

Garage Sale Treasure

Garage sales aren't something that Krista and I do a lot of. Every once in a while, we'd try to find a bike for one of the kids or stop by to see if they have legos for sale. One Saturday Krista noticed a garage sale in our new Florida neighborhood. We didn't need anything, so I'm not exactly sure why she went. She was gone quite a while, which usually isn't a good sign when it comes to garage sales. When she came back in the door, her arms were empty, but she had collected a Pearl.

We landed in the neighborhood about seven months earlier. It was a neighborhood of vacation rental houses just south of Disney. We lived there for a month in January, a few weeks in April and during our month-long trip in August we met Pearl. It was an odd life to be sure. Somewhere in between our flights back and forth from Seattle to Orlando, and somewhere in between not knowing where to call home, God taught us who we really were and what real treasure is.

Pearl was a 78-year-old heartbroken widow. Her husband of 37 years had just died the month before. Pearl was as alone as alone gets. No children. Estranged from all family members. A Jewish New Yorker residing in a land of vacation rental properties in Kissimmee Florida. Pearl was slightly racist, extremely judgmental and often surly. But Pearl was also the best kind of sweet, and when she loved you, she really loved you. She had no car, no internet, a phone connected to the wall and her rolodex on the counter that had every number she'd ever called. Pearl needed help to do everything away from her home. It was a bit overwhelming for us to comprehend. We still lived in Seattle much of the year and couldn't be present long enough to be the help this dear woman needed.

We had only lived in Florida for about ten weeks, but we had inherited a neighbor to love. We called on our new Disney friends for help. These Disney workers and friends that we had felt called to serve, became servants to Pearl. Beautiful people like Rene, Kristen and McKala would take Pearl places when we could not. Rene quickly became a lover of Pearl and was every bit as much family as we were. Amy became another daughter and loved Pearl through some of the toughest times. Pearl brought us all great joy and we all brought her family.

A story is told about Jesus meeting a widow whose son had just died. The story says that *Jesus' heart went out to her*. I think that phrase explains what we all felt knowing the pain Pearl was in. Jesus went on to give that widow back her son. If we could have raised her precious husband from the dead, we certainly would have. But I think God was letting Pearl see that she was important to him in different ways. He let her see that she was worth loving, and that family goes much deeper than bloodlines.

I think we started to learn that meeting someone in their time of need was more important than anything else. We just asked Pearl what she needed. She had no problem telling us. After all, she was a grown woman who had lived a full and amazing life. But at 78, she was starting over. All that the Bible said about widows and orphans hit a bit harder during those days. Being alone isn't something that people should have to experience. I think that might be why God sent Krista to that garage sale.

Our group of friends took her grocery shopping, to the bank, to the post-office, to haircuts and to many, many doctors appointments. To go out with Pearl was always an experience. She really knew people because she listened, she asked questions and she took time to love. To be on Pearl's good side was life and I would never dare get on her bad side. Pearl would take an hour to shop for groceries when the rest of us would need just ten minutes. The store was to be walked in the same order every time. You'd always finish with the refrigerated items and finally lotto tickets. She would stop and talk to just about everyone who worked at Publix. Those working there would greet her by name. We'd hear things like this every time:

"Hello Miss Pearl, how have you been?"

"Pearl, it's so wonderful to see you!"

"Pearl, I was worried about you. I didn't see you last week".

The butcher would have her cut of meat wrapped and ready when she arrived. If Pearl thought the meat was tough last week, she'd tell him what she thought about it. Most of us would never have the gall to speak to someone the way Pearl would speak. I'm not sure I'd recommend it, but it seemed to work for her. The butcher would quickly apologize and let her know this week's cut was on him. We all wanted to please her somehow because she was so sweet. And at times, we'd all roll our eyes because she could be so sour. But her charm was iconic. She's finish a conversation like that with the butcher by calling him "Darling" and telling him she'd be back next week to tell him how the meat was. Her wry smile always left me wondering if she knew just how good she was.

One time we took her to see Avengers: The Civil War. She loved Marvel movies! Pearl had a thing for Chris Hemsworth that she didn't hide. She wasn't afraid to tell you how sexy Thor was. It was more funny than it was awkward. We took her to The Loop, the movie theater she went to with her dear husband every week. While waiting for popcorn, we hear this man in the manager's booth say, "Miss Pearl, is that you?" They caught up and embraced in the way the dearest of friends do. That is the way we all felt about Pearl. Moments like that were commonplace when you were with her. Life was both remarkable & ordinary at the same time.

Pearl had this beautiful short silver hair that made her hard to miss. Her personality made her impossible to forget. One week Rene and Annika were running errands with Pearl and they had to stop at a different Walmart than normal. This did not please Pearl. When they walked past the bank, out runs a woman, "Miss Pearl, is that you??" The last time that banker had seen Pearl was ten years prior. I'm convinced that we walked with royalty for a few years.

When people are admired so much, they make an impact. The story of Tabitha in Acts had always struck me as an impressive life. When I watched Pearl, it all made sense. Tabitha was described as "always doing good and helping the poor". The widows during that time were in the thousands and the early believers were known for taking care of their needs. Tabitha was a disciple of Jesus and had lived in the center of that need. She died and there was such grief. Peter was in a town nearby and they sent for him. The widows showed him the clothes and robes that Tabitha had made for them. Peter sent them all out of the room. He knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to the dead woman and said, "Tabitha, get up". She sat up and Peter called for the believers, especially the widows. I love that Peter knew how important Tabitha was to those who had lost so much. "especially the widows" is a phrase that I think Pearl tattooed on our hearts. She made an impact in the places she went because she got to know the people. It was never just grocery shopping or the bank. It was really going to see friends. I missed this for a while before Pearl's impact on me became more clear.

I think God uses widows to make impact on others. The next time you read the Christmas story in Luke, pay attention to when Jesus is presented at the Temple. There is a prophet there name Anna. She was married for seven years when her husband died and had been a widow for more than 60 years. She devoted herself to God, never leaving the temple and fasting day and night. Can you even imagine? She came up to Joseph and Mary when Jesus was presented at the temple. Anna spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. A widow for 60 years, praying and fasting in the temple became her life work. And God in his graciousness and beautiful inclusion uses this woman to point towards the future redemption. That's a pretty great description of what Christmas is really about.

That first year with Pearl meant Christmas wouldn't be the same. On Christmas Eve we invited her for dinner with some of our friends. She was quick to tell us she wasn't a Christian, but we told her Jesus said she could come anyway. Pearl hadn't done a lot of family meals. Being estranged from just about everyone in her own family makes it go like that. We prayed, we thanked Jesus and we did life together. Pearl got used to all of us Christians that God had given her. I think she decided we were all okay. And for Pearl, that meant she loved us very much. Shortly after that Christmas Eve dinner, our kids decided it was time for us to move to Florida full-time. I think Pearl had a lot to do with that. We had someone who we loved who needed us, and I know we needed her. About a year after we met Pearl, we were no longer her neighbor, we were just family.

We were moving to Florida full-time and we already had family here now. Pearl spent many of her days crying, missing her late husband so badly. There was a pain in her side that seemed to grow and grow that concerned Krista. For a while we thought it was muscle pain, in time we learned it was cancer. I don't think there is a time in our lives when we need family and community more than when we're sick. Krista, Amy and Rene spent many an hour in waiting rooms, cold hospital rooms and long waits for the doctor to come in. Pearl was scared. To help pass the time, Krista took to reading stories from the book, "Love Does" by Bob Goff. Those stories would make Pearl laugh and good conversations would always follow. The best part was the stories were often about joy and not so much about sorrow. Pearl's life was full of sorrow, worry and sadness. Our time together was a bright spot in her day.

The toughest part was always bringing Pearl back to her home after an appointment. Leaving her was leaving a part of yourself. There were times Pearl would sleep at our house before or after a treatment. It was good to have her with us, and hard at the same time. Anyone who has an aging parent or grandparent in their house would understand. Krista was great about just picking up the phone and calling Pearl. Those 15-minute conversations helped ease the distance between our houses. Sometimes Pearl would just vent for the entire time. Other times she was as sweet as could be. Krista would never know what she'd get until she called. I always admired that despite the unknown, she called anyway. I think that is love.

The last day Krista was able to take Pearl to the doctors was brutal. Pearl was a terrible patient who didn't follow directions well or often. Her life was about being in control and she was trying to hold on to as much of it as possible. While Pearl wasn't too interested in following directions, she was also afraid to die. It was a terribly complicated mix. Eventually Pearl's body could no longer control itself. When we are babies and toddlers, the reality of diapers are accepted. It's not so easy when you're older. On that day, the hospital needed to give her new clothes because she had soiled her own a few times. She wasn't strong enough to change herself, so she needed help with that too. It was degrading and humbling for such a strong woman. On this day, the awareness was clear that she was not well.

Krista was just as overwhelmed and broken as Pearl on the drive home. Krista kept praying silently, Lord, help me love well. Help me stay present. The drive was pretty quiet aside from some songs playing by "Need to Breathe". All of the sudden, Pearl starts praying out loud at the end of a song. I think God met both of them in the same moment. Pearl thanked God for all that he had provided her, for the care and for the people in her life and she begged God for help. Krista heard those words and it brought her such peace. It was pure and beautiful and honest. Just like Pearl.

She was near to God as she was nearing death. I think that's a good place to be. Those of us who walked life with Pearl received far more than gold or silver or the gaudy artwork on her walls. We didn't need any of her garage sale treasures. We were given the chance to know her and to be known by her. I think that may be the greatest treasure of all.