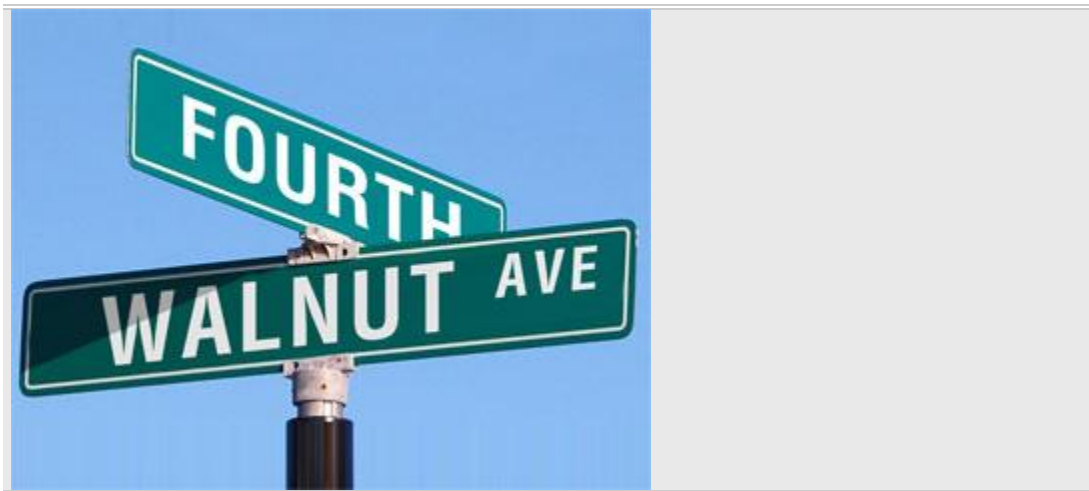


Experiencing Fourth and Walnut: Reflections on Faith and Service

By [James Menkhaus](#)

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Thomas Merton writes, "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs." This famous passage goes on to unpack Merton's realization that we do not have a separate existence from people and we should not consider ourselves as better than others. Merton's illumination is described as a "liberation from an illusory difference" that brought him joy. During the first week of March 2010 I had the opportunity to accompany eleven students and another staff member on an immersion trip to Louisville, Kentucky. During the trip we had the opportunity to reflect on the life and thoughts of Thomas Merton while serving the refugee community through CrossRoads Ministry in Louisville. This experience opened our eyes to the plight of refugees, the strength of working as a community and the connection between faith and service that is embodied by Merton's work.



We began each of our eight days with prayer, asking God to open our hearts and eyes to those that we would encounter through our work. We would then travel to St. Helen's ESL school where we would work with adults or children who were learning English. Many of the days I worked with the "weaker" group, focusing on counting, calendars and dates. The refugees in this class came from such diverse places as Somalia, Iraq and Myanmar. Even though they could not speak each other's languages, those who completed the in-class work first would

often come to the aid of the others. Just as Merton pointed out, for these refugees differences between them were illusory. Brought from around the world to Louisville, Kentucky, these men and women grasped the truth that Merton eloquently hopes everyone can take to heart –the love for others that is not interrupted by language, religion and culture.

Our afternoons were often spent at Americana, a high school where many refugee families sent their children. Again, we were divided into groups who helped students of different ages with their homework and spent time with them in afterschool programs. On the final day of service at Americana, we had a dance party and basketball game pitting college students against high school students. This bonding experience again helped both sides break down barriers between the groups. While an observer may have only seen a game of basketball, those participating in it experienced team work and community. A pat on the back or a helping hand when someone fell demonstrated that the game was not about winning, but about spending time with each other. As we left Americana for the final time, high fives demonstrated the gratitude that each side felt for the other. The international language of laughter and joy surpassed differences of language and background. It is difficult to tell if the high school students gained more from the experience or if it was the college students who left with a new understanding about service and faith.

Our final full day was spent, not in service, but in prayer. Before heading to the Abby of Gethsemane, we stopped at Fourth and Walnut to see the spot where Merton had his experience of insight and love. Like many street corners it was busy, full of traffic and pedestrians walking to the shops along the road. However, for our group the street corner held a different significance. While standing there reflecting on the words that Merton wrote, we saw the faces of those people we helped pass through our memory. The women from Somalia that struggled to grasp the difference between the hour hand and the minute hand, the men and women from Iraq who attempted to learn a new alphabet, and the students at Americana who needed help researching and writing reports. Those illusory differences had been discarded and, in some small way, we had a chance to see people as Merton did on that same street corner over many years before us.

The rest of the day we spent in silence at Gethsemane. Some chose to walk the numerous trails, while others sat in prayer. The ambiance of silence allowed us to take time to think of those we helped and spent time with during the previous days. During our evening reflection on our time at Gethsemane, many of the students described how they recollected conversations and encounters that impacted them as they brought these experiences to God during their prayer. The students also described how difficult it was to be present to the pain of the refugees and to realize that so many people in the world struggle to survive day after

day. Balancing this realization with God's love for all people is difficult, but our time at Gethsemane gave us the chance to work through these feelings with God.

On the first night of our experience, Dawn Dones, who led us through our service and reflections, told us that human beings are 99% the same. Over and over again in our nightly reflections students would bring this insight up during prayer. After spending a week working with refugees from around the world, this statistic means more than it did when we arrived in Kentucky. It was exemplified in our experiences with each other and with those we encountered. Each night we would also reflect on the story from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus appeared to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. The stranger that the disciples encountered was welcomed and through this experience of walking with him, their eyes and hearts were open to a new reality of love and respect. We too walked on a pilgrimage and our eyes were also open to the harsh reality of the world, the plight of people that are pushed aside, and the warmth and compassion that these "strangers" offered us with their smiles. The immersion experience in Louisville, Kentucky brought our group together as a community, but also helped us see the world as a community. We saw, just as Merton did, "...the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes." We were given a gift, an opportunity, to see, to heal, and to be present the way Christ was in the Gospel. It is now up to us to take what we have learned out into the world and to not forget those who touched our lives.