Stranger Love

Who is the first person to come to mind when you think of total and utter selfless love? A mother loves because you are her child. A father loves with a fierce sense of protectiveness. Friends love you for your eccentricities, shared passions, and common experiences. This love is earned, forming gradually as the friendship strengthens. Spouses love on a whole other level, a romantic bond that brings two people together as one.

But a stranger? A foreigner? One does not love one he does not know. You don’t go up to an unknown person walking down the street and ask how they are, what you can do to help them. You don’t offer to clean their room (and their bathroom) for nothing in return. You don’t invite them to share your meager meal. You don’t give them a satchel of water and refuse to take their money. You don’t give away your merchandise, a percentage of your daily income, when they depart on a journey. Yet, this was the love level of love I found in Ghana.

Her name was Nancy.
She was a single mother of two, in her late-thirties. Her husband had left her when their youngest was less than a year old. She never heard from him, abandoned to raise her children alone on a single woman’s income. But she moved forward. Her children were her life. When her house was robbed, all her possessions stolen, Nancy held strong in her faith, only her children’s well-being in mind. This is how we saw her. Weary, but strong.

Her name was Bernice.
She was sixteen, but had not yet attended junior secondary, the Ghanaian equivalent of middle school. This was by no fault of her own; the government had neglected to assign her a school for nearly four months. Selling cheap snacks for a minimal profit was the only option open to her until she heard back. She was originally from a region in the western half of the country, and thus had no family in the coastal capital. But she always greeted us with excitement and a hug.

Her name was Grace.
Though trapped in a marriage with a harsh husband, she never let her smile falter around us. Though she and her sister often fought, and she was far from home, she was always ready to give of herself and her possessions, without demanding anything in return.

Her name was Awa.
She was sixteen, one of eight children from a poor family in Cote d’Ivoire. She spoke no English, and little Twi. A few from our group knew French, the national language of Cote d’Ivoire, and through them, we learned she had come to Ghana to earn money so she could go back to school. But her plan was not working as well as she had expected; thus, she was considering the propositions of a man who had offered her money for sex. She trusted us with her secrets and never asked anything of us in return.
Scripture commands us to love the stranger. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus likens himself to the hungry, the weary, the downtrodden of society that receive little love from friends and family, let alone complete strangers. To love them, he says, is to love Him.

These four women, common women of Ghana, hovering just around the poverty line, could not have embodied this Biblical ideal better. Just a couple of weeks into our semester, Nancy called me her “sister.” After barely a month of acquaintance, Bernice was also asking after me. Grace constantly gave us gifts for our excursions, though we knew she could not truly bear the cost. And though we could not communicate directly, Awa never ceased trying to speak with me; to laugh with me; to know me. I may have taught her what it meant to “sing,” but this girl, with whom I could not really speak, taught me so much more about what it meant to live.

In the end there were many tears when we finally climbed into the bus and drove away from the campus. Awa even gave us hugs hours before and went home because she could not handle being around when we gave our final good-byes. But that was just the point, wasn’t it? These women so loved us, bumbling strangers in their homeland, we could not help but dearly love them in return.