



Sterling Severns Photo

'the meek shall inherit the earth'

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I spent the day with six boys from the Elkins Lake Baptist youth group participating in "Impact Huntsville," a gathering of youth groups from various churches in the community working on houses in need of repair.

This event began as an outgrowth of Huntsville's Promise, a nonprofit organization partly funded by the city of Huntsville, TX, as an attempt to promote the well-being of youth in the community, encouraging collaborative efforts of congregations, businesses and institutions to take responsibility and action in facilitating an environment of empowerment for all youth in the community. As an "outsider" to the community, a first-time participant of Impact Huntsville and a novice at construction, I was "assigned" with the boys to work with three adults from First Christian Church of Huntsville in building a wheelchair ramp for an elderly, African-American couple.

The organizer of this task group was in a wheelchair himself but I hardly noticed because he was by far the hardest and most efficient worker of the group. I did my best to hand the right tools at the right time, but after a while I decided to take more of a public relations role and visit with the resident of the house, Mr. Johnson.

He positioned himself on the front steps of his porch so that he could recline on the railing and watch the progress. His wife had been in a wheelchair for three months and he had been try-

ing to get her down the steps of the porch of their dilapidated trailer home after the makeshift ramp he had attempted to build had collapsed. Our conversation began as I leaned against the same railing and asked him about how long he had lived in Huntsville, which led to a conversation about fishing and trying to catch rats around their trailer home.

Finally, he commented, “You know, not everyone would come do something like this for people like us.” I asked him why he thought that was the case, and he asked me to turn around and tell him what I saw. An old Jeep was parked there. “And what color is that jeep, girl?” he asked, and I responded, “It is black.” He then began to tell me that although we were a church group, he was still surprised us “white folk” would come help a poor black man and his wife. “We do not have the money for a wheelchair ramp. I was so surprised you all would do this for free,” he said.

I told him how several church youth groups from Hispanic, White and African American churches were involved in these projects all over Huntsville. At some point as we talked, I mentioned to him that I intended to become a minister, and he said, “Well you all in the right company. You know what the Good Book says, ‘the meek shall inherit the earth.’” He mentioned several biblical references and teachings that meant a lot to him, and I asked him if he went to church anywhere in the community.

“I don’t go to church because they only tell you you’re going to hell and they want your money,” he said. I agreed that I had been to churches like that, too, and that perhaps if we spoke of love more often than more projects like this could happen and a community would change. He reminded me that where two or three are gathered in Jesus’s name, there He is and His power is unleashed.

Mr. Johnson said he believed churches should work together like that. He added, “I believe in the Holy Spirit and that it is at

work around us. I believe our job here is not to preach hell and take money but to make this earth beautiful while we are here. With the help of the Holy Spirit, of course.”

“Do you think what we’re doing here today, helping you and your wife with this wheelchair ramp, counts as making the earth beautiful,” I asked him.

“Why yes,” he said.

“Then that’s the kind of gospel and Jesus I can believe, too, Mr. Johnson, we agree with you in that, and that’s why God woke us up this morning to come serve you.”

But that wasn’t the end of our conversation. After asking my permission, which I gladly gave. Mr. Johnson proceeded to teach me more about life. He told me how power can corrupt people, how you know when love is love, and how the world is changing all around him. I asked lots of questions as I listened, and he asked me some as well. He did not know if he approved of my wanting to be a minister because I was a woman, but he gave me the best compliment I’ve ever received when he said, “I can see you are different. You talk of love and see people different like you are separated from the world.”

Grace happens at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected places. During that conversation something happened; it was a mutuality of grace and equality as we acknowledged each other’s mishaps, judgments, failures and beliefs. We were two completely different people – defined by race, socioeconomic class, gender and age – leaning against a porch railing but very soon we became “brother and sister” in one another’s eyes.

I walked away from my time spent with Mr. Johnson thinking that perhaps I should have helped more to build the ramp but then I remembered two things: Jesus commended Mary for sitting at His feet and listening to Him, and Jesus (and Mr. Johnson) said that the “meek shall inherit the earth.”