

## Making Our Community Livable Again

By Matt Clarke

**Disclaimer:** Please know I am writing about the Lord's conviction on me – I am not preaching. I'll leave that to those with that gift.

A community, by its very nature, is a diverse group of people sharing talents, strengths, burdens, and resources for the benefit of everyone within. This was, and still is, a practical way to live; however, few people in America do because of our hard-won independence. Many of us take for granted that our community is simply the neighborhood in which we live. And even if it is, many Americans live in gated communities, have rear entry garages, 8-foot privacy fences around the backyard and hardly know their neighbors beyond the first and last names. (I myself am guilty of the latter three). All of which serve to separate and isolate those on the inside from those on the outside.

Don't get me wrong; safety and security are real, valid concerns in our lives, our city, and our world. However, the Lord calls us to form relationships with people – which is difficult for me to do over my privacy fence. Many times, uncomfortably for me, with people whose value is hard to see on their rough, dirty exterior, and from whom I, until recently, actively sought to be separated. The formerly incarcerated, the currently homeless, the formerly and currently addicted. People who initially seem to be smelly and dirty and seem to want my money only for a "fix" also seem to be the specific people Christ wants me to love; in real, true, physically, and spiritually transforming ways. One thing the Lord has laid on my heart lately is that a neighborhood does not a community make. The dollar I give to a homeless man is not going to change his life in the way Christ yearns for it to be changed – in the same way (truly and meaningfully) that the same Christ changed mine. The meal I serve at a shelter is not making a difference in anyone's life. True, serving a meal is a good thing to do. But dishing the meatloaf and walking away is not enough. The meal is just a catalyst that we should allow to connect us to that person's life and find other needs to meet and to allow them to meet ours. God calls us to be the actual hands and feet of his church, his body. To DO the work, not be the mouth. To live as examples of his radically transforming love and grace. Christ invited the apostles to do the work, not spread the theology. He called sinners and generally messy outcasts to bring His Kingdom to Earth. And he hasn't stop calling us.

Through service in my life - true, gritty, awesome, dirty, lovely, difficult service – I have been shown by God that build loving, honest relationships is what He wants from me and I don't do it enough. But not just with anyone, with the homeless. My wife, Rachel, and I have been serving a Friday evening meal at the Dallas Life Foundation, a homeless shelter, over the past several weeks. At first I was nervous, perhaps a tad scared. But we went and got through it and in doing so, it got through to us. Deeply. To our stereotypes. To our prejudices. To what we thought about "the homeless." I was washing dishes next to men who had been successful in business before a poor choice (something most people can empathize with) derailed their lives and landed them in recovery or on the streets. Rachel was serving food to people whose houses had been foreclosed on and didn't have a plan B, much less enough money saved to keep themselves and their children off the streets. It is a scary thought for many of us that we are two paychecks from being in their same position. By returning the next week, I realized, like I said before: it wasn't the *meal* that changed a life – it was the *relationships*

that were beginning to change *my* life – and here I was thinking not-so-humbly that it was *I* who was serving. The Kingdom of God needs dishwashers. It needs people to mop, and paint, and dish out beans. It needs people, us, to say, “What can I do for you?” And it needs us to recognize the value in others, especially those we (myself included) too often consider without value, by saying, “Can you help me? Would you pray for me?”

God has laid on Rachel’s and my heart to put together an event that would bring members of Christ’s WHOLE body together for fellowship and to begin to build relationships with each other. The event will be called Everybody’s Picnic – because it is literally FOR EVERYBODY, for every part of Christ’s body. It will be held on Saturday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, at Exall Park, east of downtown and north of Baylor Medical Center off Bryan Street and Adair. The purpose is to fellowship, break bread and barriers, have a great time by playing games, and get to know people who have largely been neglected by society and sadly, even by “Christians” and make them feel welcome and loved again.

The picnic will do an amazing thing. It will make us equal. There will be no separation between “the servers” and “the served,” but will unite us as a true community of believers and a true representation of Christ’s body: diverse, unique, equally important, equally valued, and equally loved by God. I encourage everyone reading this to participate, in one way or another. Contact myself or Rachel at [mattrach518@yahoo.com](mailto:mattrach518@yahoo.com) or Shante Buckley at [sbuckley@llumc.org](mailto:sbuckley@llumc.org) for ways to be involved and make a difference, not just in their lives but ours, not just in Dallas but in God’s Kingdom.

Isaiah 58:12 “...You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, **make the community livable again.**”