

NOT BY MIGHT NOR BY POWER, BUT BY MY SPIRIT, SAYS THE LORD

Today's Pentecostal Evangel

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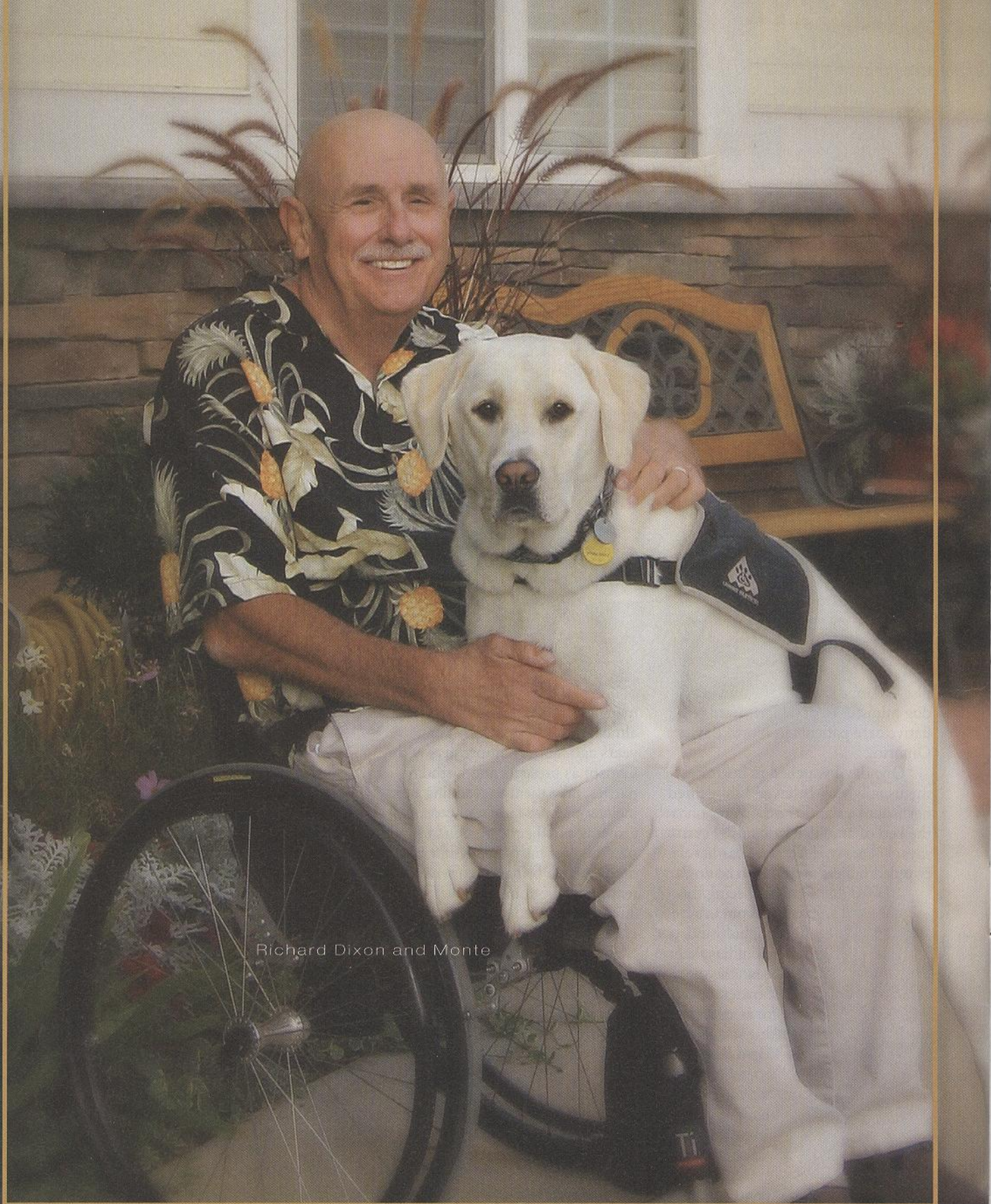
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Richard Dixon and Monte

My service dog and Jesus

By
Richard
Dixon

I like to read bumper sticker slogans, though my aging eyes tend increasingly to obscure the fine print. I recently saw a familiar mobile message that resonates with anyone who's owned a dog:

"I wish I could be the person my dog thinks I am."

Do you share my struggle to always do what's right? Do you ever get caught up in a situation and forget to ask what Jesus would do? Do you find yourself making the convenient choice when Christian ideals conflict with the world's reality?

It's awfully easy to rationalize or cut corners and pretend God won't notice. I miss God's mark so frequently I wonder if I should get a T-shirt printed, "I wish I could be the person God wants me to be."

As a wheelchair user, I'm fortunate to enjoy the constant companionship of a specially trained service dog. Monte's a wonderful friend who assists me in many

ways, but mostly he teaches me each day about the profound power contained within the simplicity of Jesus' words. He's a faithful, floppy-eared reminder that Jesus meant what He said, that His teachings aren't impractical, idealistic platitudes.

Monte goes everywhere with me — to work, to church, even to restaurants — and his calm presence affects everyone. He's virtually impossible to ignore, and I sometimes imagine that God placed him in my life to challenge my self-centered choices and perceptions. Monte's constantly wagging tail forces me to confront my tendency toward fear and worry.

Monte was taught as a puppy to provide a model of service that exemplifies Christ's simple example. He lives the apparent paradox that a life of service to others ultimately fulfills all of his needs.

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16, NIV).

Monte reminds me that Jesus meant what He said. Whenever we enter a public place, Monte is clearly the star. I'm hardly noticed, but my humble servant becomes the center of attention. Strangers marvel at his calm demeanor and his willingness to ignore his own instincts and focus on my needs. His whole purpose is to make my life easier, but in doing so he receives more affirmation and affection, and more treats, than he would if he placed his own desires first.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink. ... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matthew 6:25,26, NIV).

God feeds the birds even though they don't plan for potential emergencies. While I fuss with insurance, retirement accounts and investment strategies, Monte's not concerned about his

My service dog and Jesus

next meal. He's just confident that I'll feed him every day.

I always have one eye on the future, attempting to anticipate and prepare for every possible contingency. Do I truly believe that the infinite God of the universe will care for me and meet my needs? I sometimes wonder if I trust God as much as my dog trusts me.

"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? ... So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (Matthew 6:27,31,32).

Do I really rely on Jesus' assurances? Monte doesn't waste time fussing about the future. He's free of worry and able to spend his time on more important pursuits. He just lives today and trusts that I'll take care of him. That's exactly what Jesus taught. Is it possible that this goofy-looking ball of fur is challenging me to take my Lord seriously?

Later in Matthew 25, Jesus talks about caring for the hungry, the sick and the stranger and confronts me with the reality of my selfishness.

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:40).

No matter how hard I try to alter my natural inclinations, I form instant judgments about people based on appearance or wealth. I avoid those who are different. I don't always make an effort to include the outcast or reach out to someone who doesn't fit within my neat little circle. I'm more concerned with satisfying my wants than others' needs.

Monte greets everyone equally. Neighbor or newcomer, rich or

poor, they all receive his undivided attention. He doesn't care what they're wearing or how much money they have. His affection is unconditional and free. He'll let anyone rub his ears and scratch his tummy. He's just present with whoever happens to show up. Least or greatest makes no difference to him.

Monte seems to believe that whatever God places in his path is compelling and worthy of his time and energy. Jesus said the lilies of the field were clothed in splendor. My furry companion illustrates this truth, because he doesn't just "stop to smell the roses." He checks out the grass, the trees and the weeds. He doesn't want to miss one detail. The backyard he's explored thoroughly still contains wonders requiring investigation. For Monte, no uninteresting background exists. Everything's important, and nothing is more essential than wherever he happens to be at a particular moment.

Of course Monte's way of dealing with the world is terribly inefficient. Every aspect of God's creation fascinates him, but he never gets anything accomplished.

In our lives meaningless trivia slows our progress. If we stop for every flower and every bug, we'll never get where we're going. But there's a reminder in Monte's behavior for all of us. Considering others' needs may prevent me from moving along to the next item on the list as quickly as I would like. But that discipline will inevitably enrich my life and allow me to accomplish what is truly important.

Monte doesn't know about planning, projects and deadlines — realities the rest of us cannot avoid. He assumes the quality of the journey matters more than the destination. He naively enjoys the surroundings, unaware of the

importance of maintaining course and achieving goals. He knows nothing of being a responsible adult with places to go, people to see and things to do.

But Monte's behavior also says to me that wherever God places me is holy and set apart, and that I ought to respect and attend to the path God created. Jesus told us to become more like children. I wonder if becoming more like a Labrador retriever would be a good beginning.

Despite Monte's presence, I still mess up. But that's another way he reminds me about Jesus. He forgives and forgets about my mistakes and loves me anyway. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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