

The first congregation I served with out of seminary had this youth group that thrived off the novel concept of the lock-in, something I had only heard about but never participated in, in my younger years. It is when teenagers are invited to stay inside church walls all night long; and this particular collection of youth would do the usual playing of games, but also take on some form of a service project, do a Bible study, and as well as they should, watch movies in hopes of staying up all hours of the night. And when coming together for such things on a monthly basis, strong bonds tend to develop amongst the teens, but in doing so it may also create this inner circle that isn't always easy for an outsider to approach, which, if we're honest, may very well happen with church anything, for that matter.

And so, shortly after I arrived to that faith community, since I was not pre-occupied with married life or parenting responsibilities, I was invited to my first lock-in, and I could very much tell I was an outsider to all those friendships that had developed through years of overnight stays and mission trips and random get-togethers in between, but there was this one high school senior who went out of her way to include me.

One of the popular girls in school, but you could never tell that by how she carried herself. One who also didn't have the strongest family life on the homefront, but again, you could never tell that with all the kindness and compassion and humility that she exuded well beyond her years. Of all the strong bonds amongst the 30 or so of that group, she was a stronghold in of herself, and oddly enough, had the name Angel to top it off: as if she was a living embodiment of the Gospel to other teens and even to the supposedly wiser in age in the church and beyond.

And then, on a fall Saturday morning, the phone rang from one of our members who was in law enforcement at the time. There was an automobile accident overnight. Angel was gone at far too young of an age. Death had taken away the smile, the laughter, the joy about her, all within a night. There has only been one instance in my time serving as a pastor, where I have seen folding chairs needed to accommodate overflow in a church sanctuary: and it wasn't for Christmas Eve or for an Easter Sunday. It was that funeral for an 18-year-old girl. And yet, as packed to the brim with emotions as that afternoon was, there was a whole 'nother level of holiness that had emerged in a different room

altogether in that church building, the church building that many still consider to be “the house of the Lord,” as described in our Psalm that we spoke together this morning.

A few days before, when news broke about Angel’s unthinkable, unexplainable death, her youth group, her second family of sorts, gathered in their own sacred spot in the “house of the Lord,” and it was not the room with the altar and the pews and the font. It wasn’t the Sunday school room that some of them grew up learning about the basics of it all. It was this room tucked away in the corner in the basement with a pool table and a few worn-out love seats and couches. It was their room. It was their space that they grew close together over years of surface-level conversations and the deepest questions asked as well. The supposedly wiser in age in the church and beyond may not always realize it, but that room is where they felt most comfortable. That is where they experienced God the most, with each other. And on that day, when their world was thoroughly torn apart, that just as precious of spot in the “house of the Lord” is where they gathered with all their anger and frustration and complete and utter silence.

I doubt the Psalmist had a youth room in mind when it was written, “I rejoiced when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord,’” but sometimes Scripture can be fulfilled in exceptional ways that the original author could never imagine, because that’s just how the Holy Spirit likes to operate. Because in a room with a pool table and some worn-out love seats and couches is where those just-as-loved-by-God teenagers experienced their own kindness and compassion and humility with each other when they didn’t know where else to turn, as if Angel’s impact was still being felt; as if God could somehow, someway, unexplainably, unthinkably, still rise from the dead.

And as we enter this time of year, when some may try to approach the sometimes insider circle of churches, going to the modern day “houses of the Lord,” yes, some may come to the sanctuaries on December 24th, or for such places like ours for a Blue Christmas service, because yes, this season is not always easy for everyone to bear. And yet, others may come to the Lord’s house for the youth room, to be in just of holy of a spot where they need to be accepted for who they are, no questions asked. Others may need the fellowship hall for an AA

meeting, because they're not so sure there's any other place that will truly take them in with whatever past and present baggage they may be carrying. Others might just need a random chair by someone with a caring and listening ear, because they're struggling to find the kindness and compassion and humility in this world that sometimes feels as if it has none of the above. And they're wondering if the "house of the Lord" has any of that left in its holy supply. It's not always easy for the "house of the Lord" to try to pull off being all things to all people during this time of year, when it is rather packed to the brim with all the human emotions, but it shouldn't stop us from trying. Because we do have this never-ending supply of the Gospel that will always insist that not even death can silence it. And that God will keep on rising with all the hope and love and grace we need not just for inside the circle, not just for the houses of the Lord, but for all the world to know, that they are most certainly loved to the point of being born to live and die and rise all for those inside the circle and well well beyond. So, for that Greatest News for all the world, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!