

A Tale of Two Buses
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January 25, 2015
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If you had happened to be walking by the Holiday Inn in downtown Bridgeport on Wednesday afternoon,
and if you happened to glance in the plate glass windows as you wandered by,
you would have seen a rather extraordinary sight ...
a gathering of people of all ages,
all colors, all faiths,
hundreds of them, holding hands together,
and swaying back and forth as they sang "We Shall Overcome."
And up at the front of the room, you would have noticed three people up on a dais,
two older black gentleman and one white woman,
leading the singing, tears on their cheeks,
as there were tears on many cheeks.

David and I were there, as were some of you --
we were there to hear those three people speak.
Joan Browning, Dion Diamond and Reginald Green --
three of the original Freedom Riders from the summer of 1961.
All three at the time were young college students,
eager to play their role in changing this nation for the better,
climbing onto buses with other young men and women,
white and black,
taking a ride to Jackson, Mississippi to challenge the Jim Crow laws
that kept blacks and whites apart from each other on public transportation.
The Freedom Rider buses boldly rode into town
with blacks up front and whites in the back
and interracial couples sitting together.
And you know what happened ... one bus firebombed,
riders pulled off buses and beaten,
jailed for weeks at a time, clothes and bedding taken away to humiliate them.
Joan, Dion and Reginald were there.

And they talked about the fear, and the prisons, and the beating.
But most of all they talked about how good it was to be doing good,
to be together on that bus as God's children working for justice.

A whole bunch of young people from Harding High School were there on Wednesday;
the kids had decorated posters that they'd waved out the windows of their schoolbus as
rode through Bridgeport, just like the Freedom Riders had:

"Freedom's Wheels are Rolling" "End Segregation Now".

And several of them stood to ask questions at the end.

"Weren't you scared?" one of them asked. "Weren't you afraid of going down South"?

And Reginald Green said,

"Yes. But you know, there is a feeling you get when you know that you are in exactly the
right place at the right time,

that you are where you are meant to be."

That you are where God wants you to be.

And they *were* where God wanted them to be:

together, on one bus, white and black, showing to a whole nation that everyone is a child
of God,

that everyone belongs, together on one bus.

I found myself crying as Reginald Green spoke --

I wasn't the only one --

and it suddenly occurred to me that the past two weeks of my life had been bookended
by, of all things, busses.

Two buses --

in fact, if this sermon were to have a title,

I would call it a Tale of Two Buses.

Two weeks earlier,

on January 5, I had been sitting on a bus

whose purpose, like those Freedom Buses, is to show that everyone belongs,
that everyone is worthy.

And I'd had tears in my eyes then, too.

The bus that I was on then was a bus called the School on Wheels.

You've heard me talk about it before,
you've heard others talk about it.

It's one of a bunch of good things that we're a part of on the other side of the world,
in the city of Hyderabad, India.

All of us on this month's India mission trip had climbed on board that morning,
but we weren't the first ones on board --

there were forty-some children already there,

on this bus where the seats have been removed,

and the walls decorated with bright pictures and the letters of the alphabet.

The School on Wheels drives to three slums each day,

parking itself beside the ramshackle huts made of discarded plastic and tin.

And the children who live in those slums run to climb on board,

because the bus gives them the things they don't have but should:

a loving teacher, crayons and coloring books, education -- childhood.

Just like the Freedom bus,

this bus says that everyone belongs and everyone is worthy.

So there we were, the twelve of us,

and we each introduced ourselves,

and I used the big plastic globe they had to show them how far we had come to see
them,

and Art Thurnauer gave a beautiful little speech about how precious they each were to
us.

And then they each solemnly introduced themselves.

And there was one boy at the back who caught my eye --

it always seems to be the way that one child somewhere on this trip grabs hold of your
heart until it hurts --

and our friend Mr. Reddy, our Indian partner,

told me that that boy was from another part of India,

couldn't speak the local language in Hyderabad,

worked with his parents selling stone statues of the Gods by the side of the road,

but loved more than anything to be on that bus.

Far from home, a child laborer, knowing no one,

but finding on that bus a place where everyone belongs.

And I couldn't help it, I began to cry.

Tears for a child who lived in a home made of tin sheets and plastic,
tears for a world that is not yet as God created it to be,
but also
tears of joy for a bus where everyone belongs,
tears of thanksgiving for teachers who get up each morning and ride a bus into the
slums
tears of pride for being part of a church that cares.

A tale of two buses --
one, fifty years ago, telling the world: everyone counts, everyone belongs.
The other, right now, telling the world: everyone counts, everyone belongs.

And in truth that's the theme for all our work in India.

Everyone counts, everyone belongs.

If you're new to this church congregation, you might be wondering what this India stuff is.
Thirty-one years ago, David started a little charity called Friends of Christ in India,
created simply to raise funds *here* so that good people doing God's work in India
might feel our love and support.

And that's still what FOCl does. It gets help from this church,
and from lots of you, and from folks all over this country,
and every year some of us go so that we can carry the love of this church with us.
So that we can remind a small child in a slum that everyone belongs,
and everyone counts.

Let me tell you a little about who else we were with.

On the rooftop of a three-story concrete school,

close to a hundred 14 year old girls are sitting and waiting for us.

It's a flat roof, with a wall around the edge, so it's not quite as precarious as it sounds,
in fact it's beautiful --

there's a late afternoon sun, and the colorful roof of the Hindu temple is glistening,
and from other rooftops around us people are flying kites that chase each other across
the sky.

Not far from us, a mosque is playing the call to prayer.

The girls are all in tenth class, the last year of schooling,

getting ready for the national exams that determine whether they'll be able to continue their education.

We can't take the exams for them, but what we do is provide tutors, and exam study materials -- kind of like SAT prep.

Because we believe that girls belong in education, and that they count too.

So up on the rooftop, proudly they stand up one after another, and announce to us their ambitions.

"I want to be a doctor." "I want to be an engineer."

"My ambition is to be district collector."

Our group is puzzled by that one, until the headmistress whispers that *district collector* means something like *mayor*.

And then our group, one after another,

stands up, too, and one after another we tell the girls how much we believe in them, and how proud we are of them,

and they pepper us with questions --

good questions, like "how did you choose your career?"

and hard questions like, "how can I come study in your country?"

...And then an unexpected question, to our Sarah Jennings --

"Do you want to dance?"

And Sarah, God bless her, without hesitation agrees,

and she and one of the girls clear a space in front,

find a song on Sarah's iPhone, hook up a speaker,

and *shake it down*.

The visit that seems to undo us all, however,

is our visit to a women's sewing center.

Fifty women have gathered to meet us,

all students in this year's tailoring class.

Each day they come to learn how to be seamstresses,

which means that each day they are learning a trade,

which means that each day they are closer to earning for themselves,

which means that each day they are discovering that they are strong and capable.

Many are no older than the college students in our group,

but have children climbing in and out of their laps.

And as we speak words of encouragement to them,

and tell them that they matter, and they belong,
something happens to us all.

Suddenly we realize, all of us, that this isn't just a little pep talk by some nice people
from America --

that they are listening hungrily to every word,

and when I quote to them the Chinese proverb *women hold up half the sky*,

the woman in front of me nods vigorously, and the woman next to her begins to tear up.

And she asks permission to sing us a song.

And as she sings it, she has to stop because she is crying so hard she can barely
speak, and she finishes the song in a whisper.

And the translator tells us that what she has sung to us is this:

"Mother, O mother, why do I not matter in this world?

Why do you not see me?

Why was I born a girl child?"

So we say to her, with all our heart, and all our love:

you matter. You count. You belong.

And then we all, *all* weep.

That's when Bonnie, our Bonnie Britz, starts to sing. Spontaneously.

She begins singing "He's got the whole world in his hands,"

and we all join in --

clapping, and swaying, with tears still on our cheeks,

singing "he's got you and me, brother, in his hands, he's got you and me, sister, in his
hands."

We even sound pretty good -- doesn't hurt that we've stolen one of the basses from our
church choir to come with us, Jon Passmore.

He's got the whole wide world in his hands, we sing.

And, you know, it's perfect. It's perfect.

Because God *does* have us all in God's hands --

and we all matter

and we all belong.

Friday night, two nights ago,

at our 'Family Room' service, we shared worship with folks from the Church of the
Apostles,

an evangelical church here in Fairfield.

It was a coming together of two congregations who do things a little differently
don't worship quite the same way usually,
but do follow the same Jesus.

And the pastor of the church, Thad Barnum,
got up here and reminded us that it was a pretty cool thing to be worshipping together;
because the Savior we follow, he pointed out,
was pretty fond of knocking down every wall that we build up.
That as far as Jesus was concerned,
everyone mattered, and everyone belonged.

When we go to India, in your name, and with your prayers,
that's the message we take.

That everyone counts, and everyone belongs.

That God's love is without boundary,
and dares us to believe all things, and hope all things.

A Tale of Two Buses, I called this.

One bus riding for freedom's sake into Mississippi,
reminding the world that everyone counts.

Another bus that's riding right now into the slums of India,
reminding the world that everyone belongs.

And we, all of us, we're along for the ride,
then and now, now and in the days to come,
witnessing wherever we can
however we can to the truth:
God's got the world in his hands,
and everyone, everyone belongs.

Amen.

