

Biweekly \$7.95

June 24, 2015

THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.



Reversal



REVERSAL

I walked to the front steps of a small bungalow, where a middle-aged black woman met me. I told her I was the chaplain from hospice, and she expressed gratitude for my coming. She told me her mother had a bad night and wasn't very responsive. She took me down the hall to where her mother lay in a hospital bed, photos of her children hanging on the wall.

I introduced myself, asked a few questions, and offered a prayer. I could see that this tiny, frail woman was nearing the end of her journey. She hardly had enough energy for our brief conversation. I asked a final question: "Do you have a favorite hymn?" There was a long pause. I thought she was asleep or just not answering.

Then, with her eyes still closed, she began to sing, "Pass me not, O gentle Savior, hear my humble cry; while on others thou art calling, do not pass me by. Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry; while on others thou art calling, do not pass me by." Her voice was frail, but the melody was clear and true.

About a week later I pulled into the driveway, and before I was out of the car the daughter came to the door in tears. She said, "Pastor, pastor, I'm so glad you are here. Momma's taken a turn for the worse. She isn't doing well. I was hoping you would come."

This time there was no response from the woman. Her breathing was labored, and her eyes were closed. The daughter was tearful and left the room. I said a few words, said a prayer, then began to sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound . . ."

Later I got word that she died that night. I called to check on the daughter. When she answered I could hear excitement in her voice. She told me she was fine and having some quiet time alone, but that she was really glad to hear from me because she had something she needed to share.

"When I was a child, my mom used to ask me to sing to her and to sing in church. I never did. I didn't think I could. All through my growing up, she begged me to sing until finally I said to her, 'No, Mamma, stop asking me to sing to you. I promise you, I will sing for you before you die, but please don't ask me again.'"

"I never sang to her. I never remembered my promise until I heard you singing to her. Then I remembered and when you left, I got her hymnbook, and I sang to her. And then she died."

*Judy Worthington
Franktown, Virginia*

Reaching out to ALL God's people!" The leadership of the church had enthusiastically endorsed the new slogan. I proclaimed it from the pulpit. We exclaimed it in bold print on our flyers.

And then God gave us Joshua. Joshua showed up disheveled and smelling bad. He asked for money before the service and during the passing of the peace. He sidled up to people at fellowship time with stories of hardship. He kept coming back week after week.

“God put him here for a reason,” I told the congregation. “He walks past three or four different churches to get to our church on a regular basis. Why do you think that is?” *God, can you clue me in? I prayed. Why is Joshua with us? What are you doing?*

Joshua became legendary. Everyone had an opinion about his situation. Some were brave enough to wonder aloud if “reaching out to ALL God’s people” was a good idea. Others felt called to provide.

One Sunday, after telling his week’s story of his hardship and asking for money, he approached members of the mission team and asked for one of the penny banks they were passing out for donations to the Heifer Fund. He wanted to donate to the campaign.

Another Sunday, he came up to me with a bulletin insert in his hand. “This says you need volunteers for the strawberry festival. Can I help, Pastor Sue? Please, Pastor Sue.” He had a habit of always calling me Pastor Sue when asking for something, as if he was reminding me of my role as his pastor.

“Yes, you can volunteer,” I told him, wondering how the planning committee would respond. “We haven’t assigned jobs yet, so we will get back to you on what you will be doing.” *God, are you serious?*

The committee accepted Joshua’s offer of help with something between hesitant grace and holy obligation. After a frank discussion about hygiene, he showed up showered, in clean clothes, and desperately eager to please.

I entertained the thought that maybe, just maybe, we were making a difference in his life. We were providing for the “least of these” and showing him how to live in the world. Like most Christians, I’m a sucker for redemption stories. I told everyone how he put down his phone and picked up the hymnal during worship.

But a few weeks later, things began to fall apart. He’d gotten a big check, cashed it, and bought stereo equipment instead of paying his rent. A few weeks after that he invited some people to crash at his place. Now four people were crammed into his two-room apartment, and he couldn’t figure out how to get them to leave. His partner, Kelly, had mental health issues, which now flared up.

Kelly was put in a locked-down mental health unit. Joshua had no way to get there during the two-hour visiting window, so he asked me to drive him. It was a short drive, and we were well enough acquainted for me to believe that he was not dangerous. Nonetheless, I let everyone know what I was doing.

“Can I put these clothes for Kelly in the backseat, Pastor Sue?” I nodded. He tossed a bag of what looked and smelled like dirty clothes in the backseat, got into the passenger seat, and put up his window. I arranged the vents so that I would have fresh air to breathe. He thanked me profusely. As we drove, I asked him if he knew what to expect. He didn’t.

“We will go in and you will have to put all of your things in a locker, then they will wave a wand around your body to make sure you don’t have any metal on you or anything that might be like a weapon. We will sit at a table and you can talk to Kelly, but you will not be allowed to touch her. If she gets upset, you will have to leave. Do you understand?”

He was silent for a moment.

“Will you go in with me, Pastor Sue, please? Please will you go with me?” he pleaded like a child.

“Yes, Joshua, I will go in with you.” *When will this end, God?* I asked silently. *We have all given so much.*

We stayed at the hospital for about half an hour. The car ride home was pretty quiet. I was thinking about cutting the grass when I got home. Joshua’s fingers kept jabbing at his phone. I made an effort to be present.

“Are you texting?”

“Downloading music.”

I tried to hide my exasperation. Moments before he had asked for money for food. *Just go with it.* I refocused on the conversation.

“What are you downloading?”

“Alabama. Have you heard of them?”

“Yes. I like the ‘Play Me Some Mountain Music’ song.”

“I like that one. But this here is the best one. Here listen. It’s called ‘Angels Among Us.’ Want to hear it? Can I play it for you, Pastor Sue?” He held his phone near my ear while I drove so that I could hear the song out of the tiny speakers.

Oh, I believe there are angels among us / Sent down to us, from somewhere up above / They come to you and me in our darkest hours / To show us how to live / To teach us how to give / To guide us with the light of love.

I chuckled. *OK, God, I think I get it.*

“What, Pastor Sue?”

“Nothing, Joshua. No wait. Thank you, Joshua. That is a lovely song.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s one of my favorites.”

*Sue Washburn
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

Readers are invited to submit first-person narratives (under 1,000 words) on the following topics:

**Lies
Road**

Deadline: August 1, 2015
Deadline: September 1, 2015

A selection of submissions will be published in the print or web magazine. Authors of the selected essays will receive a free one-year subscription to the magazine. Send essays to lies@christiancentury.org or road@christiancentury.org.