



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

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Episode 029: From felt church mice to ministry

Calvary Church in Columbia has a light hearted ministry that raises thousands each year for the community –for food pantries, gardens, social justice organizations and some church outreach ministry. And it’s all built around hand-made felt church mice, YES! MICE! Calvary members Kay Glass and Sharon Sessions talk with Deacon Harry Leip about the history and mission of these mighty mice, the star of Calvary’s St. Nicholas Bazaar. It’s coming again to downtown Columbia MO, inside the church buildings, this (and every) first Saturday in December at 8 AM.

Harry Leip: Welcome to JesusHacked. I'm your host for this podcast, Deacon Harry Leip, serving at Trinity in the central West End in St Louis City. As many of our listeners know, churches have many different ways to raise funds. Some have bake sales and barbecues. Some have raffles, they raffle things. While others, and this is my personal favorite, have quilt bingos. The diversity and creativity of fundraising in churches seemingly has no limits or bounds and that is why I'm delighted that this episode of the podcast, we're going to explore how one of our churches has developed a very unique and creative, let's call it whimsical, way to raise funds for outreach, which involves not only the church community, but their entire community.

For those of you who are not familiar with Calvary, Columbia's St. Nicholas bazaar and their famous hand-made mice, you are in for a treat today. And so to guide us through this unique story and even more unique, these little rodents that are staring at us while I speak today, I'm very happy to welcome Kay Glass and Sharon Sessions, both parishioners at Calvary Columbia in central Missouri. Ladies, welcome to the podcast.

Kay Glass: Thank you.

Sharon Sessions: Thank you.

Harry Leip: So, for our listeners, can one of you describe one of these lovely mice that we're looking at? I'll start because I'm bad at descriptions. We're looking, they're about three inches tall, right? And they're all hand-made, so can one of you describe one of them? Pick your favorite.

Sharon Sessions: We need to describe the actual original church mouse.

Harry Leip: Yeah.

Sharon Sessions: The mouse came about, well, I moved to Columbia in 1970 and they were going before then, so we figure it's been about what, 52, 53 years. And they actually have a patent on these things.

Harry Leip: Really.

Sharon Sessions: They made a patent so that people can't copy them. But they're about three inches tall and they're made of either a light gray or a little bit delicate darker gray. They're hand-stitched and the first ones that were made were actually acolyte mice. They were dressed in red cassocks with the white, I'm not sure what the white overlay is, but the white overlay. They have little ears with little pink sides. A little black nose and whiskers and little button eyes. And every one of them has a tail. And actually after you see these things, you, and eventually see everybody who makes them, you can actually tell who actually made the mice. Anything else?

Kay Glass: No. You did well.

Sharon Sessions: Thank you.

Harry Leip: And I love the idea that you just mentioned is that you can, someone can bring you a mouse, it doesn't matter if it's maybe two years ago or five years ago and chances are you can say, "Oh, this mouse was created from the hands of so and so." I just love that idea, because it's sort of tradition and history sort of meets artistry. So it sounds like it's been about 50 some years although the beginning, the onset of it is a little bit clouded in

the, as history often is. Are there any, I'm curious, are there any hard and fast rules? Because I'm looking at several of these and they all have, I would say, different personalities. They're wearing different things. Looks like we've got a mighty bishop here, we've got a graduate complete with mortar board, little hat. We even have a, I'm going to call her, hula girl mouse. Are there any rules? I think you said it sounds like they have to have tails and they have to be hand-made, hand stitched.

Sharon Sessions: Little black noses and eyes.

Harry Leip: Okay. And then at that point, can anyone just do anything with them, in terms of personalities, the way they're dressed?

Kay Glass: Some people will make the mouse body and they will hand it off to someone else to dress it. So, you will have formal dresses, your bishop, your hula, your graduate, your little 50's mouse.

Sharon Sessions: With the poodle skirt.

Harry Leip: Poodle skirt.

Kay Glass: I saw a mouse one time that had a gold lame gown with a mink jacket on. She was so cute. There was a Native American mouse that had braids and there were little ears. Most anything that you can think of, that's what we get.

Harry Leip: And is there, do people get together and talk about a theme across all of them? Or do people just do what they'll do?

Sharon Sessions: They just do what they want to do.

Kay Glass: Most of them are just done at home and if they have the body then they'll dress them the way they want.

Harry Leip: Okay, so perhaps on that Saturday morning of the bazaar, you all are caught in the wonder with everyone else who's there to buy one of them, because you don't know what's going to be unveiled.

Kay Glass: Exactly.

Harry Leip: Could be another bishop or it could be something as outrageous as, again, I think my personal favorite's got to be the hula mouse. So that sounds like some of the wonder of this activity.

Sharon Sessions: We do have some ladies who will, if we ask them to commission one for us, and my daughter, she asked to commission a Mrs. Obama mouse and so I should have brought it, but yeah, she has it with the

elegant gown and the hair and she has a big pole standing here that says "Obama for President." So yeah, it's really cool. You can ask. Also besides the mice that are like this, we have one lady who just absolutely does wondrous things with these. She will take like, I have one that has a spinning Christmas ornament that looks like the old fashioned candy that you used to make. And she has a little mouse hooked on to there like he's climbing the thing up the rack.

I have one that's a round ball and the mouse is sitting up on top. It's for Christmas. It's decorated in Christmas and snowflakes and things like that. Not last year, but the year before, they had one that was sitting on a pedestal like this that had a grand piano and the guy that had a tuxedo on playing the piano. So they get really, really incredible.

Harry Leip: And I understand the one, if I read it correctly, the one with the grand piano went for a significant amount of money.

Kay Glass: Yeah. About \$150.00.

Harry Leip: Oh my gosh. That's tremendous! So there's true, not only whimsy of this, but true artistry involved. So I have to ask though, do you have a little competition going on because I could imagine when people bring their wares in December to this, there's a little bit of, "Oh, they did this this year." And, "Oh, they did that." So, maybe healthy competition or ...

Kay Glass: Maybe, but I don't think so. I think everyone is just so happy to see what somebody else has done, like, "Oh my, you did this! You said you were going to and now you've done it and this is wonderful!" Yeah.

Sharon Sessions: I was Sunday school coordinator for 17 years and when I quit they gave me a party at the end and I got a box that's about this big and inside the box ..."

Harry Leip: Like a small shoe box.

Sharon Sessions: Well, plastic.

Kay Glass: Acrylic box.

Sharon Sessions: Acrylic box, so you can see through it, is the Christmas pageant that we have every year. It has Gabriel in the back. It has Mary and Joseph and the baby in the front. Then it has little angels on the side and then little shepherds on the ... and it even has a donkey and a sheep. It's gorgeous.

Harry Leip: All hand-made.

Sharon Sessions: All hand-made and I've only known two that have been made and oh, it's gor- I should have brought it. It's just gorgeous. So ...

Harry Leip: And that's, I can only imagine. That's such a keepsake.

Sharon Sessions: Oh yeah, nobody touches that thing.

Harry Leip: Do you have an idea of how many, again I'm asking on the spur of the moment, how much time one of these mice represents with the sewing and the costuming. Any idea how much time?

Sharon Sessions: I never thought about it.

Kay Glass: I would say eight to 10 hours, because it's such intricate, small work and maybe some of the others even more than that.

Harry Leip: Okay, so each one of these represents an investment of time that someone is doing out of their heart and out of their creativity in honor of hopefully raising funds to go to outreach. One of the stories you shared before we went on the air was that it's not just Calvary people making the mice, it's now, you've got others in the community that even though they're not directly a parishioner have helped in the endeavor and have learned to make the mice and do costuming. Do I remember that correctly?

Kay Glass: That's true. That's true. One of the ladies last year made a Betsy Ross on a little walnut pedestal with a little bitty spinning wheel and she had a flag draped over her lap and that was very, very cute.

Harry Leip: That is wonderful. It's just, in my mind, that idea, there's not ... there's probably even with the mighty Internet, there's probably not a site people can go to to say what does a mice look like for Betsy Ross. Instead, someone had to dream it.

Sharon Sessions: Exactly.

Harry Leip: And then have the creativity and the passion to bring it to life.

Sharon Sessions: Exactly.

Kay Glass: We also have, every year, the chairman or co-chairman or whatever of the bazaar picks somebody for "Mouse of the Year." Somebody who we feel has done a good job not only for the bazaar, but for the parish and you know, worked hard and didn't say much about anything and they always, they make a little mouse that depicts their works in the church.

Harry Leip: Really. So, it goes to a parishioner and they're awarded the "Mouse of the Year," which is truly a mouse that is sort of representative of them and their gifts and their service. That is wonderful. So we have here a Mouse of the Year that went, oh Sharon, to yourself. And we're looking at a mouse that looks quite culinary. I'm seeing a lot of baked goods.

Kay Glass: A bakery mouse.

Harry Leip: Bakery mouse. So I'm just going to make a wild guess that you're known for your baking in the community.

Sharon Sessions: Right. Kay and I do the bakery at the bazaar.

Harry Leip: Wonderful. And I believe we will have the picture of this mighty mouse along with the podcast materials, because she is not to be missed. She looks very happy with all her goodies. So, I wanted to take a step out and enlarge this conversation a little bit. So the mice are part of a greater St. Nicholas bazaar and that's usually the first Saturday in December?

Sharon Sessions: True.

Harry Leip: And can you talk about what is the purpose of the bazaar outside of fostering creativity and bringing the community together, what is the hope of the bazaar?

Kay Glass: The hope of the bazaar is to raise money for outreach. I'm not sure just exactly how much money we have given to outreach, but it averages anywhere from \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year.

Harry Leip: Oh my gosh.

Kay Glass: Various organizations in Columbia will petition for some of the money or all of the money or whatever we're able to give and this year we were able to give \$11,500 and it went to 10 organizations.

Harry Leip: And it looks like from the material I have that some of those recipients were groups like Room at the Inn, Voluntary Action Center, Columbia Center for Urban Development. So how does that come about when you generate these wonderful funds? Does that go to your rector to decide where the money goes to? How is that discernment done?

Kay Glass: There is a committee who takes all of the applications and visits with people. I was part of the committee this year. This is with the voluntary action committee. We go back and meet again and then decide, this one maybe should have this much, got this much last year, maybe we should let's give them a little bit more this year. Or whatever. The Urban Development is a city garden and you can buy a row in the garden or a

half a row or whatever. We supported them for several years because they give that back to the food pantry and then the food pantry I think gets a little bit of money too.

Harry Leip: That's wonderful. So, if I am putting it all together, it sounds like the community plans the event and the community puts it on and the community finds ways to take the proceeds and build community outside of the walls of Calvary.

Kay Glass: And the community benefits then also.

Harry Leip: Wow. So you're not only building the church, you're building the greater community.

Kay Glass: Yes.

Harry Leip: Wow. So I'm embarrassed to say I have never attended this mighty event. So I understand this has quite the reputation since its been going on for a number of years. On Saturday of the bazaar, what time does it start, but more importantly, what time do people start lining up for this event?

Kay Glass: It starts at 8:00 in the morning.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Kay Glass: The parishioners and workers and all this other stuff, they get there between 6:00 and 6:30 and ...

Harry Leip: So if I want my pick of the litter, if I want my mouse, what time do I need to get there?

Kay Glass: Probably about 5:30.

Harry Leip: Oh my goodness. So this is like picking up major concert tickets.

Sharon Sessions: Right.

Kay Glass: Exactly

Harry Leip: Okay. So you have people and December's not one of our more warm months.

Kay Glass: No.

Sharon Sessions: This past year wasn't too bad, but there's been years where

Kay Glass: There was snow everywhere

Sharon Sessions: Snow and ...

Kay Glass: Yeah.

Harry Leip: So you have people who are lining up hours ahead of time to get in the door. Okay, so I'm sensing a little crowd control, so when you open the doors, how do you do traffic so that one person doesn't come in and swoop up a whole clan of mice?

Sharon Sessions: Well, they do rush in and they head straight to the mouse room. And, they form a line and there's only 10 people that can go in the mouse room at a time.

Kay Glass: Five.

Sharon Sessions: Oh I thought it was 10.

Kay Glass: Five.

Sharon Sessions: Okay ...

Harry Leip: Small numbers.

Sharon Sessions: Small numbers. And then once they get a mouse, then they can leave ...

Harry Leip: A single mouse.

Kay Glass: One mouse.

Sharon Sessions: And then they can go back to the end of the line if there's any left. Some people do manage to get back to the end of the line and get more than one mouse.

Harry Leip: Like a roller coaster.

Kay Glass: Right.

Sharon Sessions: It's what it is. And then we kind of just stand around for a little bit until all the mice are gone and then they come to our room. And there's like what, six or seven different rooms. There's the bakery. There's what we call hand goods or hand-mades which are knitting and towels and all kinds of just hand made

Kay Glass: Textiles.

Sharon Sessions: Right. Christmas ornaments. We have the fine things room which can be anywhere from a silver tray to a necklace to anything like that. And we have the country breakfast and that's country ham and grits and apples and biscuits and gravy and that's well-attended.

Harry Leip: Because when you're waiting in line for two hours you probably get hungry. I love it. Love it. They're fixing that need, that's perfect.

Sharon Sessions: What am I missing?

Kay Glass: The white elephants.

Sharon Sessions: Oh, the white elephants. Everybody brings their white elephants and they start, they try to start in the middle of the summer time, but we hold them off until November.

Harry Leip: And just in case people don't understand what a white elephant is. If you can help us with that.

Kay Glass: Garage sale ... flea market.

Sharon Sessions: We changed the name of it because Kay and I were the coordinators these past two years so we changed the names of some of the places and we now call it the marketplace.

Harry Leip: Okay, okay.

Sharon Sessions: And then we have a book room and then we have a kids room. We have a very cute little room that's called, "The Children's Room." And it is hand-made stuff for children to buy for like their parents or their sisters or their friends and the price is like 50 cents or a dollar and that's it. And oh there's all kinds of cute little stuff. I mean, they've even made tiny little mouse on key rings to sell to these people. Yeah, or sell to the kids.

Harry Leip: And this all happens under Calvary's roof.

Kay Glass: Yes.

Sharon Sessions: All of it.

Kay Glass: Yes.

Harry Leip: So, if I were to attend the next one in December, how many people ... I can't even imagine how many people would be coming in, because that's got to be dozens of people for the mice coming in, eating, shopping and since you all are located in the heart of Columbia in the business district,

just two or three blocks off campus, I'm assuming you see a lot of people that Saturday.

Sharon Sessions: Well, we do. And they come in, the first time that Kay and I, well the first time that anybody has ever counted how many people ate at the breakfast was this last year and we told those people if they throw those tickets away they are dead meat. And I mean we tried it the year before and they threw them away. So we had somebody standing there holding them and they served 125 adults and something like 10 or 11 kids.

Harry Leip: Between the hours of ...

Kay Glass: 8 and 12:00.

Sharon Sessions: Yeah.

Harry Leip: Holy cow.

Sharon Sessions: Actually, they closed down what, about 11, 11:30, somewhere around there.

Harry Leip: Wow.

Sharon Sessions: 125 people, but that doesn't count the people that donate and it's kind of fun because as many years as Kay and I have been doing this, we've gotten to know the people who come and who come for the mice or who come for our food or who come for hand-made things and you really, really get to know these people.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Kay Glass: And they will, in the bakery they will look for specific things. You guys don't have this this year. No ...

Sharon Sessions: That's right.

Kay Glass: Sorry.

Sharon Sessions: Yeah.

Harry Leip: They know what they want. They've got that pecan roll last year and where is it this year.

Kay Glass: That's right, so you didn't make one this year, so ...

Sharon Sessions: And we have a dentist who makes caramels and boy when they don't show up, people get upset.

Harry Leip: A dentist who does caramels. That sounds like he's sort of working that to his advantage it sounds like.

Sharon Sessions: But they are just wonderful.

Harry Leip: That sounds great. So as part of that, I'm seeing all these people coming in and out like you said you've got regulars. So one of the ways it sounds like that Calvary is known in the community is because you open your doors and have this wonderful city-wide event. What is, outside of people being upset when their caramels are missing, what do you hear from people? I mean, they may not use those church words, but what do they say to you all about opening your doors and being, letting the community in like that?

Kay Glass: I think once they saw the posters that we put up to specify where all the money went from the previous bazaars, I think they were surprised that we were able to give that much money to that many organizations and I think that in the back of their mind they're thinking, eh, this isn't not so bad.

Harry Leip: Absolutely.

Kay Glass: And 30 years ago when I started going to Calvary, there were more bazaars all over town. There might have been five on that Saturday. I think now there's only two.

Sharon Sessions: I think there's three.

Kay Glass: Two or three, yeah. And so it's not quite as big a thing as it used to be, but we're still there and we're still going to do it.

Sharon Sessions: And people say, "Oh, this is the best bazaar I go to."

Kay Glass: Yeah.

Harry Leip: Right. Where else are you going to get mice?

Kay Glass: Exactly. And these little things have a true following.

Sharon Sessions: Oh, they do.

Kay Glass: There are people that seriously collect these. They do not care how much they cost. They average about \$25, \$35, maybe \$40.

Sharon Sessions: Up to \$100.

Kay Glass: Per mouse and then once you start adding things to it, that's when the price goes higher and higher and higher.

Sharon Sessions: We had a lady who died. She willed her mice back to the church. She willed them to the church and she told them if we wanted to sell them that we could sell them, but they built a little wall space in the office and that's where they sit.

Harry Leip: Oh my goodness.

Sharon Sessions: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's kind of a neat thing.

Kay Glass: Yeah.

Harry Leip: That is. Because that shows at least to me some connectivity that someone would have their wherewithal to say I want these mice to go back to the community where they came from and see what the community does with them. That's a great story.

I think my last question is, anything that you're aware of, any special nice coming into this December that you've heard about? Any rumors that you ... Now I know you're probably both under secrecy oaths, but ...

Sharon Sessions: They don't really tell anybody, they just show up. Like my sister makes them and I have no clue what she's going to make this year. I know she always makes the original red, but she makes other ones. So, I'm not exactly sure what she'll have with the red ones that she does make.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Kay Glass: Didn't she make a John the Baptist one year?

Sharon Sessions: Oh yes she did. It was kind of cute.

Kay Glass: With the little hair shirt and everything. It was really cute.

Sharon Sessions: It was kind of a dirty little old ...

Harry Leip: Yes, because of course mice need hair shirts after John the Baptist of course.

Sharon Sessions: Of course!

Harry Leip: All right. Well then, I'm sure our listeners will be waiting eagerly for December to see ... And I forgot to ask, so how many mice are usually displayed for the event with everyone, in general?

Sharon Sessions: Oh my gosh.

Kay Glass: We probably have no less than 40.

Sharon Sessions: That are on the shelf.

Kay Glass: That are for sale. No less than. So it can be much more than that.

Harry Leip: Sure.

Sharon Sessions: Oh yeah. And what they do is they put a variety ... They have like stair steps and they put a variety on that and then when one is sold, then back behind they just bring one up and they replace it. It may not be the same mouse, but it's a replacement.

Harry Leip: So, if someone takes the John the Baptist you've had your eyes on, maybe you get a Mary Magdalene Mouse.

Sharon Sessions: Yes.

Harry Leip: So okay, so part of it is this random

Kay Glass: It's very random.

Sharon Sessions: Very.

Kay Glass: And you will see more of the choir and acolyte and lay reader mice than you will ... there may only be one 50's mouse.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Kay Glass: Or there may be one Peter Rabbit or whatever. Maybe a couple of bishops.

Harry Leip: Okay.

Kay Glass: But maybe one will be dressed in red.

Harry Leip: There you go.

Kay Glass: Cardinal Red.

Sharon Sessions: They even make a Truman the Tiger mouse. And you know I should have brought ... I have one, but I don't know where it is.

Kay Glass: I don't know.

Harry Leip: I'm sure he's somewhere safe. Well, ladies, thank you for this time and I will just put in a plug. I think maybe this may be the year of a deacon mouse. I'll just put it out there.

Sharon Sessions: Never thought of that!

Harry Leip: Ladies again, thank you very much for this illuminating, illuminating conversation and again, thank you for bringing your little friends with us.

Sharon Sessions: Oh all right.

Kay Glass: Thank you very much for having us.

Sharon Sessions: Thank you very much.