

## **CIC 2/1/26: God's Heart for Our City**

As many of you know I spent most of my adulthood so far in the city of New Orleans Louisiana. I went there for a mission trip in high school, developed a big heart for the city, and ended up going to college there, and after college I stayed to work in college ministry with Chi Alpha.

And the summer after my freshmen year, I went back to my home state of CT, and was at church with my parents. They were getting involved in a recent church plant at that point and so there were a lot of new people there that I hadn't met. They introduced me to one woman they had just met a little earlier. We started talking about me living in New Orleans and going to school there, me and my parents were talking about it just to share about our lives, and also a lot of people tended to find it curious or interesting that I was living there, so it was a good conversation starter. People oftentimes asked why I went to school so far away or what food i had eaten or festivals I'd gone to, or they'd share their favorite memories from travelling there. And the first thing that this woman said, was "Oh, I heard there's a lot of spiritual darkness down there."

I was a little taken aback by that, First, it would appear my life didn't seem as cool to her as I thought it was. Oh well, you can't win them all.

Second, that's a very interesting way of describing someone else's home the first time you meet them. To put it a little more bluntly, her saying that, especially with the context of her being a Christian, felt rather rude. And I'm not someone who always thinks of quick responses, which is probably for the best because sometimes I have some pretty strong ones, so i didn't make it a big issue in the moment. But after the convo wrapped up, and we left church, and I had some time to ponder what she said, I remember thinking to myself, how would you feel if I described the place you lived like that? As a place full of spiritual darkness.

And I know there's some truth to what this lady said, New Orleans did have a Voodoo Queen named Marie Laveau, there were people who practiced it in the past, it's mostly dead now. But New Orleans also has long had a reputation for more typical spiritual hardships like alcoholism, sexual sin, drug abuse. It also for a long time has grappled with a high poverty rate, and related to that it was the murder capital of the US for a lot of years. And on top of that, it periodically experiences major damage from storms and floods, and so there is a genuine degree of hopelessness or defeatism that is not hard to find in the city. Which is why we're taking a mission team there this June. Because there are real hardships and there's people there that need hope, and there's ministries loving the community day after day that can use help.

But there's also everyday issues in New Orleans that are just plain annoying. It's annoying getting stuck in parade traffic after church and you just want to get home and nap. It's annoying getting a ticket from a redlight camera because you turned right on red, or a school camera because you were going 25 mph. There's a certain grimace you make when you don't see a pothole in time and you feel the underside of your car scrape the street. Or there's certain streets in the city that flood whenever it rains hard. I took this picture of my roommate JP standing in the flood waters at my last apartment there to commemorate how annoying it was to have to keep moving my car and walking back through that mess. I'd hardly be the first to admit that New Orleans is not the most functional city. In response to the city's broken infrastructure, a lot of locals have developed what I would describe as a creative sense of humor to cope with it. Here's an exemplary traffic cone monster to give you a sense of what that looks like.

The truth is wherever you live, there's going to be things that bother you, there's going to be reasons to be disappointed or upset with where you live. Maybe up here in the greater providence and Boston area, you're upset with the cost of living, you're upset with how long it takes to get a medical appointment, you're frustrated by the tax rate, you're frustrated by the commute to Boston, you're upset at having to go through that horribly designed highway merge in downtown Providence, or you're annoyed at the

whole Washington Bridge Saga, you're disappointed in our political systems, or you're disappointed that we lost the Pawsox and we're about to lose Hasbro, or that the Superman building is still empty.

That's lots of reasons to be upset. And in every place I've lived, Whether it's Connecticut or New Orleans, or here, people complain. People naysay, insult or demean the place they live. Including Christians, we do the same. From what I can see, We talk down about the places we live all the time as much as anyone else. And I feel a deep conviction that isn't the right posture for our hearts to be in as the church.

### **Jeremiah 29:7**

**7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."**

Jeremiah received this message from God at a time when the kingdom of Judah was failing badly, and was falling into idolatry and injustice. God gave Jeremiah a vision of Israel's defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians to come. And as bad as many Christians might think New Orleans is, or Providence or Boston are, they don't compare to Babylon in corruption, in cruelty, in oppression, in idolatry. Babylon wasn't just distasteful for the Israelites, they didn't just not like the government or the culture, Babylon had committed violence against the Israelites, oppressed them, took their homeland from them, humiliated them. And God still commanded the Israelites to seek Babylon's peace and prosperity, to pray for it, to be vested in its prosperity.

And if God wanted the Israelites to wish prosperity for Babylon, the land of their oppression and exile, how much more does he want us Christians today in our cities here in America to wish prosperity upon where we live? If God wanted the Israelites to treat Babylon well in the midst of their hardship, I'm confident that we have reason to treat Providence and Boston well today.

And I think one of the most effective things we can do to that end is not complain about our cities, to not insult our cities, to not look for reason to demean the places where God has placed us. Whether its through birth, or immigration, or study, or a job, we are where we are, and we have the Biblical imperative to seek its peace and prosperity, not dismiss it or speak ill of it.

What we say matters

### **James 3:3-6, 9-10**

**3** When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. **4** Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. **5** Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. **6** The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell... **9** With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. **10** Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

What we say matters in general, no matter the context. What we say has the potential to do great damage, like a forest fire lit by a small spark. What we say also directs what we think, like the bit in the mouth of a horse, or the rudder of a ship. So if we speak negativity about our cities, and continue to do so, our hearts towards our cities will eventually be negative. So as the church we need to stop being the naysayers, the complainers, the dismissers

King Solomon wrote as much in the book of Proverbs

### **Proverbs 11:11-12**

**11** Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,  
but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.

**12** Whoever derides their neighbor has no sense,  
but the one who has understanding holds their tongue.

Church, Lets not be those who destroy with their mouths, lets not be those who deride, lets be those who can be upright, can control our negativity, and bless instead.

And how do we make that shift? How do we go from being those who deride to those who bless?

Paul in his letter to the Philippians has a good recommendation

### **Philippians 4:8**

**8** Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Think about such things. What does that look like to think about what is true of your city, what personalities or characteristics make your city noble, what is pure in your city amidst all the imperfection, what are the lovely places in your city, what is admirable about the city's culture or history, what is excellent or praiseworthy about the arts, or the businesses, or the institutions?

Put another way:

What can you find that's worth complimenting in your city? Where do you see God at work in your city? How can you intentionally look for the good instead of the bad?

Well, during my time in New Orleans, I built a pretty good collection of photos, so I can literally show you what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely,

admirable, excellent, praiseworthy there. And I want to share a few lessons that God impressed on me because I lived there and was looking for the good.

One thing I love about New Orleans is the trees. I love the old oaks. I spent countless hours reading, praying, listening, meditating, even having crucial conversations by those trees. Not only are they pretty impressive and provide good shade, but they also show the intentionality, intricacy and care that God has created our world with. And therefore, we can see how much he cares for us. And the trees also show longevity and endurance, and how growth takes time. If God has enabled the trees to grow so much over time, how much more should we be patient and endure in our walks with him?

Another natural feature of New Orleans I love is the sunsets. Sunsets are everywhere, but the flatness of New Orleans and its different river and lakefronts helps make golden hour extra golden. I'd very often walk in the evenings to enjoy the sunsets and connect with God, because they are so indicative of his power and sovereignty. There is a park right next to where I used to live, and you can see so much of the sky there over the fields. If you ever want to feel small in a good way, if you ever want a reminder that God is still on the throne and is so much bigger than we can imagine, find a good spot to watch the sunset.

I also went on a lot of walks around the city, and would find different ways residents would invest in their properties or public spaces in creative ways. There was a house with a golden swordfish over the door, a yard with giraffes in it, another yard covered in glass ornaments, a park with a ceramic Pelican on top of an octopus, a street sign covered in pottery. And those things might seem like an unnecessary way of investing in the world around us, but they brought a smile and a laugh to me when I'd see them. And they show how invested the neighbors are in loving where they live and giving it value in their own wacky way. Which shows that loving God or others doesn't always mean getting something in return for what we invest,

love can be sacrificial and done out of joy. We don't deserve God's love or reward God for how he loves us, yet he still does so.

And the last photo real is of the garden I built at my last house. We had a great front staircase with lots of room. I couldn't build a ceramic pelican or blow some glass ornaments, but I could take care of some plants.. At least most of them. That was one of my main creative outlets for years, and the garden grew. And my apartment became known as the one with the garden on the steps. Over the years friends would take pictures of themselves by the plants, so I'd see the garden appear periodically on social media, so I was doing something right. When I left the city I gave a lot of those plants away, and many of them are still growing in friends' yards. So God used that garden to teach me how sowing seeds and doing the constant work of tending to the garden bears fruit, and blesses others even when you're no longer the farmer.

**When we choose to see the good in our cities, when we choose to bless our cities, God reveals his heart to us.**

So what can you do here in Rhode Island and Massachusetts?

**How can you identify what is good in your city? How can you be open to God's heart for this place? How can you bless where you live?**

Here's a few ideas:

Maybe in this area that means appreciating the beauty around us. Take a walk down Blackstone Blvd or through College Hill, go for a run or a bikeride on the East Bay Bike Path, go for a hike in the Blue Hills. One of my favorite aspects of moving here is having a lot of opportunities to explore nature.

Appreciate the diversity of the immigrant community around you. We have over 30 ethnic groups present here. Go get some food from a place that isn't American, invite someone who is different from you over for some dinner.

Learn about the history of our area. Both of our states were founded for religious freedom. The Christian heritage of our nation and our freedom to practice and worship is directly descended from these 2 states. Roger Williams considered God's hand to be so involved in his settlement that he named the city Providence. And the whole nation has been blessed by the freedom of religion he established here. His church, The 1st Baptist church in America is still standing and open for tours.

You want to bless your city directly? Maybe you have the skills to build a ceramic figurine in your yard or plant a garden that the neighborhood can enjoy. Maybe you have another skill or idea. I know one couple that bought goats so they could have an attraction at their house for the neighbors to enjoy so they can share their faith with them.

Maybe you can bless where you live by just spending money here. Go to a local restaurant that you won't find anywhere else instead of a chain you could go to anywhere. I love food, I'll give you a list. Have a staycation and keep your money in the area. Go to local shops instead of buying on Amazon. Patronize a business owned by someone here at CIC.

And above all, pray for your city, speak life over your city. Make it known that you love where you live, potholes and all. Imagine how beautiful it would be if that's something this church is known for in the region. That this is a community that loves where it lives? Imagine the good God can do, and the people who think the church is nothing but critics and judges, but can see love and encouragement in action.