**The Communion of Saints in Austin Crossings Conference January 28, 2020**

**Intro**

I’m grateful to be here at the Crossings Conference steeping in “Law and Gospel” for these past few days. As the daughter of evangelical missionaries, I grew up understanding the gospel to be for those who needed to be saved. Over the years at Grace Lutheran in River Forest I got a heavy dose of law/gospel theology from Bruce Modahl and I learned that the gospel is for Christians too! Being here, I feel very much at home. Thank you for inviting me to share a little bit of my story.

**History of Austin**

For the past 19 years, I have lived with my family in the Austin community on the west side of Chicago. If you have spent any time in Chicago, you might be familiar with the area, but if you aren’t, here is a little history. Austin was settled in the mid 1800’s and through the 1960’s was home to Scandinavian, German, Irish and Greek immigrants. During the Great Migration of the first part of the 20th century, southern African Americans moved to northern cities in pursuit of work and a better life. What they encountered was a different kind of racism with restrictive covenants limiting where black Americans could live. In those years, few African Americans lived in Austin. Over time the banking practice of ***redlining*** set the stage for the unscrupulous real estate practice of ***blockbusting*** which led to white flight and disinvestment in Chicago’s west side communities like Austin, Lawndale and Garfield Park in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. While issues like high unemployment, low income households and low high school graduation rates are great challenges in Austin, it is a strong community with many, engaged and caring people.

**Moving to Austin**

My husband, Bill, and I were influenced by the community development principles of Dr. John Perkins. He challenged Christians to live out the gospel through relocation, reconciliation and redistribution. These ideas brought each of us to work at Lawndale Christian Health Center on the west side of Chicago. After a couple years of marriage, we started looking to purchase a house. Our hope was to find an affordable house with character in a neighborhood where we could find community. We looked at many houses on the far west side of the city and nearby suburbs, and ultimately bought a house in the Austin community. While I don’t always have a clear sense of God’s leading, this house did seem to be the right one for us, and we both had a strong sense of God’s direction to buy our home.

**My Neighbors**

While most of the people on my block are pretty easy to get along with, my next-door neighbors can be a challenging at times. And by challenging, I mean “make a lot of noise until 4 a.m. most nights of the summer” kind of challenging. Sometimes its friendly, drunk banter that might go on for a few hours. Other times it might be loud music blaring from someone’s car stereo. The most frustrating and frightening is when there is loud yelling or fighting in the street. Often my neighbor, Timmy, is in the mix. His name may be a diminutive, but he is definitely not—he is about 6’2” and weighs about 300#--a big guy who is intimidating and angry much of the time.

The other neighbors on my block or even on surrounding blocks often shake their heads when my next-door neighbors come up in conversation and say “I feel so bad for you guys” or something along those lines. It has resulted in some creative solutions such as white noise or turning on the air conditioning in the summer when what I really want is to keep my windows open at night. At various times I’ve tried passive-aggressive approaches like flashing my front porch light, slamming my front door, or sitting on my porch steps. Sometimes I’ve called 911 or gone the direct route with a middle of the night face to face “come to Jesus” conversation out on the sidewalk with the folks who are keeping me awake. In my less sane, sleep deprived moments I’ve been known to look out my window mumbling curses and prayers of lament like Chad encouraged us to do yesterday. Prayers like “God, what are you going to do about this??”. Loving my neighbor has not been very easy at times. To be honest, there have been many nights of dread, anxiety and fear. In the midst of all of that, often there are pleasantries exchanged with these individuals, eggs borrowed and updates on the kids. When I walk my dog down the block, frequently I am greeted with a “Hey Karen” by friends and relatives of my next-door neighbors who I don’t even know. There are layers of “good neighborliness” that run both ways despite frustrations on both sides.

**Mark**

Mark grew up on our block. He was intelligent and quick thinking—he actually spent a couple of years in prison using an alias—he had memorized the name and inmate number of a guy with less of a criminal record. When he was arrested, he used that alias so that he would be able to serve a shorter sentence. Mark had a great sense of humor and enjoyed a good laugh. He came over the night of Obama’s first inauguration (which was the day after MLK’s birthday that year). When he came in and I introduced him to my then four-year-old daughter, she asked him earnestly if he was Martin Luther King! He got a good laugh out of that! Though some would have seen him as a thug, I remember him talking to me about his girlfriend and how he liked to sit with her holding hands and talking. I’ve met few people in my life who had his natural leadership skills—he could redirect a rowdy group with a few words and a gesture. He also happened to be involved in a gang and selling drugs in the neighborhood. Around 10 p.m. one June night in 2009, Mark was with a group of friends hanging out across the street from our house and a car drove up to them. A gunman inside the car shot Mark in the chest and back. Bystanders put him in the back of their car and drove him to the hospital down the street. He died a few hours later. He was 27 years old. The gunman has never been arrested. Of course, this type of scenario is repeated almost daily somewhere in Chicago, but for me this was personal. I knew Mark; he was special and I really liked him.

I was sad, angry and scared; I felt like I either needed to move or hunker down and engage more fully with my neighbors. After lots of discussion, support and prayer, Bill and I decided we wanted to stay and continue building our life on our block. Neighbors on the block began to get together and we got to know and trust each other more. We set up a phone tree and started communicating our concerns. That summer we formed a block club and had our first block party—a fun event and real source of pride for the block. We partnered with local officials and engaged the police commander in our district who was community minded and interested in going far beyond just arresting people.

**2017**

Fast forward to 2017. This was a year of difficulty and violence in the neighborhood. In February that year, my 20-year-old neighbor from across the street was shot and killed a few blocks away. A few months later in June, another young man in his 20’s was shot and killed in the middle of our block.

A few days later, on a warm June night, my husband, daughter and I were sitting on our front porch eating dinner. Lots of people were out, enjoying the night. Next door, a group of about 10 guys was standing in the front yard. A white minivan pulled up into our intersection with the sliding door open and someone inside the van started shooting at the group of guys next door. The guys next door started shooting back at the van. This flurry of bullets was going right in front of our house. The whole incident lasted less than 30 seconds. After the shots stopped, I stood up and started yelling at the guys next door—I’m not sure if my daughter was more upset by hearing her mother use profanity or by the shooting! Thankfully, no one was seriously hurt. The only injury was sustained by, Timmy, who got shot in the hand.

For me, the aftermath of this shooting incident was different than Mark’s death 8 years earlier. This time, we had been more directly affected—not in terms of being harmed, but in terms of directly witnessing the violence. It was traumatic. I was outraged that the shots had been reciprocated by my next-door neighbors. Although they perceived it as necessary and even helpful to return shots, I felt betrayed and I let them know it. Also, not only did I have to manage my own fears and anxieties, I had to help my young teenage daughter deal with her emotions. She had become fearful of going outside and asked me and my husband constantly why we had to live in a violent neighborhood.

I felt on edge for much of that summer. I was grateful for a few short getaways to bring my adrenalin down, but once I was home again, I could feel my stomach begin to churn and my body start to buzz. We had a lot of support and prayers from our neighbors, friends and faith communities, but it didn’t feel like it was going to change anything. I couldn’t see how God was going to intervene in the situation—it seemed to me that the only interventions would have to come from human action, and I began to wonder if God cared or even real. I couldn’t see a path forward, and Bill and I began to seriously consider moving.

**Timmy and Wanda**

One Friday night about 6 weeks after the shooting incident in front of our house, we were awakened around 2 a.m. by Timmy, angrily shouting and stomping back and forth between his house and our house with group of people trailing him trying to calm him down. It was disconcerting and woke up a number of neighbors. The next morning we had an impromptu breakfast meeting at our house with some neighbors to figure out next steps and strategies to quell the violence and atmosphere of fear that was escalating on the block. As we were meeting, outside Timmy again began yelling and walking up and down the sidewalk in front of our home. I was scared and not sure what to do. But my neighbors Kim and her mother Wanda weren’t scared. They went out the front door and directly into the chaos. Kim started talking with Timmy’s mom and within a few minutes Wanda (a petite retiree) and Timmy were on my front steps, deep in calm conversation. I could tell Wanda was doing what she did best—giving a serious tongue lashing mixed in with a lot of love. As Wanda and Timmy ended their conversation, they embraced.

In that moment, I understood in a new way what it meant to believe in and be a part of the communion of saints. I love what N.T. Wright said; “God through the gospel puts people right so that through them, God can make the world right.” God, through Wanda, was making the world a little more right that day. Wanda was showing me how God deals with people—with love, truth and dignity. She was also showing me that she loved and cared for me and my family by being willing to show up for us in a tense and potentially violent situation.

**Wanda and A**

I’ll relate one last story. One evening last summer, our block club was meeting together in lawn chairs outside on the sidewalk. We were discussing some concerns that included a spate of car burglaries that were happening on the block as well as Timmy’s recent incarceration. A few days later one of my next door neighbors angrily walked up to me told me she heard that at the block club meeting our neighbors Kim and Wanda had been talking about her family breaking into cars. Of course, they had done nothing of the sort. I tried to explain what had actually been discussed, but she would hear nothing of it. She had a few choice words to say about Kim and Wanda and then informed me she was going to go to all the neighbors on our block and have them sign a petition to have Kim and Wanda kicked out of the block club. I didn’t know what to do. I figured if she should be mad at anyone, it should be me. We had a number of conversations over the next few weeks—reiterating what had actually been discussed at the meeting, talking about extending grace to one another, but I wasn’t sure what was going to happen. At our next block club meeting, this woman showed up (for the first time ever) and stood off to the side murmuring negative comments under her breath during the whole meeting. It was very tense, and I was worried things might come to blows. By the grace of God, the meeting ended without incident, but I couldn’t see a path to resolution.

A few weeks later, we had our annual summer block party. A group of us were sitting around talking and eating. I was sitting next to Wanda, and this same woman came over and started kind of circling around us. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen. It seemed to me like she had something to say to Wanda, but wasn’t quite sure how to do it. I figured this time she was going to let Wanda have it to her face. After a few minutes, she walked up to Wanda and quietly said, “I’m sorry about what I said about you a few weeks ago.” Wanda turned to her, smiled and said “apology accepted”. And that was it. No “you shouldn’t have been rude and disrespectful to me and my daughter” or “let me think about it”. Instant forgiveness. It was one of the most amazing things I have ever witnessed.

**Conclusion**

Over the last couple years it has become abundantly clear to me that our block is a beautiful, messy group of sinners and saints that couldn’t be replicated, and I definitely want to continue to be a part of what we have here. So we remain. Some relationships are just beginning to open up after almost 20 years, and I consider it a gift that in the past year two people have mentioned (one directly to me and one to a friend) that they don’t actually trust me! There have been more noisy nights, occasional conflicts and more “come to Jesus moments”. Timmy is currently in prison, and my dear friend, Wanda, died last month. While it isn’t always easy, I can say that I’m grateful and truly blessed to be a part of the communion of saints on Ohio street in Austin.