



FELLOW MAN INTERNATIONAL



# Sitting With Jesus at the Circus

One of the most awesome things I have discovered since the arrival of my two children is the magic of reliving one's childhood through their eyes. When I saw the colorful circus big top go up on the fairgrounds in San Pedro Sula, it brought back special memories of seeing the Barnum and Bailey's circus as a very young child. I could hardly wait to take my kids!

I soon found myself at the Saturday matinee performance juggling two toddlers, one on each knee, a box of popcorn in one hand, sippee cups in the other and a diaper bag over one shoulder. Yes, I was in mommy heaven. The familiar smells of sawdust, animals and sweaty spectators all brought a welcome distraction, far from the stench of poverty that permeates my usual routine. As the lights came down I felt joy in my heart and warmth in my soul. I was at the circus with my two children and once more, if only for just a couple of hours, I too could be five years old.

It was a circus from Mexico City. They had all kinds of animals including camels, horses, tigers and elephants. There were clowns and acrobats. Also, there was *the world's tiniest trapeze artist*, a 22 year old man with dwarfism, no more than three feet tall who was absolutely amazing. It was magic time. As I watched my children smile, laugh and clap the reality of Honduras's struggles quickly faded into the background.

Somewhere between a trampoline act and the elephant march a strange smell brought me back to consciousness. Was it gasoline? No. I couldn't quite place the smell, but it was nauseating. I quickly looked around to see what it could be. And then I saw him.

It was a street boy sitting behind us.

He was thin and his face was drawn. I would guess he was about ten years old. He was dirty, barefoot and there were holes in his clothes. But, the most disturbing thing of all was the open coke bottle he had filled with a glue called Resistol and hidden beneath his shirt. The fumes from the glue were overwhelming. The little boy would stick his nose in the collar of his shirt and inhale the concentrated glue fumes to get high. He was doing it several times a minute. My heart broke in two.

Obviously this street child had sneaked into the circus to see what it was all about. As he sat there in the bleachers, anxious parents were staring at him with indignation. Several people got up to find another seat. One man even pushed the child and muttered some unkind words. I understood what the fuss was all about. The smell of the glue was aggravating, but that wasn't what had everyone so upset. It was the mere presence of this child. He had invaded a place where poverty was unwelcome. After all, the price to enter the Big Top refuge was nearly three days wages for the average working man. Like it or not, the circus was a rich man's experience. But here was a street child challenging by his very presence, those who would choose to ignore him under normal circumstances.

Even though he was half anesthetized by the toxic fumes, he laughed and clapped just like all of the other children. His situation was tragic. What could be done to attend to the needs of this child of God? Over the years, I have come to understand there are no quick

fixes. I knew in the overall scheme of things, when the circus was over, this little boy would return to the streets to beg for money. And to take the gnaw of his hunger pangs away, he would continue to huff glue fumes. All I really hoped to accomplish in that moment was for the child to abandon the bottle of glue if only for a short while. I reached in my bag and pulled out a few things. Mandarin oranges, a juice box and some cookies. It wasn't exactly a nutritious meal, but perhaps I could trade them for the bottle of glue. I turned around and tapped him on the knee. I said, "take these instead of that glue, they are better for you". He grabbed the mandarin orange first and loudly exclaimed "*mandarina.*" I motioned to the glue bottle but he seemed reluctant to abandon his only source of consolation. I gave him the rest of the food items and he in turn put the cap on the coke bottle filled with glue. That would just have to do.

I couldn't help thinking at that moment how stark the difference between the have's and have not's. I was part of the have's and this child behind me, Christ in disguise, was part of Honduras' ten thousand street children who "have not". There I was at the circus with my two kids and Jesus sitting behind me asking me in no uncertain terms how I would respond. I did not have a good answer. The one thing I was sure of as I walked out of the circus tent that day is that opportunity to see Jesus is everywhere. May God protect the little street children who bring Christ's face so clearly into view.