



JONATHAN BROOKS

FOREWORD BY **SHO BARAKA**

PRACTICING PRESENCE IN NEGLECTED NEIGHBORHOODS

Taken from *Church Forsaken* by Jonathan Brooks.
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CHAPTER ONE

WELCOME HOME



As I unpacked my U-Haul truck at my mom's house, I felt a deep pit in my stomach, wondering how I ended up back here. Just months earlier I had been gripped with fear when I received the call telling me that my mom had suffered a stroke while teaching her pre-kindergarten class. I knew it was the right decision to come back to Chicago after graduating from Tuskegee University, but that feeling did not remove the frustration of finally making it out of the inner city just to find myself back again. I am no stranger to moving: I have lived all over the South Side of Chicago and even did a short stint in the south suburb of Robbins. It was difficult to feel at home when coming back to Chicago during my college years because my mom moved to a different house just about every year while I was away. Regardless of how much we moved I always considered myself an Englewood resident. That is because the place I called home was my grandma Thelma's house on the 6400 block of South Wolcott in West Englewood. Although the house is empty now, I have many memories of block parties, games of tag, and long bike rides up and down the

surrounding blocks. Whenever my mom and I fell on hard times, we found ourselves back on this block with the woman who, although not an actual relation, graciously took us in at points when we were homeless.

Despite my conflicted feelings and another unfamiliar home, I had an adopted, six-year-old little brother and a recovering mother. It made sense for me to come home rather than pursue a job somewhere in the south as I had imagined. I wasn't that worried about coming back to Chicago considering I had studied architecture and figured it wouldn't be too difficult to find work in a city known for its world-class architecture. However, I quickly found myself disillusioned with architecture, which made living back home with my mom a big deal. Living there to take care of her and my little brother was one thing, but living there with her taking care of me was another.

Although I was raised in the church, I had only become serious about my Christian faith while in college. I often jokingly tell people that it's hard to move to Alabama and not come back a Christian! In southern states like Alabama entire cities shut down on Sunday because the belief is that they are overwhelmingly Christian. After returning to Chicago in 2002, unsure of what to do with myself, I began working with the youth at Canaan Missionary Baptist Church in the West Englewood community not far from the blocks I frequented as a child. Canaan was a church split from the historic Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church in the Bronzeville community. I was offered this position for two reasons. First, I had an existing relationship with the teens at the church. My mom had started attending the church in 2000, and most of the kids there were the brothers and sisters of friends I grew up with either at Ebenezer or in the community. They already knew me as Jay. Second, to be honest, no one else wanted the job. I also volunteered to serve at the Diamond Academy, the church's afterschool and summer

education program, which worked with youth from the local elementary school.

When I began we had about seven or eight dedicated youth coming to midweek gatherings at Canaan, most of whom were there because their parents were making them come. I entered this position not knowing what I was supposed to do with them and never even having led a formal Bible study. I began by playing a lot of games with them and having pizza nights and lock-ins in the church building. Out of necessity, because I was running out of ideas, I began using our weekly Bible-study time as homework time as well. Many of the students were thankful to be able to receive help with their homework, and even some from the Diamond Academy began to stay for our study times.

This connection of students from the church and the community, although unintentional, was the key to the growth of Canaan's youth ministry. True friendships began to form and we began to travel together to school sporting events and special days. Our bond grew and the students began to invite other friends from the neighborhood to our weekly gatherings. By 2005 we were averaging between sixty and sixty-five students weekly and had formed a collective called "The Fam" with three other South Side youth ministries. These were exciting times. I had become so excited about working with young people that I had gone back to school for a master's degree in education and began teaching in the Chicago public schools.

Much had changed in the three years since my return to Chicago. In 2002, I married my beautiful wife, Michéal, and we had our first daughter, Jasmine, in 2003. Michéal and I had moved into a small apartment in the Bronzeville community near the lakefront and were focusing on our careers and building a future for our family. Michéal was working in business and finance, and I had just begun my career in elementary education. She had been supportive as I

worked with the youth at church, but we also started making plans about our long-term future together. Like most college grads, we had dreams of upward mobility and comfort.

MANY ARE CALLED, SOME ARE FORCED

Jeremiah seems to be writing this letter to Israel to exhort them to see with new eyes the place that God has put them. They had already made up in their minds that this was simply a place of banishment, and this mindset would not allow them to see any of the beautiful attributes of Babylon. Don't get me wrong; he is not advocating the proverbial "lemons-to-lemonade" attitude. Jeremiah truly wanted them to begin to see Babylon with new eyes. While they may have never chosen this destination for themselves, and while the events that led up to this exilic event were horrific, it is the place where God placed them during this season. Jeremiah wants them to move from focusing on punishment to forging a purpose. Instead of asking why God would put them there, he wants them to ask where exactly God has placed them and why.

Although this may seem like semantics, these are two very different questions. The former is a complaint that doesn't seek an answer to the question but rather an excuse to leave. The latter seriously seeks understanding about the new place and God's purpose in placing them there. When you seek God in prayer, are you truly looking for answers or just an excuse to disobey? My wife and I had a plan for our lives and were comfortable with the way things were going. We soon found out that when we get comfortable it becomes easier to ignore God's calling on our lives and pursue what we desire. When comfort becomes our ultimate goal in life, sometimes God has to go to drastic measures to remind us of what we have actually been called to do.

It is obvious from Jeremiah's language that the exiles would have never made the decision on their own to settle down in Babylon.

The violent and horrific experience of being conquered, pillaged, and carried into exile was not God's preferred way of dealing with them or executing his will. However, taking them to this place of exile was God's way of gaining their full attention. There are less painful ways to fulfill God's plan through obedience, but when we decide to be defiant or disobedient, God does what needs to be done.

By 2005 the youth ministry at Canaan was in full force. Not only were we still meeting weekly, but through The Fam collective we had created a group of Friday night gatherings at different churches and organizations across the South Side. I had been a part of pioneering a Christian hip-hop group called Out-World, and we had just finished our first album, *Undivided Attention*, and were traveling and performing throughout the United States. I was enjoying teaching school, I loved my wife and daughter, and I was excited about the direction of my life.

Later that year, Lacy Simpson Jr., the senior pastor of Canaan, asked if he could speak with me in his office before the Sunday service. I had a great relationship with him. We didn't always see eye to eye, but he had been supportive of me as a youth leader even when my tactics and methods had seemed unorthodox. As I walked in to his office, I could feel a palpable tension in the air. He sat behind his desk with his intimidatingly stocked library forming a theological backdrop behind him. He looked at me and began by saying what an amazing job I was doing with the youth ministry and that he hoped I realized how appreciative he was that he never had to worry about what was going on with the youth. I was honored by his words. However, for the first time I realized that I had been so enamored with the youth that I had not paid much attention to what was going on with the rest of the church.

The pastor looked at me and said, "I have a serious question to ask of you and I am not looking for an answer. I just want you to think about it."

With a puzzled look I responded, "I'll definitely listen."

His next question surprised me. "Have you ever considered being a pastor?"

I responded with an emphatic "No!" Then I went on to explain that I was more than happy just working with the youth and teaching school.

He reminded me that he only asked me to think about it and not make a decision right then. Although I had made up my mind and had no plans to even consider his question, I told him I would think about it and I made my way out of his office. I later told my wife what he had asked of me, and we both dismissed it as ridiculous and something we didn't need to take seriously at all.

A few months later, in March 2006, the pastor called me back into the office again and asked if I had considered the question he had asked me previously. I told him no and added that I did not have any interest in being the pastor of a church.

However, this time he followed the question by saying, "Well, I wish you would have thought about it because I have accepted the pastorate of a church back home in North Carolina, where my father used to be pastor. I was hoping to appoint you as the pastor of this church because I am going to be leaving next week."

I was astonished and speechless. He looked at me and said, "I am offering you the position today, and if you take it we will announce next week that you are going to be pastor. If you decide not to take the position, then we will make the congregation aware that the doors of the church will be closing and they should find a new church home."

I sat there puzzled and afraid, wondering how I ever found myself in this position. He went on to say, "Go home and talk it over with your wife. Let me know what you decide and we will move forward from there."

That was the longest week of my life. I reached out to some of my closest friends just to pray because I was so confused and afraid. I waited until later in the week to sit down and talk with my wife. I had pretty much made up my mind that this was not a good idea. I had no experience pastoring a congregation. I had not been to seminary or had any formal training. On top of that, I did not even have a desire to do the job. All those factors, in my opinion, made for an easy decision. I sat down to discuss the decision with Michéal, expecting her to be upset, as she was my biggest advocate when I needed to say no to a request. I often referred to her as my “watch dog.” However, she too had some time to reflect on the decision. After we talked, she sat quietly for a few minutes then looked at me and said, “You know you have to take the position, right?”

I was confused and upset. “What do you mean I have to take the position? I don’t know how to be a pastor!” I yelled.

“I know,” she replied, “but think of all of those young people who come to church because of their relationship with you. How many of them would have their world destroyed if you don’t accept? Not to mention all our friends and family at the church who would be disappointed that you don’t care enough to even give this a try.”

I hated to admit it, but she was right. I reluctantly agreed to accept the position, hoping that it would only be for the interim until the church could find someone qualified to be our pastor.

After spending a week experiencing every possible emotion and trying to figure out what was going on in my life, it was time for the big day. The pastor and I had been speaking all week, and he promised to make sure the transition went well and to give me ongoing support as I stepped into this role. We sat in his office that Sunday morning for what felt like forever before he looked up at me and said, “Follow me.”

We walked out in front of the congregation prior to our musicians getting started with our worship time. He looked out at the

congregation and asked for everyone's attention. I thought it was odd that we were interrupting the beginning of our gathering time, but I assumed he wanted to pray or was just feeling a little more emotional than usual considering the transition that was about to take place. But I could never have imagined what happened next.

He said to the congregation, "Canaan, today is my last Sunday as your pastor."

Many of the congregants looked around confused and shocked.

I was thinking to myself, "Is he really announcing this now?"

He continued, "I know this comes as a surprise to many of you, but I am so glad that God always provides what we need. I am appointing Jonathan as your new pastor. He is more than capable to handle this role. I want you to care for him the way you have for me, support him on this journey, and pray for him daily. Thank you so much for your time."

After he said these words he walked out of the side door of the sanctuary to an already packed truck and drove away! I was left standing all alone in front of the congregation, speechless and completely frozen in place. I could not believe this was happening. This could not be real. I closed my eyes tight, hoping that when I opened them again this would all be a dream. But when I opened them the congregation was still there and in turmoil. I just stood there with no clue what to say.

Thankfully, the chairman of our trustees, Brian Dunn, stood up and said, "Okay, everyone, let's calm down. I know this situation is completely crazy, but I believe we will be okay. We have dealt with some crazy things over the last six years, and if we can endure those, we can endure this. Plus, we need to give this young man a chance. Who knows? He might be exactly what we need."

After his words I felt a little calmer, but I soon realized that our church service had not even begun. Was I expected to deliver a sermon or lead us through the worship? I have never felt more insufficient

or ill-equipped in my life than I did in that moment. Like an angel sent by God, Brian looked up and said, “Here is what we’re going to do: sing a few songs, pray, take up an offering [well, he is a trustee!], and then we will reconvene again next week after we have some time to figure this all out.” He looked at me as if he needed my approval, and I nodded back as if I had actually given it to him. I took my seat in the pulpit behind the lectern, put my head in my hands, and began to weep.

As I have reflected on this experience, I have been able to name it as one of the most difficult and frustrating times in my life. I have also realized that I probably never would have accepted a pastoral position the traditional way. I had already made up my mind that it was an exilic role for me. Although God had been tugging at my heart for years, the pulpit was the last place I wanted to be, and the pastorate was the last job I wanted to do. When we are defiant and disobedient, God turns to alternate means of gaining our attention. While the beginning of my pastoral ministry was unorthodox and frustratingly painful, it is also a reminder of the unrelenting call of God. It is important that we listen when God is speaking to us and that we do not forsake the call of God on our lives. Even more importantly, when God chooses us for a specific place and a specific time, truly there is nothing we can do about it. In the words of Jesus, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). I would add that when we don’t listen to the call, some of us are forced!

Although they were building houses and settling down while in exile, Israel had not yet realized their purpose for being there. They were to be God’s representatives to the Babylonians while living in the last place on earth they would have chosen to be. It took this major turn of events and dramatic displacement for them to even begin to listen to God’s voice. It would have been easy for them to be inwardly focused and only concerned with themselves

while in Babylon. However, the directive to “make yourself at home” pushed them to invest in Babylon in the same way they invested in Jerusalem.

THE NEIGHBORS SHOWED UP

This pastoral transition happened the third Sunday in March 2006. The next few months were like a whirlwind. It is hard to remember the countless meetings I attended. I met with church leaders who were trying to help me step into my pastoral role and assist me in understanding the business side of church affairs. I spoke with members of the church who wanted to remind me of their influence on the previous pastor, as well as the amount of money they had poured into the ministry. I also met with members, some of whom had changed my diapers, who wanted to let me know how much they loved me, but they just could not see me as their pastor, so they needed to leave our church. Those conversations were difficult, but I also had family and friends trying to encourage me when I wanted to give up. Although I often didn’t want to hear it, they would share the typical Christian encouragements like, “God won’t put more on you than you can bear.”

Of course, there was one member of the church oblivious to all that was going on: my mom. She was the epitome of a true black-church mother and still is to this day. She was showing up week after week decked out in her Sunday’s best. Bright suits and church-lady hats were her norm. She found her way to the second row each week and smiled as I gave what I know were rather underwhelming sermons. But by the huge smile on her face and posture of pride she exuded each Sunday, you would never have guessed they were underwhelming. Her unrelenting belief in my abilities as a pastor and preacher must have rubbed off on me because I wanted nothing more than to feel like I had actually earned one of those smiles and amens I was receiving from her.

Conversely, Michéal was having an even more difficult time than I was. I often think back on the dramatic change this must have been for a young wife and mother who dated an architect, married a teacher, but ended up with a pastor. Now she found herself in the most scrutinized position in the African American church: she was a first lady. She often remarks that one week she was just Michéal and no one paid her much attention, but the next week she was expected to dress immaculately, raise flawless and obedient children, and give biblical counsel to any woman in need. The pressure often made both of us question whether we had made the right decision.

However, I resolved to make both my wife and my mom proud and put my best foot forward on one of the biggest days on the black church calendar: Mother's Day. I could think of no better day to prove to everyone, including myself, that I could handle this responsibility. Anyone who knows anything about African American churches knows that there are three major days on the church calendar where you can expect a larger-than-usual crowd. We call those who only show up for these special days "CME members" because they often only attend Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter services.

As I prepared myself for my first Mother's Day as pastor of Canaan, I was determined to emulate perfectly the traditional black preaching I had witnessed as a child growing up at Ebenezer M. B. Church. In its heyday Ebenezer boasted a congregation in the thousands and was a safe haven and connection place for a myriad of blacks who had fled to Chicago looking for jobs and escaping the terror of racially motivated lynchings and other abuses happening in the south. From its pulpit, great black preachers had shared moving sermons that granted strength and encouragement to marginalized communities for decades. I was ready to take my place on the shoulders of these great preachers and deliver a sermon that

would encourage my congregants, lift up the amazing mothers in our congregation, and prove that I was able to handle the weight of this responsibility. I practiced for weeks in the mirror trying to find the right cadence, the perfect mix of poetry and prose, as well as the perfect key for my closing *whoop* (the term used for the melodic and enthusiastic closing of traditional black preaching). If I wanted to show that I could truly carry my weight, I knew that the closing of this sermon was what would seal the deal. I must have spent hours trying to pen the right words. In my mind, everything was riding on this one sermon, and people would either believe I was ready for this or not.

I woke up on that warm Mother's Day morning and felt like it was going to be a special day. I was brimming with confidence, believing I had put in the work to be prepared for this morning, and all I had to do was trust God to take it from there. I even put on a suit and tie, which is a rarity even today, but I knew I needed to look the part of the traditional black pastor that day. Here I was, twenty-six years old, having been pastor for all of eight weeks, and I was ready to show the world that I could pull this off. People walked into the sanctuary in their nicest suits and finest dresses, with white and red flowers pinned to their lapels. (This is another black church tradition: you wear a white flower if your mother is alive and a red if she is deceased.) The worship service was going beautifully, the music was great, and by sermon time almost every pew was filled to capacity. I thought to myself, "This is exactly how I pictured it."

I stood up from my center seat in the pulpit and made my way to the lectern. I thanked everyone for being there, and then I prayed and asked God to lead me to speak on his behalf and not my own. After ending my prayer I looked up at the congregation, and I could see a young man from the neighborhood walk inside the sanctuary and motion to another young man in the back row to come outside.

Now, I knew both of them: the one in the back row was Dionte, who had been in my youth group for the last few years, and the one beckoning him to come out was his friend who had been to Bible studies before. I decided to step back and allow him to step out quickly, which also gave me a moment to catch my breath before I began. Once he made it to the door, I stepped back up to the lectern and asked everyone to open their Bibles.

Just as I was about to name the passage of Scripture, Dionte stepped onto the front steps of the church and a large group of guys rushed him and begin to beat him violently. I could not believe what I was seeing. I yelled at the top of my lungs, “Somebody help Dionte!” I pointed frantically to the back of the sanctuary, but I was the only one viewing this because I was the only minister in the church and the congregation and ushers were all fixed attentively on me. Once people began to turn around there was a large gasp of disbelief. I saw men all over the sanctuary jump up and run to the steps. Yes, you guessed it: a full-out melee broke out on the front steps of the church on Mother’s Day morning!

I took off from the pulpit myself, darting down the side stairs and heading down the side aisle to the door. My mother grabbed me and cried passionately, “No! You are the pastor—you can’t go out there!” Her plea was so passionate and heartfelt it stopped me in my tracks. Then she bear-hugged me and would not let me go. I was now forced to watch this unfold from the aisle of the church, facing the door. Mark Yelverton, the chairman of deacons at the time, was a police officer. He was not on duty but realized he needed to do something. He pulled out his badge and yelled, “Police! Everyone, stop this. I said stop this!” It did not matter. Nothing seemed to work. He was pulled into the brawl with everyone else. After a few minutes I saw him emerge from the crowd again and reach his hand into the air. *Bang! Bang!* He fired two shots straight into the sky. Everyone immediately stopped, and the guys took off

across Garfield Boulevard and disappeared just as quickly as they had shown up.

After this I broke free and ran to the steps to check on the men. It wasn't until I was able to get out there and help some of them up that I realized how serious a brawl this had been. Almost immediately I heard the sirens and I began to worry. I was unsure how this would play out with the authorities, and I also did not want to add any more drama to an already unbelievable Sunday morning. I hurried and got Dionte and all the brothers back inside the sanctuary. I asked for my deacon to remain outside and talk with the authorities when they showed up. To my surprise, not only did the police show up, but ambulances, fire trucks, and even local news media. This was spiraling out of control.

I called my wife outside and asked her if she would handle the media, just let them know that all was fine, that there had been a small misunderstanding but that everything was settled. I reminded her that we did not need them to come inside. The last thing I wanted in the newspaper the next day was a headline that read, "Church Brawl with Community Residents on Mother's Day Morning." After that I locked the front door and went inside the sanctuary. It was then that the magnitude of the moment actually hit me. As I turned around to enter, I saw mothers, wives, and daughters distraughtly hugging their sons, husbands, and fathers, some gently wiping blood from their lips and brow. Dionte's mother, Tanya, who had been coaxed outside, was inconsolable. At this moment I realized what I had been doing before this whole thing had taken place. I remembered I was the pastor and that everyone in the building was looking for me to provide an answer. Walking back down that aisle was one of the longest and most excruciatingly intimidating walks of my life. As I stepped back into the pulpit and back up to the lectern, I wondered to myself what I was supposed to say. I mean, what could I say? Jesus loves us? Happy Mother's Day? Nothing

seemed appropriate, and to this day I only remember saying one line—“Welcome to Canaan Community Church, where guns make the difference!”—which was a play on the church motto that we recited every Sunday.

We were supposed to be the church where *love* makes the difference. I could not reconcile how we had been showing love and yet those young men thought it was fine to interrupt our Sunday morning worship over—as I eventually found out—a missing cellphone. At that opening line, the congregation burst into laughter. I am not exactly sure what I said after that, but I do remember asking, “Why was that okay?” I never preached that great sermon I had worked on for weeks because at that moment it seemed irrelevant.

During the opening plenary session of the 2015 Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) conference in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. Soong Chan-Rah discussed the typical architectural shape of church buildings. They are often supported by a truss system called a Kruk, which I had learned about while earning my architecture degree. The ability of this design to span from one side of the sanctuary to the other without the help of columns, which block views, made it popular. However, when you invert this design, the top of the sanctuary resembles the hull of a boat. This has become symbolic of God’s people being safe in the ark as in the story of Noah.

So, here we were thinking we were safe inside our little ark, clothed in our suits and dresses, and adorned with our little flowers. God quickly reminded us that when it rains in Englewood, it rains on us too. I was so impacted by this moment that I knew our church had to do something different. Delivering a great sermon and proving I could be accepted based on church traditions just didn’t seem important anymore. For weeks I had worked to prepare what I thought was the perfect Mother’s Day message, but God had a

different message to deliver. We were not located in West Englewood to do church as usual. Like the exiles in Babylon, we were placed there to be God's representatives to those around us. It did not matter if this was the last place on earth we would have chosen. We were shown that day that if we were not going to get outside the walls of that building and be kingdom representatives to our neighbors, then God would bring our neighbors inside to us.

WHERE LOVE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Not only were the exiles meant to be God's representatives in the last place they would have chosen, they were also forced to live and love alongside people with whom they would have never chosen to be in relationship. Through the difficult circumstance of displacement and disillusionment, the exiles would learn quickly that they needed these Babylonians. How else would they know what crops to plant, what the seasons were like, or even the best places to set up their dwellings. Sometimes loving and trusting relationships are created under difficult circumstances. You don't really know how much you need people you had previously written off until certain situations arise.

A few weeks after everything regarding the Mother's Day incident had blown over, I had the opportunity to sit down with Dionte. I had been in contact with his mother, trying to make sure he was doing well and trying to convince him that retaliation was not the answer. I was worried that the incident might spark a war or further gunplay, which we did not need. As I sat and spoke with them at the house, I was hoping to apologize for how naïve we had been as a congregation and express that we should have been far more aware of who was coming in and out of the sanctuary.

Dionte was one of the first youth from the community to start coming to my Bible study. Although I knew he still had a connection to the streets, he brought many other young people, including his

mother, to Canaan. As I began to share with him all I was feeling and beg for his forgiveness, he interrupted me and said, “Jay, I just wanna thank ya’ll for what you did for me.”

A little confused by the statement, I looked up and asked, “What do you mean?”

He replied quickly, “I don’t know no other church that would have had my back like y’all did!”

A little smirk came on his face as he continued and said, “You know I don’t necessarily get down with the church thing, but y’all really showed me something that day. I keep telling my boys that it was the church people in they’suits and ties on the steps holding it down, and they can’t believe it!”

I was not sure how to respond. All my Christian doctrine and theology led me to believe that there was no way that what had happened was a good thing. Yet as we sat having this conversation, I saw this young man connecting with our church in a genuine manner for the first time. He wanted to come back and personally thank all the men who had protected him, some of whom he did not even know. He also commented that he wanted to start bringing his sisters and little brother to church as well.

He told me, “I know that my family needs this kind of positivity in our lives, and my mom hasn’t been able to get them here but I will.”

As I listened to him describe his connection to our congregation, all my previous notions of how people connect to the church began to be dismantled. No one had walked this young man down the “Romans Road” of salvation. No one had told him he was a sinner in need of Jesus. But the people of God sacrificed their safety and their own lives in order to save his, and that was having far more impact than the countless Bible studies and sermons he had sat through in the youth group or on Sunday morning. I learned in that moment that it wasn’t my well-prepared sermon, the beautiful

harmonies of our music ministry, or our perfectly planned worship gathering that connected with him. It was not the youth group trips or the years of homework help. What finally connected was the truth that when things got crazy and he needed help, the church was there for him.

As I sat at that table I realized that while he still had not figured out where he stood with God, this young man had made a clear decision on where he stood with the church because the church had stood with him. Often we are so consumed with convincing people that they need Jesus that we fail to show them how much we need them. As the popular saying goes, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” I was learning quickly that we needed to think differently about what it means to be the church. One of the most powerful Sunday gatherings we have ever had at Canaan was when Dionte and his mom returned to thank the congregation for their protection and care.

Once they were done I stood up and told our church something I still say to this day: “After listening and learning from this young man, I now realize that we can forget about being successful or saving souls or whatever else we thought we were doing before Mother’s Day. What God has revealed to me is that we won’t even survive in Englewood until we learn to love all our neighbors the way we love this young man. This is what it means to be the church where love makes the difference.”

Everyone shouted, “Amen!” and with that affirmation we began this journey toward becoming a new church—a journey that has taken us places we would have never imagined.

ROLLING DICE AND WINNING TRUST

During our talk I asked Dionte if he had spoken to his friend who had called him out on the steps that Sunday? He replied, “Nah, not yet, and I don’t really want to ‘cause that whole situation was petty.

I do talk to some of the other guys who were there ‘cause they came to apologize when they realized how stupid it was. They are always talking about the church though.”

Intrigued by that statement, I asked him, “Really? What are they saying?”

Laughing, he said, “They be like, don’t mess with that church on Paulina—they don’t play. They got guns in there and everything.”

A little embarrassed and still worried about retaliation, I replied, “Yeah, I bet they didn’t expect that! Hey, do you think they would want to talk with me?” We looked at each other, smiled, and laughed, agreeing that neither of us thought that would be a good idea.

A couple of weeks later, on a Saturday afternoon, I came to the church to pray and ask for guidance. I had watched the previous pastor lay prostrate at the altar seeking guidance from God. With all that had occurred over the last three months, I was feeling overwhelmed and confused. I had no clue what we were supposed to be doing or what direction our congregation should be moving. While it always seemed a little awkward to me, and I was not excited about lying face down on our church’s dirty carpet, I was desperate, so I decided it was worth a try. I prayed earnestly that day for God to show me what I was supposed to be doing and to give me direction.

The events of Mother’s Day had shaken me to my core, and I just needed to know that Jesus was still with me. After I was done praying I packed up to head to my car and back home to get ready for Sunday morning. As I got ready to drive back to our new apartment in the South Shore neighborhood, I looked across Garfield Boulevard and saw a large group of young men standing on the 5400 block of South Paulina. I could not tell what was going on, but from a block away I could hear the loud talking and laughing. Something about their exuberance drew me in. I debated whether I should go see what was going on. It had been so easy to hang out

when I was working with the youth, but my title of pastor seemed to make everything more complicated. What would they think of me? What was their impression of a pastor? What was their impression of our church, especially after Mother's Day? I sat in my car agonizing over the decision for a few minutes, but I just could not start the car and drive off. Ultimately, I decided to go see what was going on. If we were going to be a new kind of church, then I needed to be a new kind of pastor.

I began walking down the block slowly toward the crowd, and with each step closer and each louder roar of laughter it became clear what was going on. These fellas were gambling, and it seemed to be an exciting game of dice. I walked up to the crowd unassumingly while one brother shook the dice furiously in his hands, slid them smoothly on the ground, and snapped his fingers with confidence. "Gimme my money!" he shouted.

I blended in well as a twenty-six-year-old, wearing my jeans and gym shoes, with my dreadlocks flowing down my neck. I stood there watching this intense game from a few steps away before I walked up to one of the brothers and said timidly, "Hey, what's up? Who's winning out here?"

He looked at me for a second before he responded arrogantly with, "Why? You trying to lose some money?"

I laughed and responded, "I'd have to have some money to lose first."

He looked back at me and said, "I feel that, plus I don't like taking strangers' money."

I said, "Thanks, I appreciate that. Since I don't have any money to lose, how about I at least introduce myself so I won't be a stranger."

He turned around and looked up at my face for the first time. I went on to say, "My name is Jay, and I'm the pastor of the church right up here on Fifty-Fifth."

He looked me up and down as if I was an alien and started laughing. Then he replied, “You ain’t no pastor!”

A little surprised by his response, I quickly asked, “Why do you say that?”

He didn’t really have an answer but followed up with a few more questions. “You mean to tell me you the pastor of that church on the corner? With the stained-glass windows and the steeple? Like, in charge of the whole church?”

“Yup,” I said confidently.

He followed up the statement with another question. “Well, what kind of car you drive?”

I was confused by the question and wasn’t quite sure I understood him correctly. He repeated his question, “What kind of car you drive?”

I gave him a confused look and replied, “A Nissan.”

He smiled at me and then yelled to the rest of the group, “Hey y’all, this the pastor from the church up there on Fifty-Fifth.”

One of the guys responded, “Oh the church where they be beating people up!” And everyone started laughing.

I was a little embarrassed as that was not exactly the reputation I wanted our church to maintain.

He replied, “Nah, Pastor cool though. You see he out here with us while we rolling, and he even say he drive a Nissan.”

You may be wondering why what kind of car I drove made any difference in this encounter. Unfortunately, in many inner-city communities, pastors are looked at as crooks and charlatans out for their own personal gain. Some drive expensive cars, wear tailor-made clothing, and live in large homes in communities far away from their church edifices located in these neglected neighborhoods. While this stereotype is overwhelmingly untrue, whenever you see a popular movie taking place in the inner city, the preacher is often portrayed in this manner. Popular television reality shows have further

perpetuated this image and made it very difficult for the average pastor in these communities to be considered trustworthy.

The game took a brief pause as some of the brothers came over to where we were standing and started to shake my hand and introduce themselves. I asked them how often they were out here. They told me every weekend, as for many of them this was their main source of income because they just were not able to find work. Many of them had children to take care of, and without a steady source of income they were doing whatever they could to provide for them. Many of them explained that they already had run-ins with the police and some of them had spent time in jail. They reminded me of the hard truth for many black men in our country: “You know, once you get locked up it’s like you got a disease or something. Nobody wanna hire you.”

It has been proven that the Chicago Police Department terrorized communities like Englewood for decades using ruthless torture to coerce people into confessing to crimes. Hundreds of people who were tortured still remain locked up in Illinois—many convicted solely because of confessions given after beatings, electric shocks, and other methods of torture.¹ Criminologists have proven repeatedly that when communities distrust or view the police as racist and unfair, the police lose their ability to prevent and solve crimes.²

However, it’s not just police brutality. Chicago’s neighborhoods also have been devastated by mass imprisonment. America already has the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world and Chicago’s West and South Side communities have incarceration rates often triple the national average. Contrary to popular belief, this is not necessarily because more crime occurs in these neighborhoods.”³ As Dominique Gilliard states in his book *Rethinking Incarceration*,

Our justice system is fundamentally broken but so is our vision. We are socialized to see entire ethnic groups as being more prone to criminal activity than others. We are trained by this society to believe

that members of certain communities of color will inevitably end up behind bars. After all, many believe that the statistics validate this belief. Today it is predicted that nationwide one in three black males and one in six Hispanic males will be incarcerated in their lifetime. We have come to accept this as natural.⁴

Rolling dice, pitching pennies, and playing cards were legal ways for these brothers to double and sometimes triple the little money they might make from selling welfare benefits or borrowing from their parents or the mother of their children. A few of them were still resorting to illegal activity to make money, but most of them told me they did not enjoy jail and were not trying to find themselves back there. I also heard stories of how police officers had repeatedly come and broken up their games, making them lay face-down on the ground, expecting to find drugs or weapons. Garfield Boulevard was not only the dividing line between two rival gangs but two very different police districts. South of the boulevard where our church is located is the seventh district police, whose headquarters is located in and serves the Englewood and West Englewood communities. On the north side of the boulevard is the ninth district, which is located in Bridgeport, home to many of our city's mayors, and serves both the Bridgeport and Back of the Yards communities. Bridgeport was notorious as a community in which African Americans and other people of color were not especially welcome. As these brothers continued to talk, I was amazed at how open they were and how much they shared of their personal experiences.

Before I realized it, I had been out there for hours and it was getting dark outside. I asked them if I could come back and hang out next week, and they told me I was always welcome. It really felt good. Before I left I needed to ask them one more question because it was truly bothering me.

I said, "Fellas, before I leave, can I ask why you needed to know what kind of car I drive?"

One of them said to me, “We was just feeling you out—most of these pastors out here getting rich off people who can’t even pay they bills.”

I nodded my head in approval and said, “I’ll remember that,” then turned to leave.

I walked away that day with far more questions than answers and unsure of what had exactly happened. During our conversation Jesus was not mentioned one time, but for the first time since I had become the pastor of Canaan, I really believed he was present and listening to my prayers.

CROSSING THE BOULEVARD

In exile Israel needed to build houses and settle down. They also needed to cross some societal boundaries and do things they had never done before, if they were going to be obedient to the way God had called them to live in Babylon. However, he never asked them to change who they were. The call was for them to be authentically who God had called them to be. Once they were able to recognize that God placed them in Babylon for this reason, the imperative to build houses would make far more sense.

I spent the entire evening thinking about my time with the brothers on Paulina. It was so refreshing. It reminded me of spending time with the youth of the church and community, eating pizza, hanging out, and just listening to each other’s crazy stories. I began to wonder why I had ever hesitated to cross the boulevard in the first place? I had made up in my mind that there was nothing I could learn from those young men, and they would never accept or listen to me either. I had been trying to change my personality to fit into the mold of how a pastor had traditionally looked to me when I was growing up. I did not desire suits and ties but rather jeans and gym shoes. I wore nappy dreadlocks instead of a crisp haircut. I love hip-hop and grew up

listening to Wu-Tang Clan instead of Walter Hawkins, and that was exactly what our community needed.

Being with the young men on Paulina showed me that God wanted to use me just the way I was and not the way I thought I needed to be. They helped me begin to change my view of what it meant to be a pastor and the kind of pastor God was calling me to be. As well as changing my view of myself, those young men helped change my view of the community. Although I had been raised in the community and had been working with youth for the last few years, it was not until I listened to these young men's stories that I understood many of the issues they were facing on a daily basis. Hearing their stories and the reasons behind many of their decisions helped me to better understand the struggles of the community and the necessity of the hope that comes from Jesus. Yes, clearly everything was changing, and it was all because I crossed the boulevard.

Father Kelly is the executive director of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR), which began in 2000 and is located in the Back of the Yards/New City community about a mile north of where the young men I talked to meet every weekend. The organization also houses the Second Chance Alternative High School. Father Kelly, a white priest not from the community, talked to me about the many years of jail ministry, community renewal, and retreat ministry he engaged in prior to starting PBMR: "I was always looking to fix things. While that work was important, the difference in my ministry now is the long-term presence in the community and the ability to see things from a different perspective."

It seems that what was required for me was the same thing required for Father Kelly. He may not have connected culturally as easily as I did, but he was fully present. He crossed his boulevard as well. He had to transition from being a fixer to a listener. We both learned that we should not make judgments about who the

young men in the community were or what they desired out of life. When you meet people where they are and hear their stories your view of them changes. For both Father Kelly and me, relationships changed our views—not only our view of God but our view of the community and ourselves. This all began with the decision to be brave enough to try something different. It began with one step across the boulevard.

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