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Reflection Summary

I thought I knew rich people. At Furman, you can’t walk but a few feet before bumping into a wealthy person—and relative to most of the global community, I more than qualify to be counted in that category. Before I came to Jubilee Partners, I’d come to be aware of my own privilege. I’d counted myself “blessed” for having the resources that maintained my comfortable lifestyle and propelled me into educational opportunities. So I didn’t think I’d meet any rich people at Jubilee. As I anticipated my summer, I expected to experience a decided drop in my quality of life and feel the grief of witnessing extreme poverty and oppression. To an extent, I was right. But to a much greater extent, I was wrong. I just hadn’t met rich people like the ones at Jubilee before.

Let me set the context. Jubilee Partners is a Christian service community in rural Georgia. Twelve adults have made a relatively permanent commitment to stay at Jubilee, and about thirteen others are seasonal volunteers. Refugee families find a sanctuary at Jubilee, gaining transitional time to acclimate to life in the United States and study English before they are expected to work and live independently in Atlanta. All staff at Jubilee receive a “stipend” of fifteen dollars a week, setting them far below the poverty line and qualifying them for food bank supplies. The refugees I lived with hadn’t had running water or electricity in their home country of Burma, and so for them, the tiny, Spartan cabins each family lived in at Jubilee were bliss.

As the summer wore on, I heard many stories about the struggles of life at home in Burma and in Thailand and Malaysia, where my friends fled while waiting to gain refugee status and approval to enter the United States. Kim told me about hunger and no work. Eh Kaw told
me about Burmese soldiers who came to kill, destroy, rape, and make warriors out of children. Sai Meh told me about refugee camps that were more like prison camps.

I heard these stories. I cried for my friends and mourned my complicity in the violence destroying their peoples. I set my heart, mind, and soul to the task of figuring out how I can participate in the healing of the world. I offered what I could: I listened; I held babies; I taught English; I cleaned; I cooked; I gardened.

At first, I was only conscious of my friends’ suffering and my own grief and hard work. But the longer I stayed at Jubilee, the more my heart became attuned to a fiercely jubilant song rising from all of our lives in spite of—and even from—the pain our community had experienced.

For we had reason to celebrate.

One Sunday evening during our regular worship time, our community was talking about grace—what it is and how we have seen it at work in our lives. Eh Kaw stood and said, “When I first became a refugee, I was ashamed. Now, I know that it is God’s grace for me to be a refugee.” Initially, Eh Kaw’s words left me dumbfounded. What could he mean?

The writer of the Gospel of Luke reports that Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20, NRSV). I’d never really understood what he meant before, but now, I think I might. War is no blessing, and neither is hunger, disease, or rape. “Blessed are the poor” doesn’t mean that eliminating those things shouldn’t be what we give our lives for. But this is what I think Jesus meant, and this is what I think Eh Kaw meant: Somehow, living stripped of the delusions and excesses of wealth, the Kingdom that Jesus talked about is right before your eyes. A Kingdom where everybody’s children matter as much as yours, where food
is for sharing, where a stranger is a brother or sister you just haven’t happened to meet before.

And nobody wears a crown in that Kingdom, but everyone is richer for living there.

I lived in a bit of that Kingdom this summer. In those days of living with people who had nothing in the eyes of the world, I learned that we were rich. I want to live for that wealth, the wealth I knew I’d found when Zil Bok, a nine-year-old refugee girl, felt safe enough to curl up against me and promptly go to sleep on a long car ride. I don’t know what path my life will take, but it has to come back to this: Wealth you receive only to give again, but that in the giving only multiplies.