

The Unpainted Door

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Acts 2:1-4. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.”

It began with spaghetti, garlic bread and corn. The next day it was homemade jambalaya, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, and the tastiest homemade apple cake fresh out of the oven, still warm. Not what you might think of when you think of a sacred meal; but through these seemingly simple elements, through the breaking of THIS bread, the spirit of God was revealed to us. Communion was shared. Community was created. And entire worldviews were changed. The presiding minister to this act of worship was a woman we came to affectionately know as Mama Jackson. The matriarch of Carroll Street.

What we witnessed, and became active participants in, was a community that was living out the principles of collectivism. Where people live by the idea that the ‘we’ is more important than ‘me.’ And I am sorry to say that these ideas, these communal principals were ideas that was completely foreign to all of our high school students. They had never before witnessed a community of people who put the needs of the community before the needs of the individual.

They have been taught that we, as white, middle class Americans, living in this society that we have created, are a society of individualists. To quote the AP Psychology book used in the GHS Cambridge program, “The United States, outside the Deep South, is the most extreme example of an individualistic culture.” Individualism, as defined by

Richard Myers, (the author of this book), means ‘giving priority to one’s own goals over groups goals, and defining one’s identity in terms of personal attributes and achievements rather than group identifications.’”

16 year old Hannah McInnes-Dean is the one who pointed this out to the group on Tuesday night of Work Tour. And she and I have continued these discussions since. (I was trying to get her to speak today, but she didn’t take the bait.) This observation broke our hearts. What has happened to our world, when our young people have no concept of what it means to live in a “beloved community” (as Martin Luther King Junior envisioned)? Have we become so staunch in our individualism that we don’t even remember how to connect to one another through community? Have we created a world of impassible thresholds? Do we even know how to let each other into our lives anymore? These are the questions that we wrestled with on this years’ Work Tour. It was the heart and soul of Mama Jackson, the matriarch of Carroll Street, who opened up her doors and let us see that a beloved community is one where neighbors walk into each others homes without knocking, whose children play in the front yard without fear. The beloved community is a place where people work together to help out in a time of need, but who know each other well enough to not even have to ask.

When do we create ‘the beloved community?’ When do we reach out to each other? Often it is at two of the most important transition times in this life. The time of birth, and the time of death. What do we do? We bring food. There is nothing that we love more than to flood the families of newborns and families of newly deceased with casseroles and lasagnas and salads and desserts. This is something we can do, and we’re good at it.

But what happens? We come to the door, knock, the door opens, and we say, “Here you go. We’re thinking of you.” All too often, the threshold is never crossed.

I’ve led a lot of work tours in my life. This was my 10th as leader, 14th as participant. And, one thing I’ve learned over time is that you can never predict what your relationship will be with those whom you try to help. Sometimes I struggle to make sense of an unwelcoming, unengaged homeowner, who barely acknowledges our hard work and efforts. But sometimes we are given a glimpse of God, and we get to meet extraordinary people, like Mama Jackson. You can learn a lot about people when you spend a few days painting their homes. You learn even more when they invite you into their lives, and share their stories with you. What we observed on Carroll Street was a revolving door family. There was Alex, who we called, “the Preacher,” a 9-year-old kid who followed us around and was eager to help, and be included. There was Roosevelt, the young man from across the street who answered all of our questions and wasn’t afraid to stand around and chat. There was Octavius, a middle schooler, who took great pride in hunting down Mikey Bird and Hayden Chance, engaging in epic battles of pterodactyls and vampires. And there was Chloe, Mama Jackson’s three-year-old granddaughter who was the key that unlocked the door for us. God bless the three-year-old mind that can see past the color of our skin, see beyond our socio-economic standing, and see through our cultural backgrounds. Chloe was the spirit of God that week. She was the Holy Spirit Fire that transformed us all. When Mama Jackson; who made us food, laughed with us, and welcomed us into this community, saw the way our kids interacted with her granddaughter, she knew we were something special, too.

The day of Pentecost is the day we recognize the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the creation of the Christian church. In the book of Acts, the disciples and followers of Jesus are still moping around, trying to figure out what to do with themselves now that Jesus is gone. But along comes the Holy Spirit, which sits as a tongue of fire upon their heads, and gives them the gift of gab, to go out and ‘preach to all nations’ as Luke had earlier predicted. While I appreciate this story as a lesson in the gift of the Holy Spirit, or as the impetus to get the disciples out into the streets, preaching the gospel, or as the birthday of the Christian church, what I really believe this story is about is transformation. Pentecost is a testament to the transformative power of God that shakes our foundations and changes our outlooks and attitudes. And that is exactly what I believe happened for us on this year's work tour.

Paul's letter to the Romans says, “do not be conformed to this world, but be TRANSFORMED by the renewal of your minds, that you might discern what is the will of God.” The unpainted door of Mama Jackson's house became the liminal place for us. We witnessed a community who lived with each other's best interests at heart. And we were transformed.

We live in a world where individuality is a badge of honor; where people subscribe to the notion that ‘good fences make good neighbors.’ What will it take for our culture to change, away from virtual relationships and text message conversations to real people engaging in real conversations, in real life?

Does it take a crisis of Katrina proportions to get us out of our front doors and into our front lawns? I pray that it does not. And I believe that we can start, right here, right now, TODAY working to bring about a beloved community. Let's take a cue from our African

American brothers and sisters and build a little communal spirit here in this church, right now...Can I get an Amen?

Lets begin by looking at our lives. Where can you foster a greater sense of community? I drop my son off at his preschool every day. Every day I see a man who is cut from the same clothe as me, meaning, he is a small brown man with a beard. I see him all over town. One day I saw him three times in the same day, at drop off, at the vet, and later at the gym. I've waved, I've nodded, but I've never gotten an acknowledgement back. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to stop him next time I see him and introduce myself. Can I get an Amen? Who is someone you interact with everyday? I challenge you to introduce yourself. Do what my in-laws do. Grab a lawn chair, go down to the end of the driveway and see who stops by. I swear, it's like a magnet for the neighborhood. People gravitate together.

What can we do in our work environments to foster a better community. I've got a suggestion. Emails. Drop them. If you can't say it in three lines or less, pick up the phone and call. A little human contact is good for you. I am also a big advocate for the hand written note. Every hand written note that I've received from one of you sits in a file folder in my office. I cherish those times when you took the effort and thought of me. There is something very personal in the scrawl of the pen on paper. Oh, and another thing...don't send 16 emails in the same week. If we have to communicate that much, let's sit down together, face-to-face, and have a chat. Can we reduce our virtual footprint in this world, people? Amen.

I've got another one for you. Go to the farmers market. It is a wonder to behold. I get a little thrill every time I get to the downtown Gainesville one on Wednesdays. I think we

have a beautiful city square. And it is such a joy to meet the different farmers from all around the area, who work the land and bring forth life and have it to share with the rest of us. It's a perfect metaphor—walk away from the mass produced, cellophane wrapped veggibot of Publix once a week, and meet the people who till the fields. Ask them the best way to prepare the summer squash. What a blessing! You might have to take off work a little early to get there, but it is time well spent. You might spend a little more for your green beans and blueberries, but isn't it worth it, to support the local farmer, and to interact, to create a little community while you do? Amen?

I've got one more for you, and then I challenge you to think of what you can do to inspire others to create a more beautiful community. Here it is. Volunteer a few hours at this week's All Church Rummage Sale. The foundation of our three-year plan is to create better connections with each other. Remember the beloved community that was created at the All Church Retreat? Let's keep that spirit going this weekend at the all church Rummage Sale. Come on by and contribute some time. This is an act of service that you can do for the children of this church. Most proceeds are going to purchase new, much needed playground equipment. But this is an act of service to our community as well. Think if it. There will potentially be hundreds of people, not a part of our faith community, who will be roaming our halls, looking for a few good deals, maybe looking for some much needed items. What will their sense of the United Church of Gainesville be? I pray that they will see you as I see you; as a warm and welcoming community of faith, eager to help out a person in need, but always willing to have a good time in doing so. Amen?

I believe that the beloved community is a community that is willing to leave the doors wide open. Together we can create a place of transformation and foster a true understanding of what it means to be a part of each other's lives. What our high schoolers experienced with the Carroll Street community this year was a transformative vision for a more beautiful community. Some of the lessons that were learned: Give thanks for every threshold you cross. Say a prayer every time a door is opened to you. Take a breath and open your senses to the possibility of spirit that exists within us all. And don't be afraid if the spirit of God moves you to knock on the doors of others, inviting them to join you in this beautiful community. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed, by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern the will of God. Amen.

Spirit of Hopeful possibility,

You burst into our lives at unexpected times, in unexpected places, and you set the world on fire with your love. Yet some days it feels more like we are the disciples, waiting in the upper room, waiting for a sign from you. We know what we want...we want a more hopeful tomorrow. We want more intimate communities. We want to know we are loved, and we want to be inspired in new ways. We know what we want...but we are afraid to ask for it. We are afraid to open up the doors to the world beyond, afraid to leave our cozy yet isolated islands for fear that we might lose the very things we are hoping for. I pray, lord, send your spirit on your world, that we might be inspired to greatness. Transform our minds one more time, that we may participate in your beloved community. Send your spirit again, that we might know your ways on earth, as it is in heaven.