

After being out of college for only a year I joined 11 other young folks in Pittsburgh, to take an incredible leap of faith. Of course, at the time we didn't know what we were getting ourselves into.

We had this grand idea...buy a 100 year old decrepit, abandoned church building, renovate it, and turn it into a community center with a coffee shop, a ceramics studio, a performance venue, a worship space, and an art gallery.

4 years later this grand idea has become a reality, rooted in the successful mobilization of over 15,000 volunteer hours, more than \$2 million dollars of grassroots fundraising, a community of supporters, and the belief that what we are doing would change a neighborhood.

As I've had a chance to reflect on this bible verse it seems quite fitting that the verse is one talking about loving God and loving our neighbors, and a verse rooted in old testament law, teaching fairness, equality, and how to worship.

When I learned I would need to speak today, the following poem came to mind. It's a poem written by one of my ceramic influences; a man named Jack Troy. He is an excellent potter who teaches at Juniata College in Pennsylvania, and for me it illustrates the kind of creative exploration that has been so important to me as an individual, as a ceramic artist, and also as a part of the Union Project.

Voting

***Years ago, on an impulse,
I wrote a short letter containing two lies***

***to Leon Gorman, the president of L.L. Bean.
Dear Mr. Gorman, my wife and I
are Black and wonder whether it is okay
for us to wear L.L. Bean clothing.
We have never seen Black people
modeling clothes in an L.L. Bean catalogue.***

***Being neither married nor Black
Didn't keep me from voting
in my imaginary election***

***Dear Mr. Troy, Mr. Gorman wrote back,
We at L.L. Bean use only our employees
as models and at present we employ
no Black people, but that may change.
Of course we welcome everyone,
Irrespective of race, to wear our clothing.***

***Just a few months later Black and Asian models
Appeared for the first time in an L.L. Bean catalogue.
I feel my vote was counted.***

Jack's impulse led to change, and it happened through asking hard, important questions, knowing that they needed to be asked, but not knowing where they would lead.

Regardless of how hard the questions can be to ask, it is equally important to LISTEN to the answers and be willing to accept the advice, counsel, or challenges that come.

The organization we created, the Union Project, is located on the border of 2 neighborhoods. One primarily black, low income, and uneducated and the other, primarily white, upper class, and educated. But what has been exciting for

me is witnessing the blurring of neighborhood boundaries when communities can come together.

In my 4 years of working at the Union Project, I've observed hundreds of people walk into our building looking for something. Dozens of folks come in almost daily, looking for a dollar to ride the bus, or asking when church services will start up, wondering if I want to buy their TV or their shoes. I've had foundation representatives come in to give us thousands of dollars in grant money, and once there was a guy who came in with a loaded gun, ready to commit suicide.

What I continuously see all of these people have in common is that they want to talk. They're curious, they're lonely, they're bored, or maybe they're just friendly. And for me, the essence of what this bible verse teaches me, is to listen.

My Mennonite heritage, my parents, my family, my friends, my college, have influenced me to pay attention to what people have to say and how they say it. For me, giving the person, any person, some time is the neighborly thing to do. After all, in trying to start the Union Project, I've asked countless people for their time.

It has been truly miraculous to see God at work in the Union Project. How else can I account for vandals breaking into our building, lighting more than a dozen fires in a wooden building, but not burning it down? or how do I account for a volunteer who always shows up unsolicited to help unload truckloads of furniture or building materials, or a Union Contractor burdened with the rules and regulations of western Pennsylvania labor unions, yet willing to work alongside more than 500 unskilled volunteers this summer?

In conclusion, I'm reminded of a passage from Madeleine L'Engle's book, *Walking on Water*,

L 'Engle writes:

In a very real sense not one of us is qualified, but it seems that god continually chooses the most unqualified to do his work, to bear his glory. If we are qualified, we tend to think that we have done the job ourselves. If we are forced to accept our evident lack of qualification, then there's no danger that we will confuse God's work with our own, or God's glory with our own.

Although I feel unqualified to be up here today, I want to thank Goshen College for this recognition and opportunity.

Justin Rothshank
September 30, 2005