

What Roller Derby Taught me about the incarnational love of Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit

For three years I played on an all-women's flat-track roller derby team. I joined the team at the behest of my husband after the MMA gym closed and I no longer had an appropriate outlet for my energies. Always up for an adventure, joining roller derby held possibility. I knew going in that I wanted to be an example of Christ's love to the other girls. I was the only Christian on a team of 30 people, and I took that responsibility seriously as I was likely to be the only Jesus they had ever spent any time with. There was no place for judgment, only acceptance and compassion. It was a chance to live out the incarnational values I believed in.

My motivation in joining was not to evangelize anyone. I just wanted to play roller derby. But I knew who I was in Christ and the opportunity I had. Instead of telling them I was a Christian, I endeavored to live in love and in the active presence of God, and let Him do what He was going to do. This was not a Christian exercise, as I wanted my heart for them to be organic and authentic. But I also wanted to represent Jesus well, so I looked for open doors to speak love and of a different narrative of Jesus than the ones they had likely heard. Sticking to my "waiting until they ask" policy, it took a year before I had my first opportunity to share about my thoughts about Jesus with a girl with whom there had been a distinct spark of friendship from early on. A couple weeks after that, after a bout (game), I told this girl that I enjoyed her friendship immensely and that we should be good friends, not just casual friends. We agreed to be roller derby best friends. That night I was fully accepted into their world and I had accepted them into mine.

It was at church the next day that something remarkable happened and the Lord taught me a significant lesson about love. I was praying for them, like I often did, when my heart broke in two and I began to weep for them. Suddenly their distance from Jesus was not merely factual, it was personal. It felt very, very real.

My foray into evangelism ended up not with conversions (not my goal), but life-long friends. I was strong enough in the Lord to know my identity. Outside of that core, I learned to be vulnerable to them, influenced by them, loved by them. Only from that place could I truly love them back and pray with a full heart of compassion. I believe love and faith makes our prayers more powerful and that prayers I whispered through those tears of longing were probably more powerful than all the others combined. Perhaps the seeds I was sowing of love were not only in their hearts, but also in mine.

I learned in this new way that true love is a vulnerable love, and it contains a willingness to be changed. I learned what it meant to really meet the girls where they were, not as a visitor on a vacation, but an ambassador who lives and loves among the people. I very experientially understood how Jesus came not just to be an example for us, but to be touched by us, moved by us and loved by us. His message was made powerful by his vulnerability. Before roller derby I knew that evangelism without love just resulted in law (and the law brings death as Paul discusses in Romans and Galatians). But what I realized was that I had greatly reduced love to a spiritualized experiment of class-based compassion. Only in my willingness to be changed by them was I able to truly love them back.

The thing about the incarnation and living a missional life is that we have to realize the incarnation for ourselves first. Are we merely saved, or do we actively engage in the mystery of Christ inhabiting our life? Once we yield to the beauty and mystery of the indwelling, being missional is no longer a project, task, or ministry objective. It is life. Galatians 2:20 becomes real, tangible, visceral. Then we walk through life actively engaged with Jesus and we can bring Him anywhere our two feet go. We can carry our spirit on the outside and when people encounter us, they encounter the Spirit of a living and loving God. When we let people love us, influence us and we truly join with them, we give them the opportunity to love Jesus and to touch the heart of God. The incarnation is meant to create a two-way street. It is not Jesus living in

some sort of virtual-reality through us. Jesus was vulnerable to and impacted by those he came to save. We can do no less in truly being His hands and feet. It is messy, it is hard, and it is beautiful.

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For more on this topic, listen to Jessie's sermon about bringing the presence of God to create crave-able community.

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