Call and Response

By Pastor James Brooks

I am so honored to be here among all of you. You Lutherans are something else. I have learned so much listening to Lori, Chad, and David. The worship last night was good for my soul.

My original talk was going to solely focus on the 3R approach to Christian community development: relocation, reconciliation and redistribution. The 3Rs were coined by Dr. John Perkins, a minister, civil rights activist, and author. He is co-founder of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA). Despite being a third grade dropout, he has earned many honorary doctorates.

However, after thinking over my own story, the 3Rs are embedded in my life’s call and response journey. As I share my story, pay attention to where you can identify relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.

Greetings to you all. I am grateful for the team who invited me to share today. Just a quick background on me: I serve as the Senior Pastor of Harmony Community Church and the Vice President of Mission and Community Engagement at Lawndale Christian Health Center on the Westside of Chicago. I formerly served as the Coordinator of Youth Ministry at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, IL, and was the first African American to be called to serve this historic Lutheran congregation.

The question that many ask is “how did you get to Grace Lutheran in River Forest?” I still am in awe at times about how God led me to Grace. Bruggemann says we serve an inscrutable but reliable God.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

When I think of my call and faith journey, I am reminded of a game we used to play in youth group called a scavenger hunt. It is a game where you have to find a specific place or object. Once you find that place or object, there is a clue that will then lead you to the next place. That has been the best way for me to describe my journey in ministry. I can say that many of the things I have encountered, the pain I have experienced, and the people I have met have led me to where I am now.

In the mid 90s I had to get a better job to support my family. I had a yearning to be in law enforcement. In particular I wanted to be an Illinois State Trooper. But, in order to be a state trooper, you need a four year degree. And, unfortunately, a few years prior I had dropped out of college.

I actually remember the weekend when I decided that I would not be going back to college. You must understand, for me to dropout was a big deal because I was on a full-ride basketball scholarship to a private university.

It was on Thursday. Our team was playing Illinois State in the Red Bird Arena. I went up for a rebound and came down awkwardly and broke my foot. It was awful. The trainers sent me home for the weekend to see an orthopedic surgeon at Loyola Medical Center.

That Sunday morning I will never forget. We had all gathered around the table except my brother Glenn, who was now living back at home due to heroin addiction. My mother asked, “Where is Glenn?” He was never late to the breakfast table. He was usually the first to rise and have the coffee brewing. She went downstairs in the basement to look for him, and there she found my brother deceased. I can still hear her screaming, “He’s gone, he’s gone, he’s gone.” Glenn was dead.

From that day, I decided that I would not go back to college. I didn’t want to leave my mom, and I found myself in a very dark place. I was stuck in “three.” I felt hopeless. But, don’t you know when you are stuck at a “three,” God will be your “four.” Just ask the Hebrew boys. King Nebuchadnezzar looked down and said, “I only put three, but I see four, and the fourth one looks like the Son of God.”

My father would come into my room, put his hands on my shoulders, and whisper a prayer. I truly understand now when my grandmother used to say, “The Lord will keep you when you can’t keep yourself.”

David said it like this: “God is a very present help in the time of trouble.”

There I was, a college dropout, but still needing a job, ideally in law enforcement. I joyfully found out that the Illinois Department of Corrections accepts entry level individuals without degrees. I took the test, interviewed, and was accepted into the DOC class. We did a six week training in Springfield, IL. Then I started working at Stateville Penitentiary. Eventually I was transferred to the Illinois Youth Center (IYC) in St. Charles, IL. There I worked for four or five years.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

I grew frustrated working at the Illinois Department of Corrections. I was tired of seeing young men coming in by the droves and not being able to help them. Every Thursday a bus came from Cook County, and the majority of those kids being brought from the county jail to the state penitentiary were from 60623, North Lawndale. That broke my heart more than anything because North Lawndale is where my family resided. It was breaking my heart, and I just couldn’t take it anymore.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

I ended up leaving the Department of Corrections and all the great state benefits and salary. From there I took a job at Westside Association for Community Action at a third of the pay and no health or retirement benefits. I worked as a Youth Advocate. I went to court with juvenile offenders and would stand with them and advocate on their behalf.

Working at WACA was not without cost: My wife was in school. Finances were limited. Our car got repossessed. We lost our apartment and had to move back home with my parents.

There I was, a grown man with a wife and two children, back home with my parents.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

In early 2002, my wife and I were looking for an elementary school for my oldest daughter Jaylah, who was entering second grade. I went to a friend of mine, Judge Carroll Kelly, who I met due to my work at WACA. I asked Judge to recommend a school, and she referred me to Grace Lutheran in River Forest, IL. I let Judge know on the spot that we could not afford anything in River Forest, especially a school, because it’s an affluent community.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

Out of curiosity, we went and met with the principal, Hugh Kress. We met in his office to discuss the school, and he asked us about ourselves as well. I told him about myself, my job, how I had served at the Illinois Department of Corrections, how I was now serving at Westside Association for Community Action in Lawndale, and about my work with the youth at Harmony Church, where my dad was the senior pastor. Mr. Kress’ eyebrows raised in amazement as I detailed my career, and he said, “James, you would make a great youth minister here.”

I thought he was crazy. He then proceeded to hand me the job qualifications, and I told Mr. Kress I wasn’t qualified. How could I be qualified? The position required a Masters of Divinity, and I was a college dropout. Being a Lutheran church and school, the position also required a knowledge of Lutheranism to teach catechism, but I didn’t even know who Martin Luther was.

However, as I walked out the glass doors to Bonnie Brae Avenue, it felt like the clouds opened up and God said, “This is where I want you to serve.”

I slid into the car with my family, and we drove home to Harlem and Lake. Then I took out my big brick cell phone, called the school back, and asked to speak with Pastor Bruce Modahl. When he picked up the phone, I declared, “Pastor Modahl, this is James Brooks. I just met with the principal, and I believe the Lord is calling me to be your next youth minister.”

He responded, “Well James, that’s great to hear. Submit your resume, and we will see about that.”

In retrospect, my resume was horrible. I padded it with a lot of fluff because I didn’t have the credentials needed. I learned at that moment, you may not have the credentials, but with Christ anything is possible. A few interviews later, at the end of July 2002, Grace Lutheran called me to be the first African American staff member to serve at the church and school.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

Wow. I would be working for Grace Lutheran Church and School. I was worried about what my dad, a Baptist pastor would say. When I told him, his response was, “Son, do they believe in Jesus?

I said, “Absolutely.”

He then said, “Go! Spread your wings. You never know how God is using this.”

My mother was so proud too. She was excited that her son got a job with some white folk.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

In the beginning I had some insecurities, and I wondered why they hired me. The narrative that consumed my mind was that I was hired to be the token African American on staff. You know, the type that is not a threat to the majority culture.

However, as time went on and trust was built, I didn’t find that to be the case. The team actually valued my input and listened to what I had to say. Not only had I been invited to the party, but I had been asked to dance. Not only did I get a chance to hear how they experienced Christ, but they were interested in hearing how I experienced Christ.

This was an interesting experience for me. Honestly, there were times that I felt like a fish out of water.

*Which hymnal, the green or the blue?*

*I don’t read music. How do I sing this hymn?*

“James I saw you and your family sitting next to Martin Marty.”

*Who is Martin Marty?*

“James, we are meeting in the Narthex.”

*Where is the Narthex?*

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was calling.*

I remember our first staff party, primarily because they had beer. I was shocked because as the son and grandson of Baptist pastors, drinking was unacceptable and considered ungodly. The Baptist church covenant says “to avoid all tattling, back biting, and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale of, and use of, destructive drugs or intoxicating drinks as a beverage.”

Yet there I was at my first staff party where there was beer and wine in abundance. People were having fun, being merry. However, the icing on the cake was when the senior pastor came up to me, offering me a drink. I felt pressured to say yes, but I decided to just go with a wine cooler. Then he joked, “James, you like those little girly drinks.” I chuckled in agreement, not at all offended since I knew it was true.

I thank God for Grace Lutheran. My granddad had taught me the law, but now I was experiencing what freedom of Gospel looked like. It wasn’t about me climbing the ladder trying to get to Jesus; it was about Jesus coming down the ladder to rescue me. Not me holding God’s hand, but God holding my hand.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

In addition to growing me culturally, my time at Grace was transformational academically and theologically. They inspired me to go back to school, and with the help of God, I finished my undergraduate degree. Thus, I ended up going to Concordia University, located right next door to Grace Lutheran, and there I finally received my undergraduate degree in organizational management. I graduated summa cum laude with a 3.97 GPA. To God be the glory!

Graduating college was a big deal to me and my entire family. I remember the commencement ceremony vividly, walking across that stage before my mom, dad, wife, daughters, mother-in-law, friends, cousins, all of them. My mother-in-law had glued pictures of my face to sticks, and when my name was called, everyone waved them and cheered.

My accomplishment was significant to the school as well. I became the poster child of adult learning at Concordia. I was able to grace many of their brochures, and my face was on billboards and advertisements across the city, even visible from the el train downtown.

But I didn’t stop there. After undergrad, I was blessed to go into seminary. I was accepted into the Lutheran School of Theology and completed a youth ministry certification at Princeton Theological in New Jersey. Eventually I went on to enroll in the Distributed Learning program at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Let it be known, I received most of my MDiv credits from Lutheran Seminaries, but I graduated from Northern Theological Seminary.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

Not only did I go back to school, but my family and I also moved into Grace House across the street from the Church. I will never forget the day that Pastor Modahl notified me that living in Grace House was approved. Unbelievable and unexpected — we were living in River Forest! The place that I once thought we could not afford for my daughter to go to school, it was now the community in which we were living. My daughter started playing soccer, so my wife was now a soccer mom.

I am thankful for my time at Grace, but there were times of challenges well. The reality was that I was a Black man in a place where there were not too many Blacks. And with that unfamiliarity comes moments of tension. However, I believe that tension is necessary for growth. Fredick Douglas once said, “Where there is no struggle, there is no progress.” It is in the hard moments when we realize what a difference Christ makes.

Here are five struggles of mine as I navigated through my time at Grace:

1. Misunderstanding my context and culture.

It was within my first two months at Grace. I remember getting into the elevator with a lady, and she asked me about my church background. I told her, and she then stated, “Churches like that are filled with entertainment and are too loud.” In that moment I really wanted to correct her, but because of my own insecurities, I backed down and didn’t say a mumbling word.

But we are a people that are not ashamed to say so. We are a people that take literally when Scripture tells us to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.” We are a people who understand if it were not for the goodness of Jesus, we would not be here today. We are a people that understand that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. We understand that it is in Christ that we have been liberated; therefore, we must let it be known.

2. My community was ignored.

Another thing that bothered me about Grace: The crime and murder rates were climbing in North Lawndale. North Lawndale is just 12 minutes away, and no one really talked about it. Doctor King once said, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” What’s sad is that I was complicit in the silence as well.

3. Feeling like a Sell Out.

There were times while at Grace that I was told that I let down my own people by not serving in North Lawndale. Therefore, on many Sundays I would attend the 8:30 service at Grace, lead Teen Talk from 9:45 to 10:45, and hurriedly get to Harmony in North Lawndale by 11:30. This was our attempt to stay connected with where we came from.

4. Assimilation.

I felt the pressure of assimilating to the culture. I felt that I had to often code switch so that I would be accepted. There were some days I went home exhausted from being Black.

I remember one Monday afternoon my friend and mentor, Dr. Steve Schmidt, went to have lunch with me at the local Panera Bread. On Sunday I had served as the assisting minister; therefore, I had to write and read the prayers for the service. I asked Steve, “How did I do?”

He said, “James, you did great. The prayers were well-written, but you sounded like an old white guy.”

He said, “You were called here to be distinctly you and not be like us.” There was freedom in hearing this.

5. Coping with Microaggressions.

I loved coaching basketball at Grace. Our teams were often good enough to participate in the state tournament, and the reality was we were one of the few teams with African American players, and I was the only African American coach. That being said, I experienced many microaggressions where the other coaches left me in moments feeling uncomfortable or insulted — things like not being invited to the all-coaches meeting or, in the midst of the game, being told by the white referee to “sit down now.”

Yes, there were moments of tension for me, but they were few and far between. My good days definitely out-weighed my bad days.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

Eight years passed. The youth group was thriving, and I was working with some outstanding young people who are still important to me today. However, in 2010, after learning about a seminary opportunity and knowing that my dad needed help, I felt the Lord saying it was time to move on from Grace Lutheran to serve full time at Harmony in North Lawndale.

*No. No. No.* I was resistant to the call because I knew the difficulties and the challenges of serving at Harmony. I had witnessed firsthand my dad’s experience of serving as a pastor at Harmony. The resources would not be readily available, there would be interpersonal struggles or conflict with members, and there would be all the challenges that come with serving in an urban setting.

However, the Lord told me that everything I learned at Grace and the connections I made there were for the purpose of serving the people at Harmony in North Lawndale. I still told God, “No!”

God told me, “All you have learned and all the people you have built relationships with are for a reason, and that reason is so you can serve in North Lawndale better.”

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

I didn’t understand it at the time, but I responded. I titled my last sermon at Grace Lutheran “Hard Calls.” At the end of my sermon that August, Pastor Modahl stood up in front of the congregation with tears in his eyes and said, “James, life as we know it has ended, but let our new life together begin.”

In Fall 2010, I became the senior pastor at Harmony Community Church. My dad retired due to health reasons, and I began serving as a senior pastor. I must admit, it was difficult at first. It still is in many ways. Some of the basic resources we had in abundance at Grace — items like office supplies and bathroom necessities — were not available at Harmony. I found myself telling God yet again, “I know you called me here, but I feel like you have abandoned me.”

I no longer had health benefits for my family, but my wife was now a nurse, and she took on the bulk of providing for our family. Our church was under-resourced, but we were committed to constantly giving to the community out of what we had. It was a struggle, but I knew God had called me to North Lawndale.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

In 1966 Martin Luther King came to North Lawndale not just to see but to live. Yes. Doctor King lived in North Lawndale from January 1966 to August 1966. He wanted to bring attention to the housing disparity and the way poor people were being treated.

Many Black families had migrated from the oppressive Jim Crow South seeking opportunities in the North and landed in communities such as North Lawndale.

However, as Black families like the Brooks family moved in, the whites moved out, also known as “White Flight.” Racist practices such as redlining prevented Blacks from getting mortgages, causing Blacks to have to pay enormous amounts in rent, and if they were to miss a payment, they would immediately be evicted. Paying so much in rent left no extra cash to maintain their properties.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. On April 5,1968, an uprising in the city took place, and buildings were burned. North Lawndale was one the most devastated communities and has been struggling to rebuild ever since. The population was once over 120,000 residents, and now it is under 35,000.

However, let me be clear: those 35,000 residents are resilient and strong. Although the population has dwindled, the Church remains one of the major pillars in the community. Harmony Church is one of the many that is opening their doors and going out and being with the community.

Harmony Community Church is blessed to be a church not just in the community but with the community. Harmony’s mission is to listen and respond to the pain in our community.

Oh do we experience pain.

It was on July 26, 2016. I will never forget getting the call that Harmony’s own, Keyon Boyd, had been shot while riding his bike. By the time we made it to John Stroger Hospital, we found out that Keyon had died.

Keyon was an 18 year old budding basketball star on his way to Heartland College. He was just at the church the previous Sunday. Actually, he was the reason his mother and family joined Harmony Church. Sometimes I can’t help but wonder if we had something going on at the church that day, maybe Keyon would still be with us today.

This should not be.

A few months ago, a 16 year old high school sophomore, Antwonae “Nae Nae” McGee, was shot eight times. Both of her legs and hips were impacted pretty severely. She had many surgeries.

When I looked at Nae Nae’s Facebook page, I saw that she had posted, “I’m all good.” I understood what she meant — she was blessed to be alive — but I also know that things are not “all good.”

It’s not all good thatour children can’t go to a party without fear of losing their lives.

I talked with the principal of Dvorak School, and we have seventh and eighth graders who are homeless. That’s not good.

It’s not all good that many of our children are reading below grade level.

It’s not all good that children do not feel free to play outside without being harmed.

It’s not all good that 40% of families in North Lawndale have food insecurities, not knowing where their next meal is coming from.

It’s not all good, but I know One who is good, and our good God is using us to be change agents in the world.

Just like Christ became incarnate in the world, as Christ followers, we are called to enter the pain of the other and offer love, support, and encouragement. However, we understand we can’t make it on this journey by ourselves; it takes all of us working together as the Body of Christ to make sure that our children are safe, healthy, and educated.

Harmony has one of the largest food pantries on the Westside of Chicago. We serve over 300 families per week. The pantry was started by my dad when he witnessed a man digging out of garbage cans in search of food.

Guess what? The coordinator of the pantry is Diane Carioscio, who is a member of Grace. She was on the call committee and was responsible for me serving at Grace.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

Harmony now has growing tutoring and fine arts programs. The leaders of the tutoring program are my wife and Sue Foran.

Guess what? Sue was also on the call committee when I was called to serve at Grace. One of our lead tutors is Susan Calhoun. She is a member of Grace and was my daughter’s second grade teacher when we first came to Grace.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

Harmony women pastors got Grace now and help lead a women’s group.

Harmony is now transforming our worship space by removing the pews and leveling the floor, adding an area for a mini-cafe, and enhancing our audio/visual. We want this sanctuary to be for the most vulnerable in our community, especially our children. Our children deserve to be safe, to be healthy, and to be educated.

To get this project done, many — not all — have been from Grace Lutheran. You remember that place in 2002 where I went to put my daughter in school.

*I didn’t fully understand, but God was up to something.*

I’m so glad that when I walked into the principal's office, he wasn’t being led by the rule of law of what the qualifications were, but the Holy Spirit led the people of Grace to show grace toward me.

God was up to something and still is. But it’s not about Grace, not about Harmony. It’s so the most vulnerable in our society can know that Christ knows all about them.

“Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim

till all the world adore his sacred name.

Come, Christians, follow where our Savior trod,

our King victorious, Christ, the Son of God.”

I can’t take credit for it. God is calling. I understand more than ever what my dad meant when he would say God specializes in the impossible.

It's Christ who calls. It's Christ's “relocation” and him with the welding to mold us. It's Christ who “reconciled” us together. It's Christ's “redistribution” of his grace for all.

So when people ask me how this is happening, all I can say is Christ did it.