

Tale of Two Cities

John 4:20

Caitlyn Hathaway
Henrico, Virginia

I'm going to tell you a story this morning, but I want to start with a disclaimer by saying that this story doesn't yet have an end. There will be no "and they all lived happily ever after. The End." This is a story about my life, and it is one that is still unfolding, so I want to invite you to just sit with me for a little while in the discomfort of the unknown.

The story I want to tell you is a tale of two cities, if you will. One of these cities is Columbia, South Carolina, where I have lived and worked with you all for the last year and eight months. And the other is Asheville, North Carolina, where I lived for a year prior to moving to Columbia. Many of you may know that while I was living in Asheville, I was serving as a Young Adult Volunteer, the PC(USA)'s service core. If you've heard me talk about this year at all, you will know that it was totally life-changing.

I lived and served alongside five amazing young women, and our jobs for the year had each of us working with the homeless population in some way. My particular work placement was with an organization called Asheville Youth Mission (AYM). Youth groups from all over the country come to AYM each summer for a week of what they call "mission immersion." I spent most of the academic year writing weekly blog posts, managing social media, and assisting with curriculum development, but on the odd weekend that we had a youth group and all throughout the summer, I got to lead young people in mission and service work around downtown Asheville.

My favorite place to take youth groups was Haywood Street Congregation—a worshipping community created specifically for Asheville's homeless population. Every Wednesday they serve a free community lunch with a worship service to follow. So, every Wednesday we would load up our vehicles with corn hole, giant jenga, frisbees, and a cooler full of popsicles and head to Haywood Street. We'd hang out for several hours on the front lawn, just playing games and sharing popsicles with anyone who might walk up, and then at 1:00 we'd all go inside and worship together.

There is nothing traditional about worship at Haywood Street. The service is led entirely by the congregation, and the congregation is made up almost entirely of people who live on the streets. The cares and concerns of the congregation are not shared by the pastor speaking from the pulpit, but rather by each individual, standing up and naming his or her own struggles and vulnerabilities. And it is not unheard of for the closing hymn to be Prince's *Purple Rain*. But let me tell you, I never truly understood the meaning of communion until it was offered to me by someone who had nothing else to offer.

That year I put names and faces and stories to those I had only formerly known as "the homeless." I met a six-year-old boy who was being raised on the streets by both of his parents and the entire homeless community. It was easy, at first, for me to judge his parents (and Buncombe County's child protective services) for allowing this child to grow up without a roof over his head or the assurance of three square meals

a day. Then I met his father, who loved and protected his child so fiercely; who told me that he was doing the very best he could; who gave three fourths of any meal he was given to his son; who believed so strongly in holding his family together, even though his wife's addiction to drugs and alcohol frequently left them without a place to sleep at night. The lines of right and wrong became just slightly blurred for me.

I came to know and love this family and many others, not just in word but in deed. Professor and activist Dr. Cornel West said, "Justice is what love looks like in public." The people of Asheville invited me into their work of love in public—working to end food insecurity and homelessness; advocating for the rights of the poor, the sick, the elderly, the addicted, the LGBT community, and those who are undocumented. I loved this work because I so deeply loved that community.

My time in Asheville was finished in August of 2016, and I promptly moved to Columbia to begin serving at Shandon and the UKirk Presbyterian Student Center. I came energized and excited to build community and love my new neighbors as much as I had loved my previous ones. I jumped at every opportunity that arose to take the college students to do mission and service work. Until one Tuesday, while we were serving lunch at a local soup kitchen, a violent fight broke out, and John and I found ourselves in a position of needing to get ourselves and our students out of there as quickly as possible. We decided not to bring students back to the soup kitchen to serve until they increased their security measures (which they have, by the way). But for me, the perception of safety within community was shattered. I felt hurt and a little foolish. Sure, I continued teaching and preaching to our college students and youth about radical welcome and acceptance, but in the everyday, I totally retreated into the security of the familiar. I avoided eye contact with those who call Main Street their home, and intentionally did not shop at certain grocery stores where I knew I might be hit up for money. Our scripture this morning says, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen." But I wasn't even seeing my brothers and sisters—how could I possibly have seen God?

In recent months, as I have made more intentional efforts to ground myself in the Columbia community, I have started to step outside of fear and back into love. But like I said, this story does not yet have an ending. And my guess is that I am not the only person in this room who is struggling to love somebody—whatever that may be for you.

That's because the love Christ calls us to is a hard love. In our scripture this morning, the Greek word *agape* is used fourteen times. It is just one of many words the Greeks had for love, meaning "unmerited...self-less and self-giving love," a "love that gives without expecting a return." This kind of love requires us to move love from just a word or a concept that gives us that warm and fuzzy feeling to action that creates space for everyone at God's table, but that makes us uncomfortable in the process. It requires us to put ourselves into situations that are outside of our comfort zone—making eye contact with the homeless person walking down the street; stepping out from behind the glass counter at the soup kitchen; befriending the person who doesn't look, think, act, talk like us—the homeless person, the refugee, the addict, the member of the LGBT community, the immigrant, the northerner, the southerner, the democrat, the republican.

Agape love requires us to lay down our stereotypes and preconceived notions of

people and see them for the fullness of who they are, who God created them to be. To recognize that God loved them, called them, and claimed them as God's own before you ever stepped into the picture. To see them through God's eyes, rather than the world's.

Agape love is also difficult, quite frankly, because some people are just hard to love. This is where I think parents have the leg up on all the rest of us—I can't imagine how hard it was for my mother to love me in my terrible twos and terrible teens.

But ultimately, I think, the hardest part about loving our neighbors in the way Christ calls us is that it requires us to acknowledge brokenness—both in others and in ourselves. Our world tells us that we have to have it all together, that our lives have to be wrapped up in a beautiful box with a big red bow on top. So we often walk around with armor on, not letting anyone see anything within us that might be a little bit messy. But that is not the way to real, genuine, Christ-like love, and it is not the truth about who God says we are. Once we recognize that we are just as broken as everybody else, though maybe in different ways, the walls that divide us can start to come down—walls made up of prejudice, pride, and fear—and we can start to move on to real love for one another.

But there are two sides to this coin; just as we are commonly broken, we also are commonly chosen and loved by God. Author and priest Henri Nouwen writes that to be God's chosen ones means that we have been seen by God from all eternity and seen as unique, special, precious beings.... From all eternity, long before you were born and became a part of history, you existed in God's heart. Long before your parents admired you or your friends acknowledged your gifts or your teachers, colleagues and employers encouraged you, you were already "chosen." The eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value. When love chooses, it chooses with perfect sensitivity for the unique beauty of the chosen one, and it chooses without making anyone else feel excluded (*Life of the Beloved*, p. 45).

Our scripture tells us, "We love *because* God first loved us." It is this very chosenness, this initiating love from God, that makes it possible for us to love like Christ. It is hard. No one ever said it would be easy, but through God's unmerited, self-sacrificing love, we are called, equipped, and freed to love our sisters and brothers in Christ.

In preparation for this sermon, I went on Haywood Street's website, and across the very top were the words to a hymn they are planning to sing together next week. It's an old Shaker hymn, and the words go like this: "If you love not each other/In daily communion,/How can you love God,/Whom you have not seen?/More love, more love,/The heavens are blessing,/The angels are calling,/O Zion, more love."