

We had something pretty amazing happen here at church on Easter Sunday and no I'm not talking about our Easter celebration although that was amazing in its own right. Due to the Easter holiday, StARS services were closed to clients so the English speaking congregation and the Nuer Presbyterian Congregation have the whole site to hold big worship services with food and music and flowers. About an hour or so after I had left for the day (the Nuer were well into their service) a pregnant woman arrived at our gate thinking that StARS was open that day. She was in labor and had been turned away at one of the local hospitals due to lack of funds (this is sadly more common than not for refugees), not knowing what else to do, she came to StARS hoping for some financial help so she could return to the hospital to deliver her baby. As she approached it was clear she needed help and so Yusef, our guard immediately helped her inside. Her labor had become more intense on the trip over and before there was time to call anyone, she was having the baby. The Nuer congregation pastor later shared with me that Yuself had come into their worship service and alerted them to what was happening. They immediately stopped everything and came right out. The woman was not able to move far and so I am told the elders came and formed a circle around her creating a makeshift birthing room so she'd have privacy. People shared clothing and other items to cover the ground, to make the place as comfortable as they could. The Nuer Deaconesses, some with prior medical experience from their home in South Sudan went into the middle of that circle and with care and love helped her deliver the baby right there in our courtyard.

The paramedics who had been called not long after she arrived, finally got to us and she and her baby, who was a boy, were lifted onto a stretcher and brought to a nearby hospital. Baby boy was healthy and mom was doing fine. StARS staff were also notified and were in contact with the mom quickly to make sure she had all she needed.

I was at home when all this was going on and had received a phone call from the Nuer pastor (presumably while it was all happening) which, I somehow missed. I called back right away but there was no answer. Wondering what was going on (as the Pastor calling me in the middle of an Easter church service is not a usual thing) I sent a WhatsApp message: "is everything ok?" Two hours later the response from the Nuer youth leader: "it's ok Rev. We delivered a baby!" followed by many details.

After a moment of shock, I had to smile (ok I actually wept). Because if you have hung around St. Andrew's long enough it's like "well of course a baby was born in our courtyard on Easter." I was told "they", as in the community gathered there around this mom, decided with her, that his name, in South Sudanese tradition of giving names that mark places and dates, would be Sunday. He is still doing well I'm told and I hope to meet him in the coming days.

Also just as an aside to this story, (because there is no way you can make this up) the mother is Muslim, she is also South Sudanese but comes from another tribe, the Dinka, who have spent many years at war with the Nuer in South Sudan. As their pastor told me, "we don't care about any of that Pastor, here at St. Andrew's we are all family and this woman is part of us."

I have to say, as I have thought about this story over these couple weeks, I realize that there is a lot more to unpack with this event—while my heart is deeply warmed at the thought of a baby being born healthy on Easter and while I'm grateful beyond words for the way the congregation and our staff rallied on behalf of this woman (of course they did) I'm also really devastated on several fronts. Devastated by a system that creates conditions so that pregnant moms from some communities are given all the healthcare they need while moms from other communities feel (or are told as in this case) they are not welcome even in a hospital and even when it's to deliver a baby. And as we know in our own home country, the United States, this kind of medical divide isn't a whole lot different--again depending on your background and I think at least from what we hear, it's only getting harder. I am also devastated about the way human beings are seemingly satisfied to treat one another in less than human ways. While this event on the one hand gives me faith it also tests my faith all the same.

But I also think about that mom...she also had faith. She had faith in us. Faith that if she came to St. Andrew's, despite what she'd been through, despite differences, despite anything really, she had faith that she'd receive the help she needed, and that faith was affirmed in a hundred different ways--most importantly that she was treated with more dignity and love by the Nuer Deconesses and congregation members than she very well may have been in any other place. And for this, even amidst the very "both/and/messed up injustice" of this situation I will say I am still amazed and I am so grateful.

As I shared this story with a colleague this past week, I ended the conversation with something I deeply believe and this only further affirms: “I think all our houses of faith should be the kinds of places where people feel safe giving birth”—whether that is to babies or ideas or manifestations of our truest selves. I pray that somehow this can be so.

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