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The word "community" has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a little girl, I would loudly belt out the words to "Who are the people in your neighborhood" with the characters on Sesame Street every morning. "Community" later became that dreaded vocabulary word in 4th grade social studies. As I got older, the word found its way onto my 9th grade biology final and the phrase "community service" was soon plastered all over my college applications. During my summer service project these last eight weeks, the word community has once again taken on a new and deeper meaning. I had the honor and the privilege of being part of a wonderful community in Memphis, TN called Target House. Target House is part of a larger and equally wonderful community called St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. In addition to providing cutting edge treatment for free to children with catastrophic illnesses, St. Jude provides room and board at no charge to the patient and their family. These houses that they live in are wonderful communities that provide not just the necessities, but also love, compassion, and unwavering support system. The opportunity to be apart of the community at Target House has brought to life the readings about community life and responsibility and allowed me to experience the deeper sense of community to which we are all called.

As Christians, we can see the importance and significance of communal and personal relationships throughout salvation history. God created Eve because he had designed human beings to be social creatures and "it was not good for man to be alone." (Gen 2:18). St. Paul wrote the early Christian communities about the importance of living a compassionate life together where you are "united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind." (Ph 2:1-2). From the time of the earliest converts to the present day, the church has encouraged worshiping in a faith community. We are all called to be members of the "Body of Christ," in which we are all connected to one another. In Catholic Social Doctrine, the Church vehemently stresses the value of family and communities when it says, "Every human being is intrinsically social, finding fulfillment in relationship to God and other persons, and realizing our dignity and rights in relationships with others." (p 74). To be a responsible member of a community, one must come to understand that communities transcend physical boundaries. These communities to which we are called are more than just a group of people living in the same geographic area; they are groups of people united by common goals, love, service, and compassion.

Genuine communities are often united by similar obstacles and goals. All the families at Target House are fighting different variations of the same battle: childhood cancer. When you all have your eyes on the same goal, there is very little room for personal competition or selfish goals. Everyone clings to those selfish feelings at times; it's hard not to when your life or the life of your child is at risk, but I cannot recount the numerous times I saw families with more than enough burdens and troubles of their own,

lend a listening and comforting ear to a fellow Target House family. Everybody's lives in a community like Target House are connected. When one child doesn't make it, everybody feels it. Once you intertwine your life with someone else – there is no turning your heart back. One of the blessings of a community in which everyone is connected is that it gives you the feeling that burdens bearable and goals attainable. As a mass of helpless individuals we can do very little, but when you feel that you are not fighting alone and that other people can understand your situation, the crushing burden seems bearable.

When a community takes on the responsibility of facing problems together, love and joy prevail. When we empty ourselves of greed and individual greatness, we make room in our hearts to love someone else. Loving is not always easy. It certainly wasn't always easy for these families at Target House who were plagued by stress and anxiety, but I witnessed acts of real love nonetheless. This kind of love doesn't always yield happiness, but it does bring joy. Happiness comes from getting what you want; joy comes from feeling loved and content even when things are tough. The people in the Target House community come from all walks of life, cultures, and religions. As a member of their community for eight weeks I found that even these differences were not enough to prevent them from offering one another love and sharing their joys with one another. Really being joyful comes from celebrating life for exactly what it is – not what it could have been or what it should be. One day while I was supervising the Moon-bounce in the backyard during a party I helped a young girl named * “Sally” work up the courage to climb into the big, inflatable castle. Her coordination has been severely hampered by her illness and she clung to the sides with both a tenacious and excited look. I watched her family excitedly videotaping her and the smile on her face. With a glowing pride her father announced, “And to think once had to learn to walk again.” Everybody at Target House shares in each others small triumphs and joys – whether it is finishing their treatment, receiving good test results, or simply feeling well enough to participate in a house event. Once a month the families faithfully gather to celebrate everyone that had a birthday because they all know and understand how precious life is and the kind of true joy that comes from really appreciating it. This kind of joy and love should not just be reserved for families who are struggling with a disease. It's an attitude that will adhere any community together.

When a group shares a common sense of love and joy, they can better fulfill their responsibility to serve the needs of the community. As part of a community, everybody lends a hand in their own way. “As individuals we cannot be everything to everyone, but in a community we can indeed serve a greater variety of needs.” (Nouwen, 58). Even though the staff of Target House could not aid in the physical treatment of the child, I saw them offer words of loving comfort to parents on many different occasions. Even though the families are guests at Target House during a stressful time, I would see smiling dads faithfully scrubbing the grills on the deck before a big event. One day when I was filling in at the front desk, a frantic gentleman who had just arrived at St. Jude called to inquire about his Target House move-in time. Needless to say, his English was as rudimentary as my Spanish. As I set about in search of a translator, the Hispanic grandmother of a very sick little girl noticed my situation and calmly took the phone out

of my hands. She jabbered away in her native tongue and although I couldn't understand a word that she said, the comfort in her voice was evident. She hung up the phone, and I thanked her profusely. She looked me in the eye and said very emphatically, "It is not my pleasure, it is my *obligation*." She didn't view helping others as special event, but rather an everyday practice.

In order to serve someone else and be a responsible member of a community, one needs to practice the virtue of compassion. In order for me to be a part of this community, I had to try to understand these people – their lives, their feeling, their hopes, and their fears. Believe me- this was not an easy task. Actually, it was quiet daunting. I am only a college student who was there for eight weeks – many of them are there for years. I was skeptical how my presence could have any effect at all. Of course I felt sorry for them, but I also feel sorry for children that are starving in 3rd world countries and the people on the evening news. The key was to get past feeling "sorry" for them. Humans don't need pity, they need compassion. Pity will not hold a community together. The word compassion comes from a Latin phrase meaning "to suffer with." In his book, *Compassion*, Nouwen suggests that since both the words passion and patience come from the root word which means "suffering," the compassionate life is one lived patiently with others. To really understand someone takes patience – not the kind you need in supermarket checkout or sitting in rush hour traffic. This kind of patience (which we often don't often see in our fast-paced world) is a genuine interest in knowing, understanding, and loving another human being. Nouwen writes, "Why is it that we keep giving dimes without daring to look into the face of the beggar?" (*Out of Solitude* p 51) It is as if people don't want to get emotionally involved, or they don't have the time to get involved. They simply make their donations or perform their good deed then go on with their life. Compassion doesn't involve only good deeds and sweet sentiments; it is "the participation in the pain, the solidarity in the suffering, the sharing in the experience of brokenness" (Nouwen 51). Some of my most amazing and touching experiences were when I was simply the listener in a one-on-one conversation. During an outing at a baseball game, one of the fathers pulled me aside and started talking to me. Although we weren't particularly close, he proceeded to tell me all about his son's declining prognosis, his personal and financial troubles, etc. With moist eyes and a quivering lower lip, this otherwise very tough and seemingly unemotional man said, "This is great (points to field)...everybody having such a good time...this is just what we needed. We were so disappointed because they told us we couldn't go home and we've had so much bad news lately." We shared a toast to just how important it was to celebrate life. In retrospect, I realize that he just needed me to take the time to enjoy the moment with him. It wasn't much, but it was one small step closer to living a compassionate life focused on understanding and sharing in someone's suffering, not just feeling sorry for them.

Members of a community have a responsibility to actively pursue these aforementioned qualities, but sometimes the final elements that cement the bonds of a community are not tangible. It is those small changes that sneak up on you, the private, yet simple conversations, and the sweet moments shared together. They are not determined by the amount or content of the time you spend together, and oftentimes they are not significant in anybody's mind but your own. I experienced these intangible

changes as I watched my relationships morph from stranger to acquaintance, to familiar-face, to friend. I recall feeling so overwhelmed and frustrated at the prospect of having so little time with these people. Then one evening during my third week, I found myself in a very intense game of backyard soccer with some competitive (and talented) Hispanic families. I can't relate exactly what happened (except that everyone had an incredible time and my team won), but I do know that after that things started to change. I had somehow found a place in their culture and in their lives. Parents would greet me by name in the hallways and kids would anxiously ask me to play with them after I had finished my house chores. It was from that springboard that many of my most amazing relationships started to grow. Most of these intangible ties stem from moments that are so ordinary you don't even notice them – like the funny things “Maggie” would say when we played checkers, or the time “Tommy” excitedly showed everyone the giant fish he caught, or when I futilely tried to explain the subtle differences between soccer and kickball to some of the Spanish kids. Sharing both the memorable and the mundane experiences culminate in relationships that seemingly formed without you being cognizant of it. Being part of a community “becomes real for people not simply because of the deeds of one hospitable individual, but because of an intangible atmosphere resulting from a common life.” (Nouwen 57). As I headed out on my last day, “Maria,” the mother of one of girls I was closest to stopped me and gave me another hug goodbye. With tears rolling down her cheeks she managed to announce only two words “Thank you” – and that was enough.

Communities come in all different sizes, shapes, and flavors. but every one carries with it a responsibility. The community has a responsibility to support its members, practice love and compassion, and share their joys and their hearts. Being a responsible member of a community means striving to live out these qualities everyday. It's not just waving “hi” to you neighbor, or obeying city laws, or volunteering to clean up the public park once a month. Those are all good practices that should be continued, but it is not enough – we are called to something higher. We are called to help create communities that are not bound by time and place, but communities that show genuine care, compassion, and understanding - the kinds of communities whose ties are stronger than location, common interest, and even blood. The things you learn in one community you carry on to another. Things at Target House, like any other community, are not always perfect or ideal. It is comprised of imperfect human beings just like every other community that ever was or ever will be. During my short time with them I learned that being a responsible and loving community does not equate with being perfect. We do the best we can with what we have. We stumble; we fall; we get up. We comfort one another in times of strife; we celebrate with others in times of joy, and we never ever lose hope.