[Cockroaches and my angry undoing](http://gracecommunityboston.weebly.com/blog/cockroaches-and-my-angry-undoing)

9/9/2016

*Let me first make some things clear:*

* I am no saint
* I am NOT writing this essay so everyone admires my efforts, but *rather* so fellow wanders, who deeply desire to follow Jesus but come up short (b/c they aren’t saints like the great MT) feel less confused/frustrated/lonely.
* I am not an expert on poverty. I have experienced the complexities of poverty over the past 20+ years, but I am still no expert. I am a pastor, not a sociologist. Again, what I am about to write is not a policy report on poverty. It is the story of an imperfect disciple who struggles to follow Jesus.

Jesus messed me up. Completely. In fact, he messed up my life. Before Jesus, I aspired to live a neatly packaged life, where you did “good” from a distance, like collecting canned goods for the food pantry. But I never imagined myself meeting the folks who needed the food, or if I did, it was with warm, easy smiles. My interior life was not going to be messy either, overwrought with competing emotions and endless questions. The equation was to be simple: Earnest Kindness = Contentedness. Instead, Jesus grabbed hold of me and I have been wrestling with him since.

I had an epic wrestling match with Jesus this August. It was unexpected. For seventeen summers now, I have spent a week volunteering in some capacity with the rural poor. I thought after seventeen summers of rehabbing homes for those who Jesus tells us will be first in the kingdom of God, I would at least resign myself to Jesus’ call. Nope.

***Here is the story:***
She is a mother of five children. Her verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive ex-husband held her captive in her home for 6 months. She and her children fled the husband and their home. In the meantime, family members moved into her abandoned home and destroyed it. Now she is back, her ex is in jail, and her home is in ruins. Amazingly, the mother never once raised her voice at her five children who were *not* easy. Instead, she was loving and patient. Her fortitude amazed me.

Our job was not heroic. It was simple. We fixed the bathroom floor, spruced up her bathroom, painted her living room/kitchen, replaced a few broken windows, and installed a working light. I have done similar work in similarly heartbreaking situations in the past. So why did this house, this story, these children, this mother, break me?

Was it because I knew they had no heat in the winter and slept huddled in the basement in one single room with electric heaters? Was it because the children all showed signs of emotional trauma? Was it because there seems no way out of the cycle of poverty in rural Maine?

My real answer is shameful and honest.
**​It was the cockroaches**.

I am not high maintenance (at least I had never thought so before). I can change the grossest diapers, clean up vomit, shovel horse stalls, wade through cow soup-manure, and clean just about anything I’ve ever encountered. Who knew cockroaches would do me in?

I was painting above the kitchen cabinets because I have mad cutting in skills with a brush. When I positioned myself awkwardly over the cabinets, I soon discovered they were littered with hundreds of dead and living roaches. I wanted to quit, but onward I pressed. We had to paint behind the fridge to complete the job. I felt like a gladiator before she enters the ring. I psyched myself up, talked myself through what would be waiting behind the fridge, and dug in. I moved that fridge, broom in hand, *ready*. I had to leave and dry heave in the yard after watching hundreds of roaches crawl out from under the fridge and behind the cabinets.

I stood outside for perhaps ten minutes, an eternity when there are others still working. I composed myself, wiped my watering eyes, and tried to give myself a pep speech: *This work has to be done. If not me, then who? I was called to it, damn it! Get your ass in gear Rev. Henrich. Suck it up.*

​My pep speech failed. I remembered the story of Mother Theresa tending the body of a man covered in maggots. When the other nuns, with whom she worked, asked her how she managed, she simply answered, “I knew he was Jesus.” I was not going to see Jesus in cockroaches, but I did decide I would rather deal with cockroaches than maggots. I went back in, did my best, and painted the wall behind the fridge. *And then all that afternoon and evening I felt angry.*

Every morning I wipe down my kitchen counters. I take out my garbage regularly. I wash clothes, fold, and put them away on a regular basis. I sort through my fridge and throw away fruit that has spoiled. I change my kids’ sheets even though they do not notice. I spend a ridiculous amount of time and energy managing our refrigerator to make sure we are not wasting food. I buy groceries on sale and we eat healthy. Why wasn’t this mother doing all those things?! She had cockroaches in her house because there was old food everywhere.

Angry. Nasty. Venomous.

I *knew* my rant was privileged. I knew I wasn’t struggling with PTSD. I knew that poverty is so complicated, so multifaceted that just grocery shopping is ten times more difficult than anything I face. But still, I was self-centeredly angry. No matter how much shame accompanied my anger I remained stuck. I felt utterly defeated.

Over the past three weeks, my anger has dissipated. Grief has taken its place. I no longer feel ashamed of my anger, but instead am aware that somehow I had reached a breaking point. I accept that I am imperfect and no Mother Theresa. I also believe the limited work we did offered some hope, some buoy to cling to for a struggling mother. It was good work: faithful, needed, blessed. Yet how am I, an imperfect disciple, to follow Jesus when the work seems so futile? When cockroaches still crawl from beneath refrigerators?

I have no answer. If I did, it would merely be a platitude. Instead, I have come to accept, once again, that the work Jesus calls us to is **difficult**. It is never neatly packaged and rarely does it offer simple satisfaction. Praise songs never play in the background. Nice, clean church clothes are unsuitable. Truly believing that the first shall be last, means encountering cockroaches and maggots. It means wrestling with Jesus.

I am sad. I am frustrated. I am worn out. But in my prayers, I try to remember that God knows when a sparrow falls (Matthew 10). And I do feel assured that God numbers each hair on the heads of five children and a mother struggling in Maine.

Rev. Abigail A. Henrich
Grace Community Boston
*an emergent progressive christian community*508.668.6801 or 508.740.2405
[www.gracecommunityboston.weebly.com](http://www.gracecommunityboston.weebly.com)