



Memories & Mercies

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

In my grandmother's house there were biscuits and hymns and stories." These memories of childhood are Yolanda's, not mine. My paternal grandmother was very fussy and ill-tempered and never bothered to learn our names. Grandfather was gruff and mostly silent. We visited them once a month, always pleased when pleasant weather allowed us to play outside.

My maternal grandparents' home was hardly any more inviting, often tension between the two of them. He had run off and lived a bigamous life with another family years earlier, and her unhappiness lingered into old age.

But she did express her love for me, if in no other way than making sure my naked dolls had proper clothes. In fact, I sometimes stripped the dolls before she visited, accepting her scolding as fair trade for another new outfit.

For Yolanda Pierce who grew up in a poor blighted neighborhood in Brooklyn, her grandmother's house was just that—a house with no grandfather, no father or mother. Her grandmother raised her and was more formative than anyone else in her life:

"I had a praying grandmother, and nothing I have accomplished would have been possible without her prayers"—her love, her discipline and encouragement.

Graduating with a B.A. from Princeton University, Yolanda holds two M.A. degrees and a PhD from Cornell. After teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary for nine years, she was appointed Dean of the School of Divinity at Howard University.

An ordained minister, her preaching is drawn largely from her grandmother's theology, "rooted in generational wisdom in the way that time and age and maturity provide an alternative lens...to know and understand God." Indeed, her grandmother's

theology goes back generations "to the kitchens, hair salons, gardens, and church basements of older Black women who are often invisible in theological discourse."

The Christian faith was "real and tangible." There was no picture of a white Jesus knocking at a door, as there was in the farmhouse of my childhood. Rather, "Jesus was a Black man," depicted in a wall-hanging by an amateur artist. Cooking was her grandmother's calling, "as she ministered to the lonely and the sick and the lost with a Bible in one hand and a freshly baked pound cake in the other." Growing up, Yolanda came to know Jesus in the same way:

I thought everybody knew Jesus as a good neighbor who visited often. We called on Jesus when the groceries ran low or when someone's fever ran high...when the rent check was due or when death visited...when bodies were healed...and relationships were restored.

My own maternal grandmother, nearing ninety, became ill while I was a freshman in high school. Only two blocks from the hospital, I could get there and back during noon hour, a routine I relished. I would race down three flights of stairs to the cafeteria, grab a sandwich and a vanilla dixie cup with a little wooden spoon, get to her bedside with twenty minutes for visiting while feeding her the ice cream and sharing family news. One day when I came, the nurse couldn't awaken her, telling me she had slept through breakfast. She never again woke up.

My grandparents were poor. Besides a few pieces of furniture, dishes and clothes she left very little behind. Several weeks after her funeral, however, my mother presented me with her sewing kit, a small green and white plastic woven box with needles, thread, thimbles and pins, maybe worth a dollar at a rummage sale. Not Yolanda's house-full of formative theology and pound cakes, but a little sewing box I still use today filled with memories and tender mercies. □

—Ruth Tucker