

Pockets of Hope

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When I think of Baltimore, I often think of my early childhood home with a large magnolia tree in the front yard and a tall, hemlock pine in the back, both of which were places where my siblings and I used to climb and imaginatively play amongst the branches to our hearts content. I think of the Girl Scout cookies my sisters and I would sell in the neighborhood without supervision, pulling our bright red Flyer wagon full of Samoas, Thin Mints, and Trefoils behind us. I was only 6 when we moved away, but I remember even then, after being robbed multiple times and my brother being held up with a gun when he was 10 for his bike, there was an awareness and fear I felt.

It really wasn't until I was older that I began to hear about some of the negative statistics from Baltimore and I came to see some of mine and my siblings' childhood experiences there in a new light. Amidst all of the negative media coverage, it's easy to believe the worst is true of Baltimore, that it continues in a downward spiral and there isn't much hope.

This year, going into City Mission, from the first day, I had an impression of the phrase "It's not a sprint, it's a marathon" on my heart. As an athlete, I've always preferred sprinting over distance running, but I've found that preference to be apparent in my life in more than just a literal sense. The Lord has taught me a lot of patience through the years and through seasons of burn out, He's taught me to pace myself more and rely on Him instead of trying to make change happen all on my own. So when this impression came to my heart, I didn't question it, I knew it instantly and even somewhat unconsciously received it. Looking back now, it feels like a gift from the Holy Spirit because He knows how much I need that reminder since I also tend to carry things pretty deeply and it has the potential to wear me down over time.

I'll be honest...It feels heavy seeing a woman come through a food pantry with her face looking beaten and her eyes red and to watch as they call a volunteer over because she can't walk through by herself. Then overhearing another volunteer reminding her "I'm only a phone call away, okay? One phone call and we can get you out of there." It feels heavy when you walk into a tent city, hidden from the road and see kids running around, documented or not, with people passed out on the ground (you hope it's not worse than that) and you learn that some of these individuals used to be businessmen and women, lawyers, police officers, etc. - people who hadn't spent all of their lives at the bottom. It feels heavy when a woman graduates from a recovery program and runs into someone she once did drugs with on the street, and with one use, she's gone... just as she was beginning to build her life again. It feels heavy knowing that a stone's throw from one of the churches we partner with is the sex trafficking hub of the city.

One evening during our time of sharing, someone from the group stood up and shared about the idea of how these churches, ministries, and organizations that we partner with in the city are like "Pockets of Hope". It felt like the perfect description. That's truly what these places are.

Because of these "Pockets of Hope", as much as we faced heaviness, we also experienced joy and immense encouragement. We got to see how much good is happening on a daily basis to lend a helping hand to people in need, some desperately

so. One of these places, after operating solely as a food pantry for a while, decided to expand and offer a deeper level of care through education, job resources, clothing distribution and more. We toured a large warehouse that is going to be an additional extension of their organization, which is now a non-profit. It is so exciting to see their vision for the future and to think of how many lives will be touched there.

It's a joy working together to be the hands and feet of Christ. Going out as a team and partnering with those who are daily aware of needs in the city already and who are actively giving of their time and resources to be effective - not only is it encouraging to us, it also helps us to make the most of our time there. These "Pockets of Hope" are so essential to the mission there. Without them, not only would we become discouraged and overwhelmed, we would be in over our heads. It's in these places, we're given a tangible reminder that God truly is at work, though He is whether we see it or not. We're not there to fix everything, we're not there to jump in and take over. We're there to walk alongside, to plant seeds, to water seeds, to give a word of encouragement, a smile, or a hug.

The phrase I mentioned earlier, "it's not a sprint, it's a marathon" served as a subtle reminder to me to let go and free my heart from the burden of expectation of wanting to see certain results and change happen, in order to embrace being a part of what God is doing right in front of me. I really felt free to do that.

As I've continued to think about this phrase, I've realized how much it really applies to all of life and ministry as a whole. If we're in this for the long haul, pacing ourselves and living out our callings through the work of the Holy Spirit within us, is essential. Our hearts were never meant to carry the burdens of the whole world. Many of us are often weighed down from the burden of too much news from all over the world, to the point where our discouragement becomes immobilization and we end up doing nothing. *It's just too much.*

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." My prayer is that we would take this to heart. When we give those burdens to God, we free ourselves up to be a vessel for good instead of being so consumed with worry and anxiety that we can't be effective at all. When we leave it in God's hands, it frees us up to allow His love, joy, hope, peace and other fruits of the spirit to take up residence in our hearts and flow out from there. That is such an essential part of being the hands and feet of Christ because those are the things that point others to Christ - the fruit of His spirit within us.

We go, we speak, we care for others and act as His hands and feet, we love, we encourage, we speak the truth... and then we need to let God do the work of the heart. The Holy Spirit changes hearts, not us. It is such an honor to partner with these "Pockets of Hope" in Baltimore - from recovery programs, to food distribution centers and churches in the heart of Baltimore that are out there every day reaching out to the lost, we are so encouraged and excited for what God is doing in this city and are blessed to be a part of it, even in a small way.

Mother Teresa once said, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity, the terrible indifference

toward one's neighbor who lives at the roadside, assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty and disease." Her response to that? "Do small things with great love."

That "small thing" is significant and may have a bigger impact than you or I could ever imagine.

"Now all glory to God, who is able, through His mighty power at work within us, to do infinitely more than we might ask or think." -Ephesians 3:20