

*This is an excerpt from Blue Like Jazz by Don Miller (pgs. 116-125). Don was involved with a small campus ministry program at Reed College, a liberal arts college in Portland Oregon with a reputation of not being terribly welcoming of organized religious groups.*

Each year at Reed they have a festival called Ren Fayre. They shut down the campus so students can party. Security keeps the authorities away, and everybody gets pretty drunk and high, and some people get naked. The school brings in White Bird, a medical unit that specializes in treating bad drug trips. The students create special lounges with black lights and television screens to enhance kids' mushroom trips.

Some of the Christian students in our little group decided this was a pretty good place to come out of the closet, letting everybody know there were a few Christians on campus. Tony the Beat Poet and I were sitting around in my room one afternoon talking about what to do, how to explain who we were to a group of students who, in the past, had expressed hostility toward Christians. Like our friends, we felt like Ren Fayre was the time to do this. I said we should build a confession booth in the middle of campus and paint a sign on it that said, *CONFESS YOUR SINS*. I said this because I knew a lot of people would be sinning, and Christian spiritually begins by confessing our sins and repenting. I also said it as a joke.

But Tony thought it was brilliant. He sat there on my couch with his mind in the clouds, and he was scaring me because, for a second, then for a minute, I actually believed he wanted to do it.

"We are not going to do this," I told him.

"Oh, we are, Don. We certainly are. We are going to build a confession booth!"

We met in Commons – Penny, Nadine, Mitch, Iven, Tony and myself. Tony said I had an idea. They looked at me. I told them I had a stupid idea that we couldn't do without getting attacked. They leaned in. I told them that we should build a confession booth in the middle of campus and paint a sign on it that said, *CONFESS YOUR SINS*. Penny put her hands over her mouth. Iven laughed. Nadine smiled. "They may very well burn it down," she said.

"Okay you guys." Tony gathered everybody's attention. "Here's the catch." He leaned in a little and collected his thoughts. "We are not actually going to accept confessions." We all looked at him in confusion. He continued. "We are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for those televangelists who steal people's money, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus. We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them."

All of us sat there in silence because it was obvious that something beautiful and true had hit the table with a thud. We all thought it was a great idea, and we could see it in each other's eyes. It would feel so good to apologize, to apologize for the Crusades, for Columbus and the genocide he committed in the Bahamas in the name of God, apologize for the missionaries who landed in Mexico and came up through the West slaughtering Indians in the name of Christ. I wanted so desperately to say that none of this was Jesus, and I wanted to desperately to apologize for the many ways I had misrepresented the Lord. I could feel that I had betrayed the Lord by judging, by not being willing to love the people He had loved and only giving lip service to issues of human rights.

So we set to work on the confession booth throughout the beginning of Ren Fayre, and people looked at us over the first couple of days with both curiosity and amusement. The further along we got on the booth, though, the more I began to wonder if our idea was such a hot one. As we began to put the finishing touches on it, I was in the process of telling Tony that I didn't want to do this. And then someone opened up the curtain and walked in, saying they were our first customer.

"What's up, man?" Duder sat himself on the chair with a smile on his face. He said his name was Jake. I shook his hand because I didn't know what to do, really.

"So, what is this? I'm supposed to tell you all of the juicy gossip I've done at Ren Fayre, right?"

"No."

"Okay, then what? What's the game?" he asked.

"Not really a game. More of a confession thing."

"You want me to confess my sins, right?"

"No, that's not what we're doing, really."

"What's the deal, man?"

"Well, we are a group of Christians here on campus, you know."

"I see. Strange place for Christians, but I am listening."

"Thanks," I told him. He was being very patient and gracious. "Anyway, there is this group of us, just a few of us who were thinking about the way Christians have sort of wronged people over time. You know, the Crusades, all that stuff...."

"Well, I doubt you personally were involved in any of that."

"No, I wasn't," I told him. "But the thing is, we are followers of Jesus. And we believe he represented certain ideas that we have not done a good job at representing. He has asked us to represent Him well, and we've failed him in that."

"I see," Jake said.

"So there is this group of us on campus who wanted to confess to you."

"You are confessing to me!" Jake said with a laugh.

"Yeah. We are confessing to you. I mean, I am confessing to you."

"You're serious." His laugh turned to something of a straight face.

I told him I was. He looked at me and told me I didn't have to. I told him I did, and I felt very strongly in that moment that I was supposed to tell Jake that I was sorry for everything.

"What are you confessing?" he asked.

"Well, there's a lot. I will keep it short. Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. I know all of this was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. So I've not been a good follower of Jesus. There's a lot more, you know."

"It's all right, man," Jake said, very tenderly. His eyes were starting to water.

"Well," I said, clearing my throat, "I am sorry for all of that."

"I forgive you," Jake said. And he meant it.

"Thanks," I told him.

He sat there and looked at the floor, then into the fire of a candle. "It's really cool what you guys are doing," he said. "A lot of people need to hear this."

"I don't know whether to thank you for that or not," I laughed. "I have to sit here and confess all my crap."

He looked at me very seriously. "It's worth it," he said. He shook my hand, and when he left the booth there was somebody else ready to get in. It went like that for a couple of hours. I talked to about thirty people, and Tony took confessions on a picnic table outside the booth. Many people wanted to hug me when we were done.

All of the people who visited the booth were grateful and gracious. I was being changed through the process. And I think those who came into the booth were being changed too.