

(X)changed Lives

2 Corinthians 5:21

“Mom and Dad, I have to tell you that I am not who I seem. I have been pretending to be someone that I am not.” These are the words that began the most difficult conversation of my life. There was now such complete honesty that my parents could hear that my voice was different. It had an unfamiliar accent that you could hear was “not from around these parts” even though I had lived here all my life, or so they thought. Their faces were puzzled but cheerful, as if to say, “What is it dear?” The gravity of this conversation had not dawned on them, not yet. Their nonchalant smiles drained away as they realized that this would be no ordinary conversation.

Let me tell you the story.

It began in a place very far from here and years ago. It was war. I was a soldier. They say that the first casualty of war is truth. That may be true, but love must be the second casualty. To survive it seems that you have to hate. You must hate the enemy enough to kill him. You are taught to hate. You must make the enemy less than human or his final grimace will haunt every sleepless night for the rest of your life. If you feel compassion for those you kill, you will go crazy.

And fear. Can I tell you about the fear? It feels like acid in your gut, constantly churning, and gnawing away at all hope and peace. Your world shrinks to the space between your ears. Nothing else seems real, except your fear. The night brings fear, but the dawn brings no relief because you wonder if this is the day that you will die, the day that an unseen bullet will tear through your heart or your head.

Yet one day, a day that dawned like any other, everything changed for me. *It is not that my life was changed; it was that I changed lives.* This is how it happened.

We were fighting house to house in Baghdad. The casualties were high. Many on both sides were dying. Bullets were flying. Grenades were exploding everywhere. Our sergeant had his orders that we should take a particular street. From one house to the next, I would kick the door open, stand to the side, turn quickly into the house and shoot. I had to shoot before the enemy shot me. Would I shoot innocent civilians? That did not really matter. I did not want to die that day.

I went to the next house. The door was ajar. I kicked it HARD and rushed in. The force of the kick made the door hit the wall behind it and bounce back closed behind me. I saw something move. I let the

bullets fly. I heard of voice, “Nooo!” That was English. I had I shot one of our own? My eyes adjusted to the darkness. I had.

My fellow soldier was now slumped to the ground with his shoulders leaning against the wall. I drew closer; I hoped that I had not wounded him too badly. My eyes adjusted further to the dim room. When I looked into his face and fell back at the sight. He looked EXACTLY like me. Was I hallucinating? I looked again. It was like looking into a mirror. Were we twins separated at birth?

I came back to reality. “God, no,” I cried, “I’m sorry . . . I didn’t mean to . . .” I ripped open his uniform to see the bullet wounds. They were bad. I cried out, “Help! In here! I need a medic!” The war raged outside that room. There was no way that I was going to be heard. There was constant gun fire and explosions. There was no way that we were going to get out of the house.

Then with both pain and amazement in his eyes, he looked at me,

“Man, you look just like me. What’s your name?”

“Devon, Devon Black,” I said.

“Where’ya from?”

“LA, south LA.”

“Tough neighborhood?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How’s your family back home?”

“Not much to tell. I haven’t talked to my family for years.”

“Why’s that?”

Now there was a question. The odor of the gunpowder in the room lessened; it was replaced by the smell of blood.” He wasn’t going to make it. I may as well tell him the whole truth.

I began, “Why haven’t we talked? I never knew my dad . . . there were a lot of “dads” passing through my mother’s bedroom when I was a kid. The last one told my Mom that it was *him or me*. My Mom chose him.”

“How could she do that?”

I had nothing to hide from the dying man, so I said, “I didn’t make it easy for my Mom. I was in a gang. I did drugs and dealt drugs. We would fight; I even hit my mother, pretty hard. There wasn’t much that I didn’t do. She couldn’t do anything with me anymore.”

“What happens when you get back?”

“Probably what always happens to kids like me. I’m out of the family. The gang is my family. Once you are in a gang you can’t get out, except dead. Did you ever see an elderly gang banger?”

I had never really thought about my future, or lack of it. I didn’t really like it.

“Hey, what about you? What’s your name? Where’ya from?”

“My name is Brandon, Brandon St. John. I’m from outside Bowling Green, Kentucky.”

I asked him what his family was like. He painted a picture that was practically more than I could believe, of green pastures, white clapboard fences and red horse barns. He told me of loving parents and grandparents, extended family holiday traditions, and birthday parties for cousins. He told me of his heritage, a heritage that was rooted so strongly that it could only lead to a bright future.

Except for one thing – my bullets were in his chest.

The next thing he did was beyond my imagination. He said, “Devon, I know that I am not going to make it. Take your dog tags from around your neck and put them on me. I will take your mistakes to the grave. I will become you. And, here, you take my dog tags from around my neck and put them on you. You take my name. You can become

me. I want you to take my name, my family, my future. You are now Brandon St. John.” I hesitated.

I said, “People are going to know that I am not you. I don’t know anything about you.”

“Before I die, I’ll tell you as much as I can, but do a lot of listening. They’ll know that war changes people, hey, and tell them you took a pretty hard blow to your head. They’ll believe you.”

With that encouragement, I put the dog tags around my neck.

We talked for a while. He continued to tell me about a life that practically was more than I could believe. I stayed there. I stayed until he took his last breathe. I stayed there until I could see that his soul had retreated from his open eyes, leaving them unnaturally still. With my bloody hands, I closed his eyes.

I stayed there. In a very real way, it was me who died – at least every bad thing that I had ever done. That’s what the dog tags said. I don’t know how long I stayed there. Outside the door the din of war continued at its usual deafening level, but there was a mysterious silence in the room. There was a power surrounding me, a strong force that defied description. I stayed there; I don’t know how long.

[Slide 3 with text of 2 Cor 5:21]

Eventually, I got up off my knees, as a new man. Like I told you at the beginning; *it was not that my life was changed; it was that I changed lives.* I was no longer Devon Black; I was Brandon St. John. And I had a home and a family. I had roots and I had a future.

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The time came for me to go to my new home. My new Mom and Dad met me at the discharge ceremony. I could recognize them from the description I heard. Anyway, I didn't really need to; they came running up to me and through their arms around me and hugged and kissed me like I had never been before. Is this what real love was like? The father looked deep in my eyes, would he discover?

We left the base and chatted in the car; but I mostly listened. They did not know it, but it was a constant flow of the information that I needed to continue this rouse. We arrived at my new home. It was just as it was described. It was peaceful and green. There were meals cooked with love, and dinner conversation. Honest work in the day and peaceful sleep at night. For the first time in my life I did not lack anything, physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

I did not live perfectly as Brandon St. John, but I tried, both to be true to who he is (or was) and because I had no interest in living like I used to. I could see now how that was a dead end, literally.

Sometimes, I would get angry and lash out, but I was always forgiven. A son always has a place in this family.

This went on for a number of years. But there came a time when I knew that I had to tell my adopted Mom and Dad the truth. I had to tell them who I truly was. I knew that this would mean that I would be thrown out of the house. I would no longer be a part of this wonderful family, but it was the right thing to do. In this new home, I came to believe that doing the right thing is what should always be done.

I sat them down and told them everything. Their reaction was completely different than I expected. I could see tears welling up in my new father's eyes as the truth fell from my lips. He looked at me and said words that I will never forget, "You are my son." All I could say was, "Thank you." I wasn't sure if they did not believe what I had told them, or did not want to believe, or if it was that in spite of this, they still counted me as their son.

Why do I tell you now? You must know him also. This man gave up his name to me to give me a new life. It was not that my life was changed. It was that I (X)changed lives.

[Slide 5: X-changed lives and Bible text]

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