

“That’s the Main Thing About It”

The story behind Ma Siss’s Place
& Quincy Street Missional Church

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The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners
...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of
his splendor.
They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.
They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

Isaiah 61:1-4

Perhaps what we as humans most often take for granted are miracles; they might spring up around us daily, but we have simply grown too busy or hard or knowledgeable to notice any longer. Take, for instance, an insignificant seed, caught up and blown about by the breeze. Its most likely destiny is to fall to the ground and lodge in damp darkness; yet, with time, a fleck of green—a sign of emerging life—will press upward to soak in the nurturing sunlight. This green will eventually grow into a strong stem, perhaps like that of the blue cornflower blossoming in an overlooked pocket of Dorchester, Massachusetts, in an empty lot scattered with discarded wrappers and broken bottles. This cornflower defies its grimy, neglected surroundings and reaches through the chain link fence toward the distant sky, manifesting the miraculous in the midst of inner city Boston.

The garage next to this empty lot on Baker Street shares a similar story with the cornflower, a testimony of beauty drawn out of brokenness and decay. At ten-thirty each morning, its door opens to reveal a high-ceilinged space stuffed with rack after rack of an eclectic jumble of clothing, boxes of shoes, shelves stocked with canned and boxed foods, a circle of worn chairs, and a well-used kitchen area accompanied by the thick scent of yesterday's fried-chicken. The garage had once been a "chop shop," where stolen cars are dismantled and gutted for their valuable parts. Abandoned for many years after the government closed it down, the brownish purple building served only as an eyesore to the community. That all changed when Idene Wilkerson, a woman who lives one street over from the garage, purchased it about two years ago. Now, through the garage, the Wilkerson family and their friends serve the surrounding community with a food pantry, thrift store, daily morning prayer, and home-style breakfasts on Saturday mornings followed by a church gathering. However, a view of the activities and services alone fails to capture its full significance. For it is a merging point of lives that have been transformed by the grace of God, lives that interweave to give the garage the strength and spirit of love that define it.

"You come as is." That's what Idene, better known as Ma Siss, has to say about Saturday mornings at the garage that is named after her. You come to be filled with scrambled eggs and bacon. You come to meet with the Lord and clap and sing. But most of all, you come as is- as black or white, as a drug addict or one staying clean, as one

with a wrinkled face or a young grin. Each of these individual faces completes the circle of chairs, but we are all stripped of these labels when we're sitting together in Ma Siss' Place. We are simply people loved by God. This truth is most evident during testimony time.

After singing out "Victory is Mine," Ma Fann shoots out of her chair with her arms raised up, calling on someone to testify. "I *know* the Lord's done something good for *somebody* this week! Come on ya'll, somebody get up and testify!" There is no awkward or sustained silence because testimony time is a time when people are not afraid to be real. Whatever is on their mind or heart, people share it. Stories are told about God's goodness and patience, about resisting drugs, or about struggling to be a good parent. And whether they are stories of victory or defeat, whether they are told through broken cries or laughter, the response is one of love. There are no conditions on who you have to be or how you are supposed to feel when you step into this circle on Saturday morning. "You come as is," and any way you come, you are loved. This picture of grace is a vivid reflection of God's love for us because we believe that Jesus Christ gave His life away on the cross to make up for all of the times we have messed up. It is the freedom of knowing that we are made right with God through Christ's life and death, and not through anything we have done right or wrong, that creates this atmosphere.

Ma Siss is not the sort of woman who believes in this truth solely when she is sitting in a circle of chairs during testimony time. She believes in it when you walk in the door of her house and she stops whatever she is doing to embrace you with a "hi dahlin'" or "come here baby." She shares God's love when she spends whole days doing laundry for others, or when she spends hours scraping kernels off of corncobs and cutting up potatoes to ensure that everyone is fed well. Ma Siss doesn't just testify to God's goodness through words; she lives it and she gives it. She says, "I'm a living testimony of what God can do. You know *I* didn't do it, it's what *God* done."

Hers is a living testimony because God redeemed her past. He brought the beauty of a giving heart from the ashes of poverty. The memory of a past life of poverty and racism is the main thing that influences and shapes Ma's nature of constantly giving. "Some things make you remember," Ma Siss says. "You know, things like a jar, something like that, so you never forget where you come from. Never." Ma comes from

Montgomery, Alabama, and it is there that she met her husband Willy and started a family. Ma Siss remembers when she worked as a maid in the South, “I had to go into the back door, I couldn’t go in the white person front door.” After she passed through that door of segregation, she would often spend her time polishing silver or washing dishes until her hands were raw. With these tired and worn hands, Ma would return to her own family and prepare a meal of rice or a chicken leg, served with water in a pickle jar. In her kitchen today, a few pickle jars remain amidst the abundance of food and dishware, and when she uses them as water glasses, they remind her of where she came from. This memory inspires her to give to anyone who has a need that she is able to fulfill. Ma articulates it best when she says, “So much stuff I always wanted to do, and couldn’t do it, and now I can give. Right now, if you catch me, I’m always giving more.”

It is a rare moment to catch Ma *not* giving. It is her generosity that allowed the garage to open. One day this summer, Ma Siss’ Place received a donation of hundreds of shoes from New Balance. Ma Siss can remember the days when she was a girl and she only had one pair of shoes. When it rained, water would seep through the tin roof of the one-roomed home that she shared with her mother and seven siblings. The rain also meant that she would have to walk barefoot through the puddles to preserve her only shoes. No one could have predicted that one summer day, fifty years later, the roof of a garage called Ma Siss’ Place would shelter hundreds of shoes for anyone in the area who needed them.

Before Ma Siss’ Place was filled with shoes, it was simply an abandoned building. But like that cornflower that pushed through the broken bottles, God grew Ma Siss’ Place into what it is today. It started when Ma’s son Willy had the idea to use the building for a barbershop. So Ma bought it with her retirement funds and she used part of the building for a community food pantry. She listened as her son shared his dream to one day have church in the garage.

Meanwhile, the first step toward the fruition of Willy’s dream was happening right in Ma’s home. Every Wednesday night, a group of women and friends met around Ma Siss’ dining room table to share their lives together. Ma remembers, “We’d get all the ladies and we’d sit in there and we’d tell our problems and stuff to each other, and each one could cry on each one’s shoulder.” What started as friends creating a time to be

there for one another eventually turned into a prayer meeting. As Ma says, “We wanted to let the spirit part in.”

Ma’s niece, Arlene, remembers that sitting around the dining room table was a time to seek the Lord together and join in prayer. Arlene recalls that some of the younger people in this founding group were struggling with drug addictions and wanted a place to share their lives without fear of judgment. They spent time in God’s word, each week choosing a different passage to study together; and, naturally, the evening began with a good home-cooked meal. Soon the group grew too large for the space and they had to move downstairs to the basement. Ma Fann remembers this expansion, “When we first started, we started just a little prayer meetin’ and different peoples, and it was *beautiful*. And we left the house and went to the basement, and we just got *so* many people comin’, we had to stretch it out further.”

So they stretched it out to the garage, and the garage became Ma Siss’ Place: a place not only to serve the physical but also the spiritual needs of the community. Recognizing the need to cultivate their spiritual family, Ma Siss and Ma Fann invited Aaron Graham to get involved with Ma Siss’ Place. They first heard Aaron speak at a local university about Christ’s love for the marginalized and voiceless in society and were thrilled by his passion to see God transform lives in the inner city. Aaron was drawn into this community in November 2002 as a recent college graduate living in Dorchester and working at Fair Foods. He was excited to come alongside as one who could lead Bible study, growing the existing hunger for God’s Word. Wednesday night Bible studies grew into a Saturday morning church service, a direct fulfillment of Willy’s dream.

Amazed by God’s evident hand in leading them toward the fullness of Ma Siss’ Place as it is today, Ma declares, “It was just a blessing...it was like God just attached everything together. It was something we really needed, we really needed that spirit piece down there, and that’s what it come to. And ever since...the door’s been open, and we’ve been getting more and more from the Lord.” The Lord did connect everything; he drew together the fragments of a despairing community, an overcrowded basement, a rundown garage, an unrealized vision, a skinny white kid and a needy neighborhood and he landscaped them into a unified garden that took on the name Ma Siss’ Place.

The garage today is a miraculous answer to years of prayer. Ma Siss assures, “What happens is gonna happen. You just gotta pray on it...If you ask and are serious about it, I can say that He will fulfill.” Having experienced the power of crying out to the Lord, Ma Siss and Ma Fann have lived out their passion for prayer every morning of this summer. They gather at 7 a.m. at the garage, giving whatever has happened to the Lord and asking him to shape what is going to happen. Aaron leads this time of prayer, along with a group of college students living in Dorchester for the summer. They join their voices to pray for the neighborhood and the lives connected with Ma Siss’ Place.

Ma Fann has prayed for her neighborhood for the past forty years. “I pray for it all the time, never been a day I didn’t, yes Lord, I pray all the time,” she passionately affirms. Ma Fann remembers when some new neighbors moved in and three people got shot at their house upon their first weekend living there. She did not react in fear, but prayed “that God would move them as far as the east is from the west.” The Lord answered her prayer because those neighbors left in a month. Ma remembers with excitement, “Them people was gone! God heard my cry.”

Joining with others in prayer this summer has been a fulfillment of a vision that Ma Fann had long ago. “One day I was sittin’ and I could just see it,” Ma Fann says; she goes on to describe the vision that the Lord gave her for Ma Siss’ Place. It is a vision that reflects the truth of who God is. He is a God who draws people up from low places, up to encounter Him and meet him in prayer, up to be in togetherness and share life. Ma Fann unfolds what she saw in one simple sentence, “You know, I could see it. We go up on a hill, we pray, and just be together; you know, just have a group of people.”

Only a few hours after Ma Fann and the others end their time of prayer, Dora and Raymond arrive to open up the doors of Ma Siss’ Place to the public. The faces of this devoted couple are the faces most familiar to folks who come around Ma Siss’ Place. These two never make much of all the time they pour into the garage, though they are the first to open the gate each day as well as the last to put away the clothes and cover the produce before leaving. On Saturday mornings, Dora, without fail, can be found leaning over the garage’s greasy stove, scrambling eggs and boiling grits for the 9:30 a.m. breakfast, with her tiny niece Chanah hanging on her hip. Dora is Ma’s spirited, creative daughter, always ready to trade loving banter with a friend or to drop the donated clothes

she's sorting and assist visitors to the garage. Raymond, on the other hand, pops in and out of the door, picking up donations around town, running to the hardware store, or moving furniture and boxes. An always-available handyman, Raymond never complains, though he barely stops to eat from early morning until seven or later in the evening.

When Raymond got involved at the garage a couple of years ago, he had only recently married Dora. Less than a decade earlier, Raymond probably never would have imagined his life as it is now, revolving around work at the garage and devotion to his family. Raymond describes his as a dark background, confessing, "I was in the clutches of horror." Only when he was moving out of that long chapter of darkness in his life and journeying toward recovery did he first meet his wife through the drug rehabilitation facility in which he was living. But Raymond says that, eventually, "I just knew it was over...I could feel it." He explains that, like most drug addicts, he had to hit bottom and decide that he was really ready to stop using before he could recover. "You have to do that first, you know. You have to say, I have a problem. You are slimy, greasy, and dirty, but the devil will tell you, 'naw, you look alright.'" Defying these lies of the devil, Raymond dove into recovery. It was during this process that the Lord began to draw Raymond out of the pit, toward Himself, eventually leading him into his role at Ma Siss' Place.

Quickly recognizing that he could not endure such a life change on his own, Raymond reached outside of himself for strength. "Prior to getting clean, I was bankrupt in the departments of spirituality, you know. There was nothing there. It was a learning process to realign my faith and my beliefs. And this community center here...it just got me at the right time. I had a job and I was laid off and I had time on my hands, and this came up. It sorta grew on me. I never really sat down and said this is what I wanna do for the rest of my life." So, not only did the Lord lead Raymond away from drugs and toward Himself, he also directed him toward a place where he could invest his energy and serve others. He provided a holistic salvation that restored Raymond's existence from consuming darkness to an abundant and selfless life. Raymond explained that for such a long time he took from the community, so the garage first appealed to him as a way to pour into the very environment where he had been a destructive force. Now he desires to be an example to the troubled community around him. His quiet demeanor certainly does

not diminish the strength he brings to the garage, especially since he is one of the few men near Baker Street modeling a life that honors his Lord and nurtures his family. Raymond presses along the path God sets for him one day at a time, refusing to perpetuate the cycles of brokenness and apathy that fetter too many families around Dorchester.

Raymond dreams of days when the foot traffic through the garage becomes unmanageable. For the time being, however, he hopes that people leave the building saying, “What a lifesaver. Oh, God, thank you!” Raymond feels this way about the transformation in his own life, sharing, “In comparison to my other life, this is paradise.” Not forgetting what a profound turn his life has taken or the past from which he has emerged, he is quick to admit that he could not survive a day apart from his faith in the Lord, a God who loved him so desperately that he lifted him from the dirt and despair, enveloping him with a garment of praise. Rejoicing in his newfound belief in Christ, Raymond declares, “It’s what’s been carrying me for the past four-plus years. It’s truly nothing of my own.”

Like her husband Raymond, Dora comprises such a vibrant part of the atmosphere at Ma Siss’ Place that most regular visitors could hardly imagine the garage without her. Describing herself as “a very blessed-by-God, forty-two year old black woman,” Dora shares that the environment of “love and true concern for others” at Ma Siss’ Place so overwhelms her that it elicits from her—from anyone—a desire to love others in response. Hers is a story that overlaps the pattern of her husband’s. Dora has also traveled “a mighty long way” with God “movin’ *so* many mountains,” as Ma Fann might say, to reach her current life as a faithful wife, daughter, attentive mother and caretaker of the garage. She views her life as a complete turnaround. Though she points out that her difficult past was not a result of her childhood upbringing because her mom raised her to “help others, respect others, always be thankful and give praises to God”. Yet Dora shares that she regrettably went her own way, choosing to follow her own beliefs. Before she knew it, she had imprisoned herself in a two-decade-long heroine addiction of deep emotional pain and countless broken relationships.

First married at age seventeen, Dora encountered all but the purity and beauty of marriage of which a young girl dreams. Her husband suddenly turned violent, abusing her

physically and psychologically. The abuse grew so severe that she lost her first son only days after his birth due to complications from the beatings. However, after giving birth to two girls, Sissy and Christine, Dora decided to endure the marriage for their sakes. When her husband brought home cocaine, Dora began sniffing it and immediately drove herself into an intense addiction. She left her husband and sent her children to stay with her parents, heading off to live with the drug dealer. She spent day after day smoking cocaine, going from a size 14 to a size 3 and visibly aging almost 20 years in a matter of five months. Only a year had passed before she was broke. She sold everything for money to get a fix, from furniture to the meat out of her freezer.

When nothing else remained, Dora returned back home where she stole from her family, and she confesses with horror that she even sold her children's Christmas gifts. She began using heroin after about two years of her cocaine addiction. She finally entered the drug rehabilitation program where she met Raymond, but even then she was not truly ready to stop using. She continued using throughout the program, hiding clean urine under the sink to keep from getting caught. Dora says, "[Raymond] did not want to believe I was using. He had fell in love with me, and I loved him—but I loved the drug more...My mother gave me a choice: get help or stop coming around her [because] she could not bear watching me kill myself again." Dora chose drugs.

Dora believes that the third and most recent time she went through a program, it made her stronger and wiser and left her with a greater clarity of purpose. Dora attributes this to a moment that deeply affected her right after she was arrested. A detective told her that she was a genius and that if she would use her gift to help people, she could really make a difference. The potential this man saw in her altered the way that she saw herself—the suffocating cage of her addiction was not the only thing left for her in life. Taking heed of these encouraging words, Dora stayed clean throughout rehab and began working at the garage in December 2002.

Reflecting on her past, Dora explains, "That's why I work really hard at what I do now. I am tired at the end of the day but I have never felt so satisfied and complete until now." After almost eight months, she still daily engages her intellect, which so struck the detective, in the work of the garage where she volunteers 6-10 hours a day for at least six days a week. Dora constantly thinks up new ideas of how the garage can be more

accessible to customers or how it can more effectively serve the needs of the community. For example, one of her hopes is to compile resources about social services available in the greater Dorchester area. She wants to gather information about emergency shelters, rent assistance, public transportation, and food stamps. Then, when someone comes in with needs that Ma Siss' Place cannot meet, she or Raymond can assist him or her in finding the best solution. This idea perfectly fits with Dora's understanding of what Ma Siss' Place is: "a place where no one is judged—all are treated the same and everyone is welcome; a place where a handful of people are trying to make a difference and show people that there is hope; a place where people want to help whether the need be clothes, food, or just a shoulder to cry on; a place to learn about God; a place to get a good home-cooked meal; a place where we laugh together, cry together, and praise glory to God together."

In accord with Dora's beautiful sketch of the many-faceted Ma Siss' Place, all the brothers and sisters involved there agree that giving praise and glory to God is, as Ma Siss herself would say, "the main thing about it." None of them forget where he or she came from or what the garage began as before it became Ma Siss' Place. God's plan of redemption on a street corner in Dorchester means transforming a garage of emptiness and oily filth into a place of provision for a community in need. It means God lifting Ma Siss from a past of poverty and hardship to a life of selfless giving. It means God drawing Dora and Raymond from the darkness of addiction and despair into joyful service to others. When we look at the garage on Quincy street, we notice a sign that says "Ma Siss' Place, open 10-6"; we notice crates of oranges and onions and a table displaying toys. But above all, looking at the garage stirs us to say with confidence that ours is a God of miracles; a God who bestows a crown of beauty instead of ashes, pours the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and clothes His children with a garment of praise instead of despair.

"For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations."

--Isaiah 61:11

With love and all glory to God,

Betsy Jackson and Julia Wilsie

(two kindred spirits who spent Summer 2003 meeting for prayer each morning and
serving at Ma Siss' Place)