

THE 2024 ACNA ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY CONTEST

First Place Winner

Priest/Deacon

Juanita-Apologetics Made Personal

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At the untested age of 29, and just out of seminary, I began working as a pastoral and hospital chaplain. I wondered, of course, how well I might be received and the work I could do for those who needed and wanted my ministry. I especially wanted to be there for people like my own parents, who had nowhere to turn to find solace and comfort they so desperately needed after losing their 8 year old son in a tragic accident that forever changed their lives and mine as well. I was ready to apply my newly acquired skills and training to comfort those hurting and to share the gospel...then I met Juanita.

I met her for the first of what turned out of be many visits during her multiple hospital stays. Juanita was in her early 50s and newly diagnosed with leukemia-which often in the early 80s resulted in death. I entered the room ready to share the good news and offer the type of comfort and compassion parents never had, but within minutes of meeting her, I quickly realized I would need to use an alternative approach. I had rarely heard so many expletives spoken at one time, and her negativity and pessimism rendered her almost impenetrable. How was I, at the idealistic age of 29, supposed to minister to someone like Juanita? Referring again to the pain and loss in my life, I could relate to her. Like the apostle Nathaniel, I know what it's like to be full of guile and ask, can anything good really happen? Pain can birth that outlook. I think that's why Juanita was not off putting to me, in fact I found her easy to love and appreciate. And that is key to offering the gospel, to "doing" apologetics.

As I imagine all of us would, I of course prayed, and in this time and place I can say I know for certain I heard from the Holy Spirit. It was clear. It was direct, which is how I prefer the Lord speak to me... "Keep your mouth shut and just love her."

Although I often felt tempted to fall back on my training or “preach” to her, I chose to obey. And for that next year I did stay quiet and listen. Whenever Juanita would be admitted I would visit her. She did most of the talking, and while I didn’t encourage her in her gossip or malcontented view of life, neither did I judge her.

As the months unfolded, we met more frequently, sometimes the visits were brief with little more than small talk, but during our lengthier visits our conversations add pbegan to include a newly found depth and WORD, but always at her leading. She spoke about family members in whom she was disappointed, or just plain mad. Complaints about the hospital. Her view of her overall health. I always offered, and usually it was accepted, that I pray, but that was about it. Over time however, her tough exterior did begin to crack, but it was not at the behest of evangelicalism or the sharing of the word... that came a little later. It was much more simple. When I learned she was turning 51, I took her a cupcake with a candle and sang happy birthday. She almost got misty eyed. Neither of us said a word, but it’s meaning was palpable.

That day did eventually come. Throughout that year, Juanita continued to be admitted intermittently, each time a little weaker, each time slightly less able to bounce back. A year since our first meeting had passed when, I entered her room. Juanita was being her usual, predictable, guileful self. She knew she was facing imminent death. Then, on that day, she spoke these words just sort of “snuck in” to her monologue: “I know when I die I’m going to hell anyway.”

I knew it was the Holy Spirit, but I didn’t need any prompting. This is why the Holy Spirit had said to keep my mouth shut and just love her. This day would not have happened without the previous 365. From the center of my heart came the words that I spoke next: “Juanita I love you too much to let that happen!” If those words had come 365 days earlier, they would have fallen on deaf ears. I continued on “you do not have to go to hell. Jesus so much loves you and wants you to accept Him and welcome you to heaven.”

She thought about that. The next day she asked me to visit. She said, “Will you pray with me so I can be saved?” Together we asked Jesus to save her, forgive her,

and comfort and reassure her. Then with peace for the first time since I'd met her, we planned her funeral. Hardly if ever had she been in church. She only knew one prayer and she asked me to incorporate it into her funeral.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. She died the next day, and that prayer became her prayer of committal at the graveside.

Why did I offer Juanita's story as an essay on apologetics? I would like to offer 4 underlying foundations to apologetics that I draw from the story of Juanita and myself.

First, apologetics requires following the leading of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who draws people to Himself, it isn't just our personality or experience or even willingness. Juanita is enjoying eternity because the Holy Spirit told me to shut up, and I listened. The Holy Spirit showed me when it was time to be silent and a time to speak. Yes, we need to pray before, during, and after conversations and opportunities to "do apologetics". Closely aligned to this is being sensitive to the Spirit's leading in such a way that we are able to pick up on and follow cues, or receive words of knowledge or wisdom so that our sharing isn't just natural, but supernatural.

Secondly, apologetics requires authenticity. I met Juanita without the cover of behavioral expectations or recoil from attitude or words which in some settings would offend. If she complained, I tried to understand why. When her rough statements were funny, I laughed. When she felt miserable, I commiserated. My identification as chaplain, pastor, or Christian were not used a dividing wall but as simply a reason for my being present. No other agenda. I was transparent about my many failures and struggles. No attempt at being other than who I am was allowed. No need for a false veneer of holy perfection.

Thirdly, apologetics also requires reaching into the depths of our personal journeys. My earliest memory of my life, as a 4 year old, is seeing my 8 year old brother's lifeless body after being accidentally killed by a 16 gauge shotgun held by another family member. When the worst thing you can imagine happens at a tender age, one possible outcome is that you decide you better trust in being guileful.

Hopeless, negative, terrified of ever having your hopes up -my well lived definition of guile. (Yes, another reference to my favorite apostle). When I talk about reaching into the depths of our personal journeys I am cautiously offering that it requires recognizing that we have a bridge to others when we fully understand how our past impacts our present perspective. My journey and its companion of pain is the well spring of this being my favorite verse: Isaiah 42:3 “A bruised reed he will not break, a faintly burning wick he will not quench”. Apologetics needs to come from our internal transformation. We consciously live with our own state of being a broken reed so that recognize it and thus are circumspect in our dealing with others. That was my point of connection with Juanita. People like Nathaniel, people like Juanita, are not negative because of being mean spirited but as a protection against being wounded after trying to be hopeful. I am not hesitant or put off from people who seem full of guile, rough around the edges, or despairing. My journey has taught me that and becomes my pathway in communicating my hope to others. Apologetics requires this awareness and healing by the Holy Spirit of our journey so that we truly can help in making for others “the rough ground level and the rugged places a plain”.

We all have our journeys, which, by the healing power of the Holy Spirit, mold us into being able to connect to others deeply. No, apologetics isn't saying I know what or how you feel, but it is being able to understand perspective at the deepest level. It is lived out as we meet joy with joy, and meet anguish by drawing from our own histories of sorrow and grief. Apologetics that changes lives comes as we draw from the wellspring of our beings as we offer stories without judgment, but with the hope that does not disappoint. We desperately need to do so without hesitancy and with compassion.

Finally, apologetics required Compassion; that is the fourth, final, and of course most important requirement of apologetics. Apologetics is rooted in and enlivened by the love of Jesus Christ. Apologetics that is done because that is what we do as Christians doesn't help anyone. That does not mean we relate to people because we see everyone as a potential altar call victim. If 31,536,000 seconds hadn't passed where I genuinely took time to love Juanita hadn't happened, there would have been no chance of a prayer of salvation. 6 different times in the gospels it says Jesus was moved with compassion. People often will argue theology. It is perhaps the most common response that those with whom we are trying to share will back

away from conversations about the need for salvation. Compassion is received as a balm.

Apologetics is the religious discipline of defending doctrine through systematic arguments and discourse, but Apologetics that makes a difference is often more authentic, personal, and draws from compassion. These attributes of apologetics are what we had embodied for us in the life of Jesus Christ. Acts 3:5 in the miracle at the gate beautiful-we read, “the man looked at them expecting to receive something from them” That is how others look at those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. In love, empowered by the Holy Spirit, authentically drawing from center of our beings is how we fulfill this expectation.