

Reflections on Russia

When Charlie invited me to venture with him to St. Petersburg and visit the orphanages there, I accepted his invitation because I had many questions, even some skepticism about the meaning and purpose of this trip. You can imagine what some of those questions might be, many of them very pessimistic questions about the goals and the fruits of this labor. Charlie and Miki obviously had a passion and love for this ministry. I could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voice when they talked about the children from Russia who had changed their lives so dramatically. But my fear was that the children were not benefiting from us as I had hoped. Like many missionaries throughout history, I measured the success of a mission by the number of lives that were saved, the number of souls that were saved, the number of improvements that we left behind.

When we went to the first children's home, a home for children of all disabilities, both physical and mental, the worry began to creep into my stomach. Their physical and mental conditions were far beyond our reach. I could not make a child walk who suffered from a degenerative spinal disease. I could not teach a child to speak whose mental faculties did not allow him to form any words. I quickly realized that concrete, dramatic results such as these were beyond my power. And I too, fell into the trap that governments and countries of the western world have perfected throughout history: pity. For many years, as communist ideals ruled Russia, it was their pity that locked these children away behind gray walls for decades. It is far too easy to look at the pictures of these children and think, "There is nothing I can do to help them, and there is nothing they can do to help us, so the natural solution is to keep them out of sight and out of mind—avoid them so that we can continue our own struggle for progress and power." It is unfair to say that the government did not pity these children, but it was their pity that led them to segregation—segregate the poor,

the sick, the depressed, because there is no hope for them.

For western countries, such as the United States, pity has only led us to self-glorification. We look at a child who has been deprived of medical care and we say, “If only they lived in America, if only they were like us...” We pity others to prop up our self-righteousness, and we pity others who are different from us, because that strokes our ego and gives us power. But western governments do not practice this alone. Western missionaries have practiced a ministry of pity for centuries. We go to other nations who are not as advanced, not as cultured, not as sophisticated as the refined, Christians of the west. Rather than welcoming them into the family of God, we force our family values upon them. That is why churches throughout Asia look very much like churches in the United Kingdom, or why you can find the Church of Scotland in places like Zambia and Jamaica.

We have practiced a ministry of pity, and when we come face to face with the tragedy of a suffering child, we rely on our pity to direct us. These children must benefit from us. They must grow and prosper in remarkable ways, or any attempt to have a relationship with them is hopeless. That is how we have seen missionary work for hundreds of years. And any attempt to build a relationship with these children will seem pointless for those who believe these children have no worth, except to be pitied.

I have described missionary work in this negative way because I believe it can be different. In Charlie and Miki’s eyes, these children are not there to be pitied, but they have a worth beyond our comprehension. Their ministry is not based on a mission of pity, but a mission of value. Unlike all of those communists and capitalists who judge a person’s worth by how much money they earn, or how much work they can produce, the value that these children have is priceless, because their worth is appraised by the eye of God. Charlie and Miki have built a relationship with these children because they

are children of God who have value. They do not return to Russia time and again because these children depend on their therapy for survival. Truly, the play therapy and the emotional therapy that Charlie and Miki offer is life-changing for them. It exercises their emotional skills, while filling in some of the gaps left by the loss of their families. But they continue to sustain their relationship because these children have great value in the family of faith. They have something to add to the way we understand ourselves and the way that we understand God. When they laugh, and they do laugh, it is like a song that only they can write, and it is an expression of God's presence even in the darkest of valleys. Charlie and Miki practice a ministry of value, valuing those who others have forgotten, finding the diamonds of God's self-expression where the world never considering searching. That is what God always intended ministry to be. For too long we have operated under an assumption that we hold God in a vessel to share with those whom we chose. But God cannot be contained in our ideas of right and wrong, valuable and worthless. Instead ministry should be about searching and finding God in bold new places. In the end, we go to Russia not to bring God in the form of polyester blankets and medical supplies. We go to Russia to meet God where God is already living and breathing in the life and death struggle within these orphanages. We go to meet God there and build relationships with these children, having faith that we can meet God together.

Finally, there are those who may say that we should love our own children, love our own country, love our own kind, and leave the value of these children for others to find. There are plenty of people in the world that we should love, without question. But the boldness of God calls us to love those whom we should not love, to love those who should be forgotten, love those who others isolate. It is one thing to fiercely protect our own children. It is another to reach out our loving arms to the homeless, to the downtrodden, as if *they* were our children. For in God's mind every rock is a

jewel, every speck of sand can be a pearl. So let us be bold and value them, value them because we need them in the family. That is what God intended ministry to be.

-- Brad Clayton