

Back when I first got to St. Thomas', I'd been here about three months when I got invited to my first Christmas party in town. I was at the Egginton's house, and it was lovely, of course. But it was also right about the perfect time for me to start getting homesick. I'd been here just long enough for the adventure of moving to wear off, and the adrenaline of being surrounded by brand new faces shifted to the panic of trying to remember the names of those faces. So, when someone said, "oh there's someone here you've gotta meet, they're from Arkansas, too," my brain kinda went two directions at the same time. One wasn't all that charitable, like, just 'cause we're both from Arkansas, you think that means we know each other? But the other was relieved to have someone that knew what haints were and had actually tasted chocolate gravy.

So, I was escorted across the party and plopped in the sitting room to meet my fellow expatriate, Patty Grossman. I'm sure some of you know Patty, some of you don't, but suffice it to say, Patty has lived here for a while, long enough to think of herself as someone who is *from* Arkansas but *is* a Hamiltonian. But the more we got to talking, the weirder things got. Patty grew up in a little place called Burlington, Arkansas. Burlington isn't even a wide spot on the road. The closest thing it has to a downtown is a white farmhouse, a ranch-style store where the woman that lived in the white farmhouse sold stained glass hummingbirds, and a two-story blue house across the highway where my grandma owned an antique store. Before I started school, I used to sit on the front porch of that store as the Welcome Committee, sipping on real cokey-cola with real sugar from a real glass bottle. Crazy, right? Patty Grossman and I, meeting in a sitting room in Hamilton, New York, grew up in the same hills down in Arkansas. Small world. Well, it gets smaller.

Somehow, my grandpa came up in conversation. He'd had polio and was paralyzed from the waist down. Grandpa spent the bulk of his adult life in a wheelchair, and after years of trying to figure out what he could do for work, he finally got a job running the switchboard at the hospital in Harrison, the county seat. Harrison is the town I grew up in, and it's just down the road from Burlington, kinda like Hamilton is to Earlville. Well now, Patty perked up. She said her mom had been a nurse at that hospital, and she remembered hearing about the man in the wheelchair that ran the switchboard! Then she paused and said, "Did he have two daughters?" Well, yeah, he did. My aunt and my momma! Turns out, Patty's older sister and my Aunt Cynthia were close friends! I told you the world was gonna get smaller. But just you wait.

Things really started to click for Patty, and she said that one day, her older sister wanted to walk down to my family's farm to see my aunt. Well, Patty being the younger sister, she did what younger siblings do and tagged along. When they made it to my family's farm, they found my grandma, my aunt, and my mom doing big, jerky donuts in the family car out in a field. Turns out, my grandma had gotten spooked by something and realized that they were in a delicate position. If something happened to her and then my wheelchair-bound grandpa got in an accident or needed to get to the hospital, it could spell real trouble. So she dragged my aunt and my mom out into the field to teach them how to drive. Some emergency may come along someday, and by God, they were all gonna be prepared. So, when Patty and her sister strolled onto the scene, the car was doing donuts and throwing straw and mud and cow patties into the air, and my grandma was clutching the dashboard white-knuckled. When the car stopped, she hollered for Patty and her sister to get in and take their turns behind the wheel. Y'all. My grandmother taught Patty Grossman how to drive.

Over the past couple of months, we've been talking a lot about loving God, loving neighbor, loving enemy, loving each other, and loving yourself. With CROP Walk and now the Turkey Bags, and soon, well, whatever we turn our sights to next, with all those things, we've shown that we certainly have the desire to put our love out in the world. I absolutely want to commend y'all, oh shoot, why not, I want to commend all of us

on several jobs well done. But I also want all of us, myself absolutely included in this, to think about our way of loving. This week last year was a hard week for me; in short order, two dear friends died suddenly, and there's a delicate piece of their deaths that bears a little extra examination. One of them told me once that he had a hard time with Jesus' commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself," but not for the reasons most people might think. He had a hard time with it because he figured his neighbors deserved better. He didn't love himself all that much. He would never say or do to others what he said and did to himself. For him, he needed, desperately needed, to love himself as he loved his neighbors. And on his better days, well he got about halfway there. But little moments where he felt kindness or beauty or wonder or love, those kept him going for longer than he could've hoped for. My friend rode a hard road, but every so often, he found people who taught him how to drive through whatever new storm he found himself in, more often than not, people who reminded him what loving neighbors meant.

I suppose I'm drawn to these very different stories because of just how different they are. There's a wonder to the gifts that people give, especially the things that just sort of happen that can define a life. For my grandma, there was a need in the family, so she sat the girls down to meet that need; Patty just happened to show up and go along for the ride. But for the rest of her life, she has known how to drive because of that neighbor's kindness. And my friends who died last year, there's an emptiness in the many spaces they used to fill. Maybe not enough loving neighbors around or maybe a desperation where their loving selves could have thrived? Who knows.

I guess I wonder, as Jesus steers us back to love again and again, I wonder where it takes us, who it takes us to? Are we ready to love the kid that comes for a visit, the man who fakes a smile, the friend who loves endlessly, or the self that can't find anything lovable in the mirror? You know, if this were a pep rally, I'd holler about all the ways we can do this, hurrah! But where we are, who we are, love isn't that. Love isn't a showy pep rally, it's slow and patient and sometimes sudden and aching and bittersweet. It isn't a limited time only item. Love is infinite, or can be, and it can expand to fill whatever heart it enters. But it can also be painfully absent. And in the world we encounter everyday, the absence sure seems to be growing. This isn't easy. I love what the Bishop said at Wednesday night's Confirmation service, "Love your neighbor? Have you *met* my neighbor? Thank God he says 'love' your neighbor and not 'like' your neighbor!" It's not easy. Our world is in desperate need of the thoughtful, invitational, heart-filling, shame-free, blame-free love that God offers. Love God, love your enemy, love your neighbor, love each other! Yes, do all those things. But love yourself, too.

I still can't believe that story about Patty and my grandma. I mean, I really didn't expect to meet someone from Arkansas up here, especially not someone that knew the same twisting roads I knew. But someone that'd met my family? C'mon. And then to have been loved so openly by them, what a testament to that whole life. But I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised that my grandma loved Patty. They were neighbors, after all.