

## Shane Claiborne: Leader of the Mustard Seed Revolution

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I want to tell you about a 38 year old man named Shane Claiborne. I've met him a few times at conferences I've attended around the country, and from the first moment I heard him speak, I knew this guy was one of today's saints. After hearing him speak and reading his book, I was so inspired by the way he lives his life. I also really respect the fact that he practices exactly what he preaches (even all the proceeds from the books he writes goes to charity). I want to tell you about him because he actually lives pretty much out of the spotlight so many people have heard about him. But I want you to know him because he is the kind of person who can change your life.

First a little background. Shane grew up in East Tennessee and attended church and youth group regularly as a kid. But he quickly learned that the church did not practice anything that Jesus actually did. Things were safe and entertaining, but it was all about Christian beliefs, not Christian actions. He became continually intrigued about Jesus and he wanted to meet people who tried to live out the things Jesus taught. He ended up at Eastern University in Philadelphia to do just that. But most of things he learned at college did not come from classes. Shane started hanging out with homeless people in downtown Philly with some college friends. They would go every night. Soon they even started sleeping outside with them because they all resented the fact that they got to go back to the comfort of their dorm rooms and leave their homeless friends in their cardboard boxes. This is where he first met Jesus. One night he met a seven year old

homeless girl and asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up. She answered, “I want to own a grocery store so I can give out food to all the hungry people.” Shane learned more about God and Jesus on the streets that in systematic theology classes.

One day at school, he heard about homeless people living in the abandoned St Edwards Cathedral who were going to be evicted by the Catholic archdioceses. Shane and a bunch of his friends joined the people at the church to protest being evicted. The people were part of a group called the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, made up mostly of homeless mothers and children. They had been living in a tent city with horrible conditions, but eventually moved into the vacant church. Once the Catholic leaders found out, they gave the people 48 hours to move out. But because of Shane and his friends, the eviction was stopped. The people stayed and started transforming the church- having worship on Sundays and getting people back on their feet. Eventually, all of the families who were once homeless found housing and jobs and were able to go on with their lives.

All this time, Shane started re-visionsing what church is and started dreaming of a new kind of church, based on the ancient visions of church in the book of Acts; People sharing everything they had so there could be no poverty, People living as the church.

I feel the same way. A new kind of church where people live what they believe. I really saw this become a reality on our Mission Trip this summer to New Jersey. Our youth were working with youth from a church in Connecticut. On the day they met, one CT girl approached one of our kids and before even saying hi or sharing her name, she asked, “how religious are you?” It turns

out that both of our groups were scared that the other might be too “religious.” I know what they meant by that- conservative, restrictive, unwelcoming, literalist, exclusive, fake, hypocritical, etc. I find it so sad that is what church and Christianity and Jesus mean to many people. Really it means love, following Jesus, helping everyone, seeing God in every moment, living what you really believe. Shane thought that too, and went looking for it. The first place he looked was in India.

Shane did a 10 week internship in Calcutta working alongside Mother Teresa with orphans and the Home for the Destitute and Dying. He also spent 3 weeks in Baghdad with the Iraq Peace Team. All of these experiences helped influence what he and his friends decided to do after college. They founded a community together called “The Simple Way” where all involved depend upon radical independence. The people who live in the house together start the day with prayer each morning at 8am. Then they dive into days that are filled with things like hanging with friends in the neighborhood or folks living on the streets, and helping folks get to appointments. They have lovely gardens and a neighborhood thrift store. Most of them work part-time jobs and that frees them up to do other they love but don’t get paid to do. Activities and programs change from time to time but they share food with lots of families and try to be good neighbors. They have dinners together each week, and a Sabbath one day each week where everything rests. They work together to try to change some of the systemic injustices around them in Philly. Right now they are working hard to end gun violence on the streets, and to create some local jobs and more stable housing for folks. Not long ago, a fire destroyed their house and everything in it. The community and neighborhood worked together and helped each other, so

they got back on their feet and received everything they needed. An excerpt from Shane's book, "The Irresistible Revolution", which describes how it is to live in this new community:

Kensington is one of the poorest districts in Pennsylvania and is deliberately neglected by the city. The streets often pile up with trash and the walls are covered with graffiti. Some folks feel a sense of degradation, a feeling that they are not worth as much as people in other neighborhoods. But for others, this neglect is a catalyst to organize ourselves. When the city refuses to plow our streets, we get out and have snowball fights and shovel the streets together. When trash piles up, it's a good excuse to throw a block party, so we rope off the street, clean the trash, and open the fire hydrant to play in the water. A family very dear to our hearts owns the Josefina minimart across the street from our house. Over the years, we have become inseparable. The kids come over for homework and to beat us at Uno. We helped rehab their house, and they helped teach us Spanish. Oftentimes they need transportation to restock the store or pick up the kids. We found that we could insure them (and actually at no extra cost) under our policy. So we share cars, and they never take our money for groceries. We are not Good Samaritans, nor are we an efficient nonprofit provider. We are family with them, and money has lost its relevance." (pp. 180-181)

Shane believes that with "The Simple Way" community, he is a part of Jesus' mustard seed revolution. Let me first explain the mustard seed parable. Back in Jesus' day, the Jews had very strict rules about gardens. They were to keep out weeds at all costs, specifically the mustard plant, because it was so invasive it would take over the garden. It was very important to keep out the weeds (reminds me of that scene from Alice in Wonderland, where Alice finds herself in a garden and the flowers call her weed and want her out). Weeds are detestable, undesirable, wild, invasive.... Plenty of people used gardening imagery to describe God and the world. Plenty of people had lofty expectations of the kingdom of God being like the cedars of Lebanon, the greatest of all trees, where the nations, like mighty eagles, can build nests in the branches. But Jesus ridiculed this triumphal expectation by using mustard plants to describe the kingdom... And by the way, they only grow a few feet tall- they are modest little bushes, not great glorious cedar trees, and not suitable for eagles, but perfect for fowls- detestable birds ! Jesus wants the kingdom to be a subtle contagion, spreading bit by bit till it takes over the world! And this

kingdom is for all of us, even those of us who may be seen as undesirable and detestable. This is such good news! This is what Shane says about this revolution:

The contagion of God's love is spreading across the land like a little mustard plant, tossing seeds on toxic waste sites, making mosaics from toys, weapons, reclaiming trash-strewn lots for urban gardens, and taking over the concrete world, where old tires and hollowed out TVs and computer monitors become pots for flowers on our road. (pg 340).

The way Shane lives his life and sees the world is so inspiring. I hope that we can all take steps to put our faith into action, and include all, even those who we consider weeds... let's all be weeds together, and make this church and this world a community love. Let's join the mustard seed revolution. Amen!