

PARISH HOUSE

Newmarket Church of Christ



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GARY'S BAPTISM

Nathan Pickard

I cannot tell you the first time I met Gary for I do not remember the first time we met, but I can tell you the first time I heard about Gary. I was visiting a friend in the neighbourhood when I noticed the bruises, the broken nose, the two black eyes, and the blood stained t-shirt. I didn't know if I should ask what happened or not. I didn't need to ask; I was simply told, "This is the work of Gary." I made a mental note not to make Gary mad.

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WELCOME TO THE TABLE, KIDS

Eleven years ago we started a Summer Camp for children living in the neighbourhood. We started with a full-day camp, complete with a large meal and a full day of activities. After each day every volunteer went home and slept! It was exhausting.

Over the years camp has evolved. Due to construction on the church property and a new apartment building, we moved camp to a local school. We thought this move was great as we had access to a gymnasium, outdoor playground structure, and a large field. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control, we had to move camp back to the church this year. We were a little skeptical, but it worked.

Each day a group of volunteers entered the kitchen and prepared a meal for the children. To end camp, we all sat down and shared a meal. Sitting at the table and sharing a grilled cheese sandwich or some pasta or even a juicy watermelon, I couldn't help but think of all those tables Jesus gathered around with people. At the table people are laughing, joking, telling stories and growing into friendship.

On one particular day, just after we finished eating lunch a little boy came up to me and said, "I have never eaten food so good in my life." I couldn't help but smile. As he ran to play some basketball the words I hear every Sunday came to mind,

Welcome to the table.

“

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.
Matthew 25:35



Gary's Baptism, cont'd

In October 2017 an unthinkable event took place in the neighbourhood: a young man named Cody was murdered. Cody was gunned down. Cody's best friend was Gary. Being the church of the neighbourhood we were asked to host the funeral. Family and friends of Cody showed up to say their goodbyes and to pay their respect. Gary was present. Gary showed up with a 40oz bottle of whiskey to help drown his sorrows.

Fast forward nearly 20 months later. It's Easter Sunday and the congregation is preparing to worship around a shared table of food. Our chefs, Claes and Nicki, have prepared a roast beef dinner. Before we share in the roast beef dinner, we gather to pray, sing, and welcome one another to a table of bread and wine. And guess who shows up to participate in our worship: Gary.

I sit at the same table with Gary and his family. We listen to Dr. John Mark Hicks describe God's work of moving from darkness to light. Soon after John Mark leads us to ponder the work of God, we are welcomed to break bread and drink the cup of salvation. Gary, to my astonishment, picks up the plate of bread and turns to the person sitting beside him and says, "*The body of Christ broken for you.*" After the bread is passed Gary then proceeds to pick up the pitcher of grape juice, pours the juice into individual cups and says to us, "*The blood of Christ poured out for the forgiveness of sins.*"

About a week after the Easter service Gary calls me and asks if we can have a coffee. Shortly thereafter, Gary walks into my office, sits down and tells his story. Gary doesn't hold anything back. He talks about his childhood and how gifted he was at school. He talks about the time he realized he held influence and power over people. He talks about how he eventually became an addict, a drug dealer, a gang leader and how he spent time institutionalized in the prison system. Gary also tells me that over the past several months, after spending time in a few rehab clinics, he has been studying the Bible in a home church in Toronto, and subsequently, getting involved in a couple different churches. Now, Gary has decided he wants to get baptized. I asked Gary what baptism is and his response was, "*I don't fully know. But I do know I have a lot of sins to wash away.*" We talk some more and I ask about what kind of life Gary will live after he walks through the waters of baptism. There is a moment of silence until Gary speaks, "*I have spent a lifetime destroying this neighbourhood; now I want to spend a lifetime rebuilding this neighbourhood.*"

After further conversation we set a date for Gary's baptism: May 5, 2019. A few days before the baptism Gary calls me and says, "*How many chairs do we have?*" "*Why?*" "*Because I'm inviting the whole neighbourhood to see this baptism; I'm inviting all of my family to see me walk through the waters of baptism!*" He wasn't lying. The doors of the church opened early on May 5th and they came from the east and the west; they came from the north and the south. It seemed the whole neighbourhood showed up to watch the local drug dealer walk through the waters of baptism and to be raised up a new creation.

Fast forward one week. I walk into the coffee shop and sit down. A friend pushing a baby stroller walks up to me and says, "*What did you do?*" I have no clue what she is talking about so she asks, "*What did you do to make Gary a disciple of Jesus?*" Fast forward three more days. I am walking through the parking lot of Tim Horton's when a person in their 20s comes up to me and says, "*Can you pray for me? I'm one day clean from my addictions and I need the prayers of the church to get me too day two and day three.*" Gary's baptismal story is helping others find the healing power of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of God moves in ways we cannot control. The Spirit of God is always moving ahead of the church and it's the church's job to always discern the work of God; to discern the ways God is at work in our neighbourhoods, in our homes, in our streets, in our workplaces, in the most unexpected places and through the most unexpected people. As we discern the work of God, it is becoming clear that the neighbourhood is offering the gift of hospitality (Luke 10:1-12). In offering the gift of welcome, the community of faith I serve has chosen to stay and eat and drink whatever is set before us. We're learning to heal the sick in a variety of ways and we're also announcing the nearness of God's kingdom.

Staying rooted in a particular place for an extended period of time is of utmost importance, for being rooted in a particular place, only then are we able to discern what good news might look like in this particular location. The good news of the gospel might have different characteristics, depending on what neighbourhood the gospel is taking root. There is no one size fits all! Because of this, it is vitally important our churches become churches that stay rooted in their neighbourhoods, asking questions about the neighbourhood, seeing with fresh eyes who lives in the neighbourhood, and very importantly, being free to explore new ways of living out the gospel story.

Gary's story certainly happened because of the work of God taking place within Gary's life. Gary's story also took place because we as a community of faith made the intentional decision to stay rooted in a particular neighbourhood and to explore in a variety of ways how we might live out the gospel in this particular neighbourhood.



In the fall of 2018, we approached a variety of congregations to introduce the vision of a Parish House. Beginning in October 2019 we hope to start another road trip to visit many of the same congregations (and new ones). We'll be in touch soon to see if this is possible and to begin a conversation on how you can partner with us.

"To be most effective in bringing about change in a community or a neighborhood, it helps if you live there."

Larry James, *The Wealth of the poor*

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