenile detention centers till they turned 21.

Though they said they didn't do the shooting, none of this was brought out at the trial. The assumption was that they were part of an ongoing gang war in a gang infested community.

I last visited them in the St Charles juvenile intake center where they were processed for a couple of months before being sent to Hannah City correctional facility downstate. I lost track of them after that.

I didn't know either well enough to vouch for their innocence or guilt. But as I visited them in St. Charles I was keenly aware that 80% of all the youth there were African American or Hispanic. I could envision most coming from the same chaotic environment that Juan and Franky knew.

My worldview was shaped by a gospel which saw their predicament a result of their own bad choices. Had they stayed clean, hung out with the right people, obeyed the authorities, worked hard in school, and sought to better themselves, their story may have been different. On several occasions, as young boys, they had received Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, more an appeasement of the young adult leaders in the various ministries they were connected with than a deep spiritual encounter.

What I was just beginning to learn at the time was that my own environment and upbringing had created a worldview in me that was unable to truly understand the dynamics that were Juan and Franky's formation. I read everything through this grid. As a white evangelical I sensed this difference but never really put words to it.

In their book, *Divided By Faith*, Christian Smith and Michael Emerson explained this as the "white evangelical toolkit". It is summed up by these three markers.

1. Accountable, freewill individualism
2. Anti-structuralism
3. Relationalism

I've always understood that when you place an "ism" on the end of almost any idea you turn it into a religion. This religion served me quite well. It created a narrative which explained my formation as a good law abiding person, and gave me a gospel which would center itself in the private lives of personal responsibility.

But as I grew older and spent time with Christians who did not share in this upbringing they began to add a new dimension to my worldview. For them the world did not work quite the same way. Though all held to a belief in personal responsibility they confronted me with the concept that it is easier to adopt my worldview when the environment and structures around me supported it. When poverty, joblessness, substandard education, and hopelessness prevail, trying to adopt the white evangelical toolkit was frustrating to say the least.

So, though I saw the plight of the Juan and Franky's of this world as a result of bad choices on their part, I began to see that assigning blame wasn't that simple.

If our concept of sin is simply bad behavior and wrong individual choices then the moralists of the world have the key to salvation. Let's just clean up our act and we can find our way into God's favor. But, that is not gospel. Jesus knew that the moralists had no answer because the foundation of peoples struggle is not personal behavior. It is a condition. The condition of sin is what Jesus came to put to death on the cross.

That condition, system or structure is at the heart of our self centered world. In this world all things are co-causal. They all interact with winners and losers. It is not enough that our gospel deals only with the personal behaviors which alienate us from others and God. God in Christ put to death the very condition of sin which taints our environment. We in the church, called to the same gospel, are to deal with the systems which create the environments in which selfishness flourishes to make justice the centerpiece of God's eternal Kingdom.

I pray that Juan and Franky have found their peace with God. I also pray that the church would be sensitive to creating the environment of grace which allows hope to flourish in the places and situations where the Juan and Franky's of this world are growing up.

Shalom