

Over 2.16 million people live here in the city of Houston--and here within a 5 mile radius of the corner of Willowbend and Bellfort live ½ a million people. People are drawn to live and grow and raise young people here for many reasons—but perhaps the number one draw is that Houston is a market city. Last month, Business Insider published an article called “Houston: Best City in America in 2014” - 18 reasons why Houston’s the best. The #1 reason? Jobs. Job creation is the best in the country. By a TON. Many other reasons in the article have to do with being a city of Market - food, parks, Beyonce—the music industry, and the rodeo. And then - one of the only reasons in the article that wasn’t explicitly about money? ‘Houston passed NYC in becoming the most ethnically and racially diverse city in the country.’”

We the people of Westbury Church know this to be true. That God has brought together here in this place a diverse people. A community where people often step through the doors and into this-God’s sanctuary-and say, “WOW. Now this--this is what heaven will be like!” So here’s the question: what does it mean for the church situated in Houston - the city of Market - the best city in America in 2014 - for job creation, money, commerce, etc) - what does it mean for the church in Houston to witness to supreme reality of the City of God? A city—a kingdom in which Jesus says - ‘those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life??’

What does this mean?

Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero said the following shortly before his assassination: I am going to speak to you simply as a pastor, as one who, together with his people, has been learning the beautiful but harsh truth that the Christian faith does not cut us off from the world but

immerses us in it; the church is not a fortress set apart from the city. The church follows Jesus, who lived, worked, struggled, and died in the midst of a city, in the polis.”

Westbury, we as a community are invited to figure this out. Figuring out what it means to follow Jesus in this city. Figuring out what Jesus meant when he rhetorically asked ‘what will it profit you if you gain the world but forfeit your life.’ I don’t suggest we can be experts, or that the point is to be experts - because, that’s God’s job. Being the expert. And yet, we’re invited as God’s people in the world to articulate and show what new life, what following Jesus, what LOVE is here in Houston – “the best city in the country in 2014”.

Friends, here’s our invitation: to wrestle together with issues related to race, ethnicity, power, and privilege as we live in a world, as we live in a city that sighs and longs and prays with guttural sounds because she needs to be set free from residual bondage to decay. Paul wrote about this earlier in the letter to the Romans - that all creation and creatures who know and experience resurrection every day through Jesus - we all still hope for the redemption of our bodies. Bodies that break down and cough and sneeze and sometimes have to stay home from school or work to rest. Bodies that buzz or feel heavy due to anxiety and depression and trauma of years ago--or of this very day. Bodies that soak up other bodies’ stress and pain because that body - that person - loves and grieves while watching another receive chemotherapy. Bodies that receive chemotherapy. Bodies that lash out against other bodies - white bodies ignoring their privilege and violently wielding power over black bodies--ending another body’s life on earth in an utterly reckless and senseless and evil way. Bodies collectively groan and cry out for new life. For freedom. For the fullness of love. For the kingdom of God—the City of God—to come and God’s will to be done NOW. They cry out that new life in God through Jesus Christ must have something to say about privilege and power. And y’all--it does. God does. Jesus does.

And we here of Westbury Church have the incredible gift and honor of sitting next to bodies in pews--bodies who make radically different amounts of money in their places of employment.

Bodies who go to bed at different times, and wake up at different times. Bodies who travel in a variety of ways - by bus, car, bicycle, foot, train - bodies who grow and harvest and purchase and cook and eat different food--this incredible gathering of bodies sitting side by side proclaim that there is another way.

That there's new life. That there's hope for the redemption of our bodies. And it is found in death.

Meaning: "If any want to become my followers" - followers of everlasting life, followers of truth, followers of the way - "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Let them deny being first, let them deny ease, let them deny convenience, let them deny what the world says about power and privilege - and may they pick up a symbol of torture, a symbol of suffering, a symbol of sacrifice, a symbol that changed the entire story of the world that turned the tide through seemingly crazy, beyond reason, LOVE - let them pick up this symbol and follow me.

*Let their love be genuine. May they hate what is evil, and may they hold fast to what's Good - because there's so much Goodness around - like social enterprise experiments training refugees to hone their farming skills from DRC, Burundi, Rwanda into urban farming expertise in Houston through Plant it Forward Farms. May they love one another with mutual affection - having their epic gathering time at the opening of their worship service, being in one another's homes and apartments and vehicles - may they outdo one another in showing honor. May they not lag in zeal, may they be ardent in spirit, may they serve the Lord every single day. May they rejoice in hope - because there's so much hope -- just look at them! May they be patient in*

*suffering - for it's tiring. May they persevere in prayer - because that is where their power lies. May they contribute to the needs of the saints - may they learn to look at one another and contribute to the needs of the community, of the body. May they extend hospitality to strangers - to refugees - to orphans - to widows – for perhaps these strangers are already among them. May they bless the one who persecute them - phew. that's so hard - may they bless and not curse them back. May they rejoice with those who rejoice, cry with those who cry. may they live in harmony with one another. May they not be prideful about what's happening among them, but may they associate evermore with the lowly. And may they not claim to be wiser than what they are. May there be no repayment of evil for evil - but may this community pay attention of what is noble in the sight of all. And if it's possible at all - at least for what this community is responsible for - which is a good deal actually - may they live peaceably with all.*

*Beloved - don't avenge yourselves, don't take the role of God - God does what God does very well. For it is written, "vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, instead - if your enemies -the people who hurt you - if they're hungry, feed them; if they're thirsty, give them something to drink; when you do this, you will heap burning coals on their heads. It's going to feel weird - for you and for them. Do not be overcome by evil dear ones - but overcome evil with good.*

This is love. This is our charge as a community united and shaped by the love, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. LOVE. Growing. Being connected. Recognizing that we're not in charge of that connectedness. That's the Creator's thing. But we get to live LOVE and LIFE and GREEN and RED and YELLOW and PURPLE colors of growth - of a garden. Of fruit on the vine- connected to other fruit on the vine, or in the rich dirt. Or on the woody plant.

These bodies - they're connected - we are all connected. When one celebrates, we all celebrate. When one weeps, we all weep. When a hardworking child of God can't find steady, living-wage employment in the Best City in America to find a job in 2014 and they need to know English, we all make noise and do something about it.

I was in Seattle a year ago and was standing in a community garden. My teacher and good friend Elaine Heath – a wonderful woman who deeply loves Jesus, deeply loves the United Methodist Church - a pastor in Texas and a professor at Perkins School of Theology who deeply loves to help disciples live a contemplative stance - that is, to show up, to pay attention, to participate with what God is doing, and to release the results of that to God. I was standing there in this garden with her and other pastors and she told us to find a nook anywhere in the garden. And to pray. To look at the veggies, to sit in the dirt, to find one of the benches and perch for awhile, and to listen to what the Holy Spirit might bring. So I shuffled around a little bit, and then I found cherry tomatoes. Y'all I love tomatoes. Especially really tasty cherry tomatoes. The ones I could buy at HEB or Kroger or Fiesta aren't what I'm talking about—it's the cherry tomatoes that were loved day by day by a farmer, her sweat dripping on the vine, her back aching as he weeded day by day, their love for creation and the Creator driving them to get up to meet the early morning dew and tend the garden. Like Plant it Forward's Tomatoes. So when I saw these tomatoes. I sat down and prayed. I looked at the fruit and was still. Saw a spider and a bug watched them for a bit. But then it was amazing - quiet - and remarkable. I sensed God invite me to think about how these cherry tomatoes of different hues, of different shapes, of different stages in growth were BEAUTIFUL AND GOOD. And it wasn't about whether or not they would be eaten. If these tomatoes were on the vine till they dropped and rotted, this creation was

just what God made it to be. Connected. Being. Giving glory to God by its very existence. God saw that it was good.

So for us – the church at Willowbend and Bellfort—a church yearning to be more and more of who God made us to be—let us BE. Let us love genuinely inside these walls—that we may love beyond walls. Let us celebrate one another’s place in their season of growth—let us honor each body, each member. Let us become more mindful and caring about the fact that our lives speak—what we buy, where we buy, what we sell, where and how we sell, how we participate in this City of Market directly speaks and shows what we believe about the City of God. And it matters in the realization of that City of God here on the corner of Willowbend and Bellfort. The way we live—the way of LOVE matters. And the good news? We get invited every single minute to eternal life—to LOVE and be LOVED by our Good Creator—to LOVE and be LOVED by others—to follow Jesus here in this good garden. Let us listen to this video and watch the way love is happening here with the FAM Community of Westbury Church.