



PENTECOST  
SPECIAL OFFERINGS

CHILDREN AT RISK • YOUTH • YOUNG ADULTS

**2020 Sermon**

*By Teresa Larson*

Fried Chicken & Divine Invitations

Luke 24:13-24, 28-35

“WHAT?” a nine-year-old yells at me. “ARE YOU KIDDING ME? You’ve got to be kidding me. Are you serious? Do you even know what life is supposed to be about? Have you ever experienced any good or any joy in your life? How, in all of your years on this planet, have you NEVER eaten fried chicken?”

It’s mid-February on a Chicago afternoon. Wind chill is -40, it’s snowing sideways, and I’ve been waiting less-than patiently for a bus to come for at least 15 minutes to take me home after a long day of chasing busy, stir-crazy four-year-olds and trying to keep the peace in an after-school program. There are lots of pleasant things I could choose to think about at a time like this, like a hot cup of tea, sweatpants and the heap of heavy blankets that are waiting for me at home. But instead, I’m listening to a nine-year-old tell me all about how poor the quality of my life has been because I’ve never eaten fried chicken.

My accuser’s name is Paul, a third grader from the West Side of Chicago, where I was serving as a 2014-15 Young Adult Volunteer. I served at a small, private Christian school in the neighborhood of Lawndale, working with preschool students during the day and assisting in supervising the after-school program for a few hours every afternoon. Paul was a student in the after-school program, and we quickly bonded early in the school year over our shared distaste for math homework. We realized later on in the year that we lived on the same street, when Paul shared with me that he had started taking the city bus home by himself because his mom had started a new job working nights and wasn’t able to come pick him up from school herself. With no other family members available, my nine-year-old student was waiting for upwards of 20 minutes for a bus on one of the busiest streets in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods of the city.

Paul didn’t come right out and say it, but I could tell he was afraid of adding this particular journey to his daily routine.

“I’m a little nervous . . .” he said to me, when he shared this scary new reality of his third-grade life. “You ride the bus, right?” he asked.

“Yep, every day.” I responded.

“Is it scary?”

I took a deep breath before responding. I had, admittedly, often experienced deep uneasiness and discomfort as the only single white female riding the bus or walking down the street on the West Side. But rather than projecting my own experience of navigating public transit solo, I saw instead a unique invitation that Paul was offering to me . . . an invitation to be his bus buddy.

And so began our routine. I would clock out from work at 5:30, go find Paul (who was usually playing basketball with the older students in the gym), and we'd zip our coats, throw on our backpacks and head to the corner of Roosevelt and Pulaski to wait for the #12 bus that would drop us off on South Central Park Ave. I'd walk with Paul to his house, see that he got in safely, and then walk four blocks up the street to my house. Our conversations during transit were always a high note at the end of the day. We'd laugh with each other, converse with other people who were waiting for the bus with us, split a candy bar and swap stories from our day. Sometimes we shared harder things, like how lonely Paul felt with his mom working her new job. Often we laughed and playfully poked fun at each other . . . like Paul sharing his utter disbelief that I had never had fried chicken, and how horrible my life must be without ever having experienced his favorite meal.

Accepting the invitation to be Paul's bus buddy gave me a new sense of hope and purpose for my YAV year. I really enjoyed having a traveling companion at the end of the day, and I felt honored that Paul had disclosed his fears with me and that we got to share this small bit of life together every day. The best part, however, was that I began to experience the city in a totally new way. Much like the disciples, who extended a vulnerable invitation to a stranger, only to later fully recognize Christ in their midst, my eyes were opened.

Through Paul's stories that he told me as we rode through Lawndale together, I began to see less of the stereotypical "inner-city Chicago" and more of the ways that God has been at work in the city. I saw vibrant community gardens where Paul had planted some vegetables. I saw Christ in the compassion of Paul's neighbors who greeted us every day as we approached his house. I experienced an overwhelming sense of hope as Paul shared with me his dreams to become a "good cop," serving his community with love and integrity.

This is a side of Chicago not many people get to see, and I was only able to see it because I accepted that invitation to humble myself and walk alongside a third grader who knows the West Side as his home. As a result, I developed a new sense of awareness and a deep love for a place I began to start calling home, too.

Don't get me wrong, though . . . this new sense of awareness did not solve for me the host of issues and injustices that the West Side of Chicago and communities around the world have. I remember one bus ride home with Paul that put faces and names to things that you usually only hear and read about. We heard a story about generational cycles of poverty tearing a family apart. We witnessed a scene of police brutality. We saw how gangs divide and control areas of the city when two members of opposing gangs ran into each other on the bus. We talked to a woman experiencing homelessness after we paid her bus fare so she could get to a shelter in a different part of the city. All of this in one bus ride.

I remember getting home that day and sitting in my bedroom window, looking out over the street and lamenting, with tears and wails, “Why? Why can’t this community find wholeness and reconciliation? Where, O God, is the hope for this community?”

I felt much like I imagine the disciples did on their walk to Emmaus—they carried with them a profound sense of devastation, grief and deep sense of hopelessness as they walked, trying to make sense of the crucifixion and loss of their beloved teacher. “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel,” they said. We had hoped . . .

I know that I had some hopes going into my YAV year that, at the mid-February mark, were looking pretty bleak. I had hoped that my experiences living in intentional community would be rich and full of life, rather than passive and sometimes incredibly isolating. I had hoped that I would be able to do the hard work of discernment and know exactly what my next steps would be once my YAV year was finished, rather than continuing to sit in uncertainty about God’s call for my life. I had hoped that I would figure out how to courageously engage with the injustices in my community by being a bold voice of change, rather than being timid and afraid to confront the ways that I perpetuated the institutional systems that were designed to oppress. I had hoped that the presence of God would be undeniable in every moment of my YAV year, rather than experiencing far too many days of feeling disconnected and unsure if my faith was even valid. Perhaps you can relate to some of these feelings and experiences as well.

It can be so tempting to look at the story of Emmaus, and the stories of places where hope seems so lost, and simply say “Well, Jesus was actually there the whole time,” and leave it at that. But I think there’s something much bigger and much more powerful at work here. Jesus wasn’t just with them on the road. The Holy Spirit was, simultaneously, moving in the hearts of the disciples. Once Jesus had vanished from their sight, they turned to one another and said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?”

Yes, of course Jesus was with them! Through the power of the Holy Spirit, through the power of invitation that the disciples extended to Christ, their eyes and hearts were opened, as they moved from “we had hoped . . .” to “the Lord has risen indeed!”

I wonder what invitations are being extended to you today from other people to share in their stories. I wonder in what ways you’ve responded to those invitations, what holy spaces you’ve been able to share with others because you responded to those invitations with authenticity and have been a part of bringing transforming hope to others. Or, on the other hand, I wonder how God’s grace has been made known to you when you know you didn’t respond with as much hospitality as you should have. I wonder what surprising and unexpected ways your eyes have been open to Christ in your midst, what stories you know of—whether your own story or that of another person—where invitation has brought transformation.

Fast-forward from mid-February to late May. It’s our last day of the 2014-15 academic year. I got permission from my supervisor to leave a little earlier than usual, so I ran across the street to a restaurant called “Hook’s”—a Lawndale staple—and picked up two orders of fried chicken and fries before running back the school to get my bus buddy

and respond to his invitation to ride with him one last time. Paul and I sat on the bench at the bus stop, where I got a thorough, professional lesson in how to eat and enjoy this savory meal. Our fingers and laughing faces were covered in grease, our bellies were full of way more chicken than we intended to consume and my eyes were wide open to the transforming presence of Christ in my midst.

*Teresa Larson served as a Young Adult Volunteer in Chicago from 2014-2015. After her YAV year, Teresa moved back to Michigan, her home state, and continued to teach preschool for three years, guided by many of the transforming experiences of her time in Lawndale. Teresa is currently a senior Master of Divinity student at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and a member of the ministry team at Second Presbyterian Church of Louisville, KY.*