

## The Sun and Maywood

by L.L.Wright

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It is a beautiful, unseasonably cool day for July, and the sun trickles curiously through the trees and peeks over the rooftops to check out what is going on at the church in Maywood. Like a warm backpack it follows me as I join the other parishners who saunter up the sidewalk, which winds beside some beautiful historic homes in a suburban Chicago neighborhood. Jon, his wife Gloria and their young daughter, greet their congregation and those of us visiting with love and hospitality, handshakes and hugs, then begin the prelude to their service; Kool-aid and Four Square.

Yes. Four square, the game you played on the playground in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

With a chalk outline drawn on the sidewalk (interestingly enough in the shape of the cross) the congregation, many under the age of twelve, begin their community with their pastor and each other in a rough and rowdy meet and greet with a purple rubber ball. Those more delicate choose to swish a hool-a-hoop around their waist as they chat with their college friends, and some choose to skip the physical stuff altogether for Kool-aid and the warm and concerned conversation to be had with Gloria inside the church. I as a visitor feel welcomed and happy to get to do both.

The sun continues making glorious weather for the worshippers, as they are herded inside the church to continue their community with singing and prayer. The pastor is skilled and passionate as he leads the faithful in song, and he receives 100% participation. Everyone wants to sit in the front. One child proudly and expertly flips the words to the songs we are singing on an overhead projector, never lagging in between verses. After singing a song about grace, a 7 year old with big innocent eyes and a wise heart explains to worshippers that, "Grace is getting something you don't deserve." God's word is printed on every surface of the sanctuary. We sing and pray, we memorize several verses together, and if we are brave enough to recite them aloud we are rewarded; God's word in our hearts and Twizzlers on our tongues.

Two student missionaries deliver the message for the day, which is hard for the young and old to grasp; the hurt that comes from lying, not causing others around us to stumble, not hitting your sibling or thinking murderously of your brother, the weight of our responsibility to one another. It is like a heavy bolder around our necks and we end our community time making clay representations of just that: a tiny replica of the millstone Jesus talked about in Mark 9, an artful reminder not to be the stone that someone falls down on. We sing more and play more four square. Parents hear the message and mill about with their children. God has been glorified in

His community, His word has gone forth, His Son Jesus proclaimed. I feel I have been to church for the first time in a long time.

The sun continues to beam providentially as the gathering winds down, indifferent to the church's location: the garage of Jon and Gloria. It beams proudly despite the fact that many church-y rules are being broken, like that it's a Saturday morning, and that minorities are present; me, the white visitor. It doesn't wonder at the oddity of the man walking by on the front sidewalk with the huge snake draped over his skinny frame, or that most church sanctuaries are not perfumed with the noxious odor of car exhaust in the nearby alley, or peppered by the sound of gunshots at night, nor housed down the street from the known neighborhood drug dealer. No, the sun, that great star beams on, shining as if illuminating a sparkling church steeple in the parking lot of a thousand-seat auditorium. It makes no distinction.

It's lunchtime next, so we pack up the chairs and tables and clay and make the sanctuary fit to house the family car again. We eat together and share a little more of our lives, and too soon it is time to go. I leave with the weight of a stone on my heart, thinking of God and looking up at the sun, feeling its warmth and and yet squinting at its intensity; feeling a warmth and love for the community I just experienced but am overwhelmed by the abundance of Kool-aid and grace and the so seemingly few takers. I wonder at the weight of responsibility that Jon and Gloria must feel amidst the intense need they rub shoulders with, like a burden around their necks everyday. Yet this family wears it as gracefully as a beautiful cherished pendant, a jewel with many facets, like a diamond that catches the beams of the sun and throws the sparkles of light on those who are near, and I now understand why the jealous sun hangs around today; to be with people who are truly all about casting light into dark places.

Sun and warmth and love and kool-aid and light and Jesus and a harvest...and that's what we found, the sun and I, when we checked out the church in Maywood.