

So you want to be a missionary? You want to pray for a missionary? You want to live like a missionary in your own neighborhood? I've got some bad news.

MISSIONS SUCKS

By Christine Jeske

Yaya lives on a mountain in Nicaragua. Her deceased husband built her two-room home out of palm leaves, flattened metal barrels, and scraps of chain-sawed wood. Her children all died or moved to Costa Rica to find work, and she raises four grandchildren, ages five through fourteen. The oldest, Rebecca, dropped out of school without passing first grade, and though they can all make tortillas, saddle a horse, and scale a mango tree, none of the kids can compute math problems as simple as nineteen plus two. In one year their horse went lame, their house was robbed, and doctors removed a tumor from Yaya's neck.

I visited Yaya nearly every day that year. Sometimes it took every ounce of resolve I could muster just to climb the two minute walk to their home and smile as I ducked into their smoky kitchen. I tutored Rebecca. I bounced the children on my knees and let them tug my hair and beg for presents until their cuteness wore off. I harvested their beans, shaped their tortillas, and ate the bananas they offered me stolen from a rich neighbor's land. I lent them more money than most of their neighbors spent in six months.

Meanwhile the price of coffee, the village's main cash crop, dropped its lowest in twenty years. Villagers struggled to buy basics like sugar, soap, and rice. Yaya got so sick she vomited out her false teeth, bought with her entire savings from one year's coffee picking. I got head lice, amoebas and fleas. I spent a night swabbing wet rags over my husband when he got malaria, watched every single student drop out of my literacy classes and Bible studies, ate rice, beans, and tortillas until I craved even a rotten mango for variety, and hauled buckets of water on my head to save a dying plot of vegetables meant to prove better farming techniques work. All I proved was poverty is a rock to beat our heads against. I went home weeping.

I tell these stories not to earn pity for myself or for anyone like Yaya, and not because I claim to have done anything right. I tell them because I wish I knew a simple truth before I went. I wish I knew that missions sucks.

The myth of the perfect fit

I took one of those personality inventories recently. After graduating with an ambiguous liberal arts major and spending six years trying everything from teaching crocheting in Nicaragua to supervising ex-con alcoholics, I still have no idea what I want to do with my life. Like most of my generation, I've been encouraged to the moon and back. Follow your dreams. You can do it if you try. Globalization connects us all, go anywhere, do anything. Find yourself, find your passion and gifts, put them together and make yourself a delicious cake job of perfect happiness.

So we go, hopping from state to state, job to job, and relationship to relationship, ever searching for the perfect fit that looms just beyond the horizon. We'll earn PhDs,

marry fashion models, hit the top of the executive ladder, teach our children basketball, and be pillars of faith in our churches, sharing the gospel with every coworker.

We'll do all this, and we'll be happy, and the church will be edified, America will be lovely, and Jesus will be with us.

Stop.

Life's not like that. And Jesus isn't like that.

You will suffer. You will suffer.

Read Jesus' words and hear him practically screaming it into his disciples' ears. Listen up! Don't you get it? This is going to be painful! You won't always have free miraculous food. You'll go where you don't want to go. Blessed are the poor, mourning, weak people. Cursed are the happy-powerful-rich-successful. You will suffer.

They'll treat you like me, Jesus said. Jesus was born in a poop-smelling barn. He walked around with twelve people that didn't really get what he was saying most of the time, thousands more who tugged his clothes and begged him for stuff day and night, and then, well, you know how it ended. He got beat up and ripped to death.

That's what it's about folks.

I know you've heard of "suffering for Christ," and maybe even heard there's more to it than getting weird looks from your coworker when you mention going to Bible studies. Yes, it's more than that. It's the whole story.

If you're not going to volunteer unless you find the perfect match for all your gifts and personality glitches, you'll never leave your couch. If you're thinking about leaving your job, your volunteer post in your church, or your neighborhood because it doesn't

“feel right,” ask yourself whether you’ll ever find something that “feels right” on this earth. Jesus did carpentry in a podunk village for forty years, and I’m sure he did fine work, but I doubt any Christian personality inventory would have told him it was a good use of his gifts, and I doubt it felt right.

What lurks behind your door

We generally only sort of believe in wrong. We know we have rough days, when everything “goes wrong,” like we fail a geometry quiz or drop ketchup on our new sweatshirt. But let’s open our eyes. There’s worse.

You’ve felt it. You’ve been hurt to the core, and if you’ve looked you’ve seen other people getting hurt like that, too. If you’ve kept looking, you’ve seen all across the planet the one consistent thing is hurt. There are more starving people in this world than cows in Wisconsin, more alcoholics than oranges in Florida, and more babies crying for a healthy meal than coffee shops in Oregon.

This world, if you look, is full of muck. Country music, tragic movies, whatever it is that touches your heart and says maybe you should cry, well, it’s true. There’s reason out there.

When someone asked Mother Teresa how she reacts to the terrible injustices she sees in her work, she returned, “The injustices are there for everyone to see.” Look and we will see.

But usually we don’t look.

My husband’s office is in our home. Every day people come in and out for meetings, and through the door I hear him happily chatting. I stop in to find him staring

peacefully at a computer screen. He leaves a fan on most of the day, and often no sound passes the opposite direction, from my side of the door.

If he could hear, my side of the door would sound far different from his. My infant son wails as I change his diaper and my daughter begs me for tape to fix the library book she tore. I vacuum cereal off the carpet while my daughter smashes a pillow over her brother's face.

Don't you know I'm here? On some of the worst, most sleep deprived days I can't help staring at that office door with a mixture of envy and hate.

I'm not saying motherhood is the only job involving unnoticed suffering, or even anywhere near the worst. Fortunately, my husband usually does care. I'm one of the lucky ones, having somebody who cares what I need.

Lots of people don't have that.

We've seen them on television. The belly-bloated baby whose mother hikes across deserts or picks through trash to find food. The woman down the street who left home with ten dollars in her pocket to keep her kids safe from their drunken dad. We see them on the news—hurricane Katrina and whatever the latest world crisis. But there's more than the latest news. The needs are continual, the solutions more complex than sending blankets and teddy bears in care packages.

There are needs that require a lifetime to solve.

And that's what Jesus gave. A life. His life. And that's what he asks.

The good news

There is good news. In fact there is good news only because there's such bad news. The good news is that Jesus is the ultimate missionary, rolling up his pant legs and stepping into the muckiest muck of life, touching it and somehow making it clean spotless beautiful. That's who we're working with as missionaries, and without him we're nothing.

Nothing about Jesus makes sense unless you can believe there is wrong in this world. Everything about Jesus makes sense when you know life sucks. Missions, or any place anybody is confronting the real world with the real Truth of living for Jesus, is a clashing of hope against hopelessness.

Why on earth did Jesus say, "Blessed are the *poor*?" Poverty sucks! Lots of things in life suck, from being an unappreciated housewife to working in a cubicle, to cleaning vomit off a bar floor. Being a Christian doesn't get us out of any of those, or at least it shouldn't.

Being a Christian, a Christ-follower, means going with Jesus to the places Jesus is. Jesus is there, at the bottom of the dung heap, with the unsuccessful underprivileged ignored. "I come with good news for you poor, sad, weak, and outlawed people," Jesus was saying. And oh, in the middle of that real life mess, that good news is *good*.

I read the Bible to Yaya sometimes. She begged to hear me read, setting down ash blackened potholders and tortilla dough just to sit and listen. *La palabra de Dios es bueno*, she would whisper. The word of God is good.

Unless we believe in the existence of sin, there's no need for the gospel. Sadly, most of our own culture, maybe Christians more than anyone, seems to only slimly believe in sin. We like to smile and tell success stories. But if we take away suffering

from our lives and from the stories we tell of our lives, we rob the gospel of its power. We rob it from those who know they're suffering.

In Jesus' time they called them Pharisees—the people who thought God loved them best because they had it all together. Today they're the church-goers who smile and say "I'm fine" when their hearts yearn to tell about their pornography addiction and their credit card debt. They're the airbrushed faces on Christian CD covers, the personal counselors telling us to find our fit so we can serve Jesus painlessly.

When everybody you know seems to be at the top, claiming Jesus is there, it's hard to believe he's down here too with the 99% of us who aren't superheroes of our generation. I believe if Jesus warns America still. People are suffering. You will suffer. Go, and suffer with me.

Until you know that, you won't know why this world so desperately, deeply, essentially, intrinsically needs Jesus.