

"Why Believe the Bible? Because of nobodies who are somebodies."

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

I Peter 2:4-10

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by Dean Snyder

Twenty-five years ago, East Brooklyn, New York, was the ground zero of urban decay and blight and violence. Mayor Kevin White of Boston visited East Brooklyn twenty-five years ago and called it "the beginning of the end of civilization." As troubled as some of our neighborhoods are here in Washington, DC, there is nothing here in Washington that matches the devastation of East Brooklyn, New York twenty-five years ago.

Twenty-five years later, it is still not paradise, but East Brooklyn now has 3,000 brand new affordable homes that the people who used to live in East Brooklyn were able to afford to buy - it wasn't a case of moving poor people out and then gentrifying and then created housing for some other folk. There are 3,000 affordable new homes. There are two new health care centers, two new schools that are run cooperatively by the community and the school board. The parks are clean and nice. The entrances to the subway are safe.

The change that happened in East Brooklyn is mostly the work of an organization called East Brooklyn Congregations. It was founded in 1978 when leaders of churches went out and did hundreds of one-on-one interviews with church members in East Brooklyn to discover the people with commitment and intelligence and talent that everybody else in the world was overlooking. They identified the overlooked people in the churches and trained them - taught them how to organize to make a difference in their community.

My friend, Mike Gegan, has just written a book about the work of East Brooklyn Congregations that he entitled "Going Public." In the book, he tells the story of this twenty-five year struggle by city people living in a devastated community to change their world. One of the people he talks about is a woman named Alice McCollum - who he says everybody else in the world would have not looked at twice as a potential leader. She was a single mother - a single mother of ten children, a member of a African-American Baptist Church in East Brooklyn. She was smart and strong. They trained her and she played a role in what Mike Gegan says was one of the most pivotal points of East Brooklyn Congregations discovering that they really could make a difference in their community and in their world.

Alice McCollum lived across from the Betsy Head Park and Pool which had been closed for renovations by the City for years. As the leaders of East Brooklyn Congregation were doing research, they discovered that the City had budgeted three million dollars to renovate the Betsy Head Park and Pool and that they had spent most of the money but had completed only about 15% of the renovations. They decided to meet with the director of construction for the City of New York to ask when the job of completing the renovation

would be done. They elected Alice McCollum to be their spokesperson. A group of about twelve of them went in for the meeting, met with the director of construction. They introduced themselves, shared their research, then Alice McCollum said in a quiet voice, "When are you going to complete the renovation of the Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

The director of construction immediately began to welcome them and tell them how great it was that they had come to see him - how this was democracy at work, following through on the principles established by Thomas Jefferson. In a quiet voice, Alice McCollum interrupted him and said "When are you going to complete the renovation of the Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

The director of construction said "Before we get to that, let me introduce to you my fine staff who are here with me today to my left is..." Alice McCollum said in an even quieter voice, "I am sorry to interrupt you again, but when are you going to complete the renovation of the Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

At this point, the director of construction began to become a bit impatient, Mike Gegan says. "Listen, there are a lot of projects that are behind schedule. The details are too complicated for you." Alice McCollum said in an even quieter voice, "When are you going to complete the construction of the Betsy Head Park and Pool?"

The director of construction of the City of New York, became furious and said "You people, you people. How dare you come into my office in this way?"

Gegan interrupts telling the story at this point to say that anyone who has worked with people of color, especially in a city, knows that when a white, powerful person says, "You people," what he is really saying is "You nobodies!"

He is saying, " How dare you nobodies come into this office and ask questions of me, an important official of the City of New York"

Alice McCollum closed her notebook, which was the signal for the group to quietly get up and leave. They walked out of the building with the director of construction shouting after them. When they got outside the building, Mike Gegan asked Alice McCollum how she felt, and she said, "I have never felt so much in control in any meeting ever. *We* were in control. And I feel we are going to win."

A couple days later, a work crew showed up at the Betsy Head Park and Pool and began renovations and they were finished a few months later. There was an open house and the director of construction came to cut the ribbon. When she saw him, Alice McCollum went over to him. She said he nervously took a step backwards when she saw her. She reached out her hand and shook his and, with a friendly smile on her face, said, "Congratulations. Thank you for what you have done for our children." After that, according to Mike Gegan, anything that East Brooklyn Congregations wanted from the director of construction of the City of New York, they got.

City pastors can spend their time working with a lot of groups. The groups I've always prioritized as a

pastor are groups like East Brooklyn Congregations. In Philadelphia, it was Philadelphia Interfaith Action. Here in Washington, I have begun to attend the sister group of both of those organizations, a group called WIN. The secret of these organizations that affect change in people's communities is that they begin by searching for those folk that everyone writes off as "those people" - doing hundreds of one-on-one meetings and finding among "those people" that everyone else writes off, the somebodies who have the capacity to change the world.

I don't think the Bible has any special information about science or medicine. The Bible contains social ideas that the writers picked up from the culture around them - things like the divine right of kings and the inferiority of women that we know are not the word of God. The Bible is an imperfect book.

Yet, one of the reasons I love the Bible is because of certain profound themes that I can find articulated nowhere else. One of those themes is that time and time again those whom the world writes off as nobody, turn out to be God's somebody.

The Deuteronomy lesson this morning talks about seventy people - twelve brothers and their families who went down to Egypt - the sons and grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah. They were really a very primitive people, in terms of the world civilization of the time. They weren't particularly civilized. They worshiped, at that point, stone ancestors - stone idols. They didn't have a particularly cutting edge morality. If you read the Bible, this group of seventy people lived pretty rough, crude lives. They weren't anybody that anyone would have guessed would turn out to be the people who introduced a new understanding of God to the world, a new understanding of humanity and what it means to be human, a new ethics, a new morality, a new politics. They were, in terms of anyone's imagination, nobodies. The book of Deuteronomy says that God picked them to be somebody.

It is a consistent theme of scripture - a boy with a slingshot turns out to be somebody. Moses, who stutters, turns out to be God's somebody. Jeremiah, a teenager with acne, turns out to be God's prophet. Rahab, a prostitute, turns out to be the savior of a people. Mary was an adolescent peasant girl whom hardly anyone would have looked at twice.

Jesus, himself, was a carpenter's son. When he started preaching, people said, "Isn't this just the carpenter's son?" Then he died on a cross, the emblem of shame. His follower's were nobodies - fishermen and tax collectors.

The Apostle Paul had many gifts, but tact wasn't one of them. He wrote to the early Christians and says, "Not many of you were wise, in earthly terms. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you were of noble birth."

"You all," the Apostle Paul says to the early church, "were nobodies."

Peter says to the early church, "You were no people - you were nobodies - but God has made you a royal priesthood."

One of the themes of scripture, that I can find articulated no where else, is this truth - that the world's nobodies are again and again, God's somebody.

History may be shaped in the corridors of power but they are also shaped in the back of buses in Montgomery, Alabama, by "nobodies." History is shaped by people like Alice McCollum.

If you are looking for a name for this theme from the Bible, the theological name for what I'm talking about is the Doctrine of Divine Election. Our Presbyterian members here at Foundry would do well to remind us about this doctrine. (A Presbyterian member who attends Foundry was telling me the other day that when she joined and the vow asked if she would be loyal to the United Methodist cross, she crossed her fingers. She says she'll always be a Presbyterian, but she likes Foundry - so, we've got some Presbyterian members here at Foundry.) Our Presbyterian members would do well to remind us of the Doctrine of Divine Election which says that finally we don't choose God, that God chooses us -- and that God doesn't choose us because we're particularly smart, because we're particularly committed, because we're particularly good - God chooses us because God decides that we might be useful.

There's two quick implications of this that I want to mention. One of them is that if this is true - that the world's nobodies are God's somebody -- then it affects the way we treat one another and the way we treat everyone who walks through these church doors. We're having a meeting of the ushers and greeters after church today, and one of the reasons we're doing that is because I want to tell them how important their work is. The work of hospitality in the church is the work of all of us, but our ushers and greeters lead us in this ministry of hospitality. When anybody walks through these church doors, I don't care who, they are God's somebody.

The United Methodist Church produced a video called "A Tale of Two Churches." It's a parable in which two churches are told they are going to have a very, very special visitor. One of the churches thinks, "Oh, maybe the mayor is coming. Maybe, the president of the United States is going to come." Everybody at this church looks around and waits for someone to walk in who looks important. While they do that, everyone else gets ignored.

The second church in this little parable studies the Bible, and discovers that Jesus says that, "the least of these are my brothers and sisters" are very important people. They begin treating everyone who comes through the doors as though they might be the mayor or the president of the United States.

That's what we do. Everyone who comes through the doors of Foundry United Methodist Church gets treated as though they might be the President of the United States - and there is no church in America that knows how to do that better than us!

The second implication, I think, of this Biblical truth that the world's nobodies are God's somebody is this - and it's a more personal - I think that this also means, that the nobody in me might be God's somebody. The part of me where I feel like nobody, where I don't feel competent, or on top of my life, or in control - I think it may be that God does not choose, in me, to use, so much, the places where I am competent and strong, as God may choose to use the places where I don't have it together in my life: he things in me that I am embarrassed about and ashamed of - the places where I feel inadequate - the places where I am broken.

Year's ago I heard a Gospel song on the radio that I have never forgotten - the song said, "I'm yours Lord, I'm yours Lord, everything I am, everything I've got and everything I'm not."

If it is true that the world's nobodies are God's somebody then I suspect that maybe the most important thing that we can offer God is the part of us where we feel like we're not much of somebody.

I don't think I would know this were it not for the Bible that again and again says that where we are broken and where we are insufficient and where we are nobody, that's the place in our life where God chooses us and makes us God's somebody.