

Asheville's Rev. Brian Combs Presides Over 'Holy Chaos'

By Barbara Blake

Originally published in the Asheville Citizen Times

March 23, 2013



Watching the Rev. Brian Combs engage with his colorful flock of congregants evokes an almost surreal sense of witnessing how Jesus might have interacted with the lepers and prostitutes to whom he was so drawn.

With his dark, soulful eyes, soothing voice and arms open wide with compassion, Combs traverses imaginary bridges to place himself on equal footing with every human he encounters, but particularly those who live on the edges and in the dark corners of the city.

Sometimes he comes to where they are —riverbanks, bridge underbellies, public parks and hidden campsites near downtown Asheville. Sometimes they come to him: at the Haywood Street Congregation he pastors, at the A-Hope of Homeward Bound Day Center for the homeless, where he keeps “office hours” or on a random street corner on a bitter winter day.

Wherever these encounters occur, there is a palpable connection when the congregants bare their troubled souls with the innocent trust of a small child, and the young pastor's eyes and ears seem on fire with intense knowing and listening.

“There's no doubt that Brian embodies a Christ-like presence about the streets of Asheville,” said the Rev. Robert Blackburn, who is senior pastor of Central United Methodist Church as well as Combs' mentor.

“He shows up in the kinds of places Jesus seemed to like to frequent —you’ll find him among the disposed and dislocated, and at table with them,” Blackburn said. “Brian really incarnates the Gospel in a powerful way —there’s no doubt about it.”

Combs says he is drawn powerfully to the weary and downtrodden, just as Jesus was.

“The holiest places in the world for me are always the most broken,” he said. “When you sit with somebody who just had a miscarriage by a rock down by the French Broad, or is sitting in jail, there’s just an absence of glibness —folks want to talk about questions that really matter, and superfluous stuff is not part of the dialogue.

“That raw, real authenticity is incredibly life-giving —(something) I would call resurrection, the good news of Easter,” Combs said. “The great paradox of Christianity is that you only have to die before you live.

“These moments of suffering ...have a way of getting rid of what doesn’t matter,” he said. “And what’s left, usually, is some kind of invitation to co-create a different tomorrow, to live how you’re intended to be.”

True communion



Every Wednesday, you’ll find Combs and his fellow pastor, the Rev. Shannon Spencer, in the midst of what he calls “holy chaos” at the Haywood Street Congregation, housed in the red brick church at the northern confluence of Clingman and Patton avenues along the homeless corridor.

The tiny ministry he founded in 2009 with fewer than a dozen curious seekers has grown into a jubilant spectacle that begins with a home-cooked meal for 200-300 people who span the socio-economic spectrum, ends with a rousing service upstairs in the dog-friendly sanctuary, and features a clothing closet, lending library, community garden, acupuncture, haircuts and other special events in between.

This is not an affair designed just for the homeless and the street-weary afflicted with addiction, alcoholism and mental illness. Combs’ vision from the beginning was to create a

place where people living in life's painful margins would engage fully with those in the comfortable middle, celebrating communion over pork chops and pecan pie as well as the symbolic body and blood of Christ, with all comers true equals in the eyes of a loving God.

And this is what you'll see at Haywood Street, week after week. Bankers, nurses, lawyers, teachers and preachers worship deeply beside fellow congregants who live in tents or under bridges and carry their entire stash of worldly possessions in stained backpacks or plastic garbage bags.

They don't just eat lunch, preach the sermon together and sing hymns. They look into each other's eyes. They know each other's names. They learn each other's life stories. Sometimes they pray for each other. And sometimes they shed tears in each other's arms.

It is not just the impoverished and disenfranchised who seek comfort. Often it is the privileged, those who have flush bank accounts but may have deficits in their spiritual hearts.

"The more compelling story is to look at folks who have come with very strident assumptions about people in poverty, stereotypes, and how they have been transformed," Combs said.

"People who have said, 'I can no longer go back and look at the world in the same way — I've been changed,' and inevitably, it's followed by this heart-weeping that's just incredible to watch.

"I think the diversity ...the encounter that people don't realize they need, that once they get used to, they say, 'Oh, this was missing in my life, and I don't know if I can go back to homogenized worship where everybody looks the same,'" he said.

"God's table is so much wider, and Jesus is always bringing more chairs and adding on a card table and saying, 'Yeah, please come eat.'"

'Empathy 101'



Combs' journey from United Methodist camp kitchen-worker to church pastor is not as improbable as it may seem.

He and his younger sister, Diana, now a pediatrician in High Point, won the “parent lottery” with their father, Douglas, a now-retired clinical psychologist, and mother, Louisa, a soon-to-retire senior vice president with Bank of America.

Combs grew up listening to stories about his father’s work with the poverty-stricken in Charlotte’s mental health clinics, recalling the nights the beeper would go off at 3 a.m., and his dad would get out of bed, put on his tie and go off to the emergency room.

“He was that guy who dealt with suicide calls, psychotic folks the sheriff would bring in, basically the catch-all for mentally ill folks in poverty —it was incredible formative to me,” Combs said.

“I’d ask him how he did it, and he’d say, ‘Well, the first thing you do is show up and listen to people, let them know you care about them and listen to what they say’ —empathy 101,” Combs said. “I didn’t realize it then, but he was teaching me how to be with folks in poverty.”

The parents insisted that their children attend public schools, where “many of my friends were from India and Vietnam, and most of my friends were bused in from the projects,” Combs said.

“That was a very good life, and probably the most important things I learned in public school didn’t have much to do with books and chalkboards, but being around lots of different people.”

Also formative was his own heritage, which he describes this way in his church biography: “With a Mexican, Indian and Spanish mother amalgamated with a Scotch, Irish, English and Dutch father, I am not easily labeled —I am a child of everywhere and of nowhere, both at once.”

Finding his path



That reality led Combs, in fourth grade, to question his parents about his ethnicity.

“Many of my classmates were saying, ‘We’re not sure what you are —you’re not quite dark enough to be black, but you’re too dark to be white.’ All I knew was I was being labeled ‘different,’ and in tandem with that, I had dyslexia,” he said.

Feeling excluded, Combs said, “accelerated this hypersensitivity to suffering, and I just started having an awareness of where other people were hurting.”

The times he did not feel “different” were during childhood summers at Camp Tekoa, the United Methodist camp in Hendersonville, beginning as a young camper and eventually running the kitchen.

“That’s the only place I wasn’t asked, ‘What are you?’ I never did get the ‘What breed are you?’ question there, and I came into my own and started to transcend some places of insecurity,” Combs said.

It was in that camp kitchen during junior high school that he first felt a calling by God toward the ministry, as he savored the quiet discipleship of service with his hands submerged in dishwater.

“But I was confused —here I am a kid with dyslexia, and I’m not particularly confident about public speaking, and I like working at a sink with dishes —that doesn’t really line up with Sunday church,” Combs said.

He decided to go the route of another love, art, earning a degree in industrial design from N.C. State University and working in the Triangle area for several years. It wasn’t enough.

“I found that even if I had a chance to work on the iPhone or whatever sexiest product was out there, it still would be nowhere as fulfilling as making biscuits and taking out trash,” Combs said.

As he sat at his drawing table, he felt ever more drawn to do “something more altruistic, to be contributing in a deeper way to a greater cause.”

He decided to take a seven-month break and hike the Appalachian Trail, from Georgia to Maine, to try and find clarity in solitude about what he was meant to do next. He found it. Soon after his return from the sojourn, he entered divinity school at Emory University.

Embracing anguish

First stop after graduating from seminary: the streets of downtown Atlanta, where his daily companions in ministry were pimps, hookers and addicts. He later sought a chaplain’s job at Atlanta’s Grady Memorial Hospital, ground zero for the uninsured and considered the roughest hospital in the nation.

Combs asked to be assigned to “the medical floors no one else wants,” spending his days and nights rocking crack babies to ease the shakes of their mothers’ addictions, visiting

patients in darkened rooms with too many infectious diseases to count, holding the hands of mothers whose sons had been shot dead in the street.

“The more anguish, the more disenfranchisement, the more abandonment, the more I wanted to be there,” Combs would later write on his blog. “And when it came to appointment time, I wanted to serve a church just the same.”

There was no such church in Western North Carolina. With the encouragement of Blackburn and the support of the Rev. John Boggs, superintendent of the Blue Ridge District of the WNC Conference of the United Methodist Church, Combs decided to create one, to be housed in the building once occupied by the Haywood Street United Methodist Church, recently merged with Central.

He hit the streets, asking what people wanted in a new downtown church. Again and again, he heard: “a midweek, middle-of-day worship service.”

The first Wednesday, in November 2009, drew nine people—including Combs and Blackburn. Slowly, more congregants began trickling in as word on the street said it was a welcoming place with a smiling, big-hearted young pastor.

Faith in motion



Eight months later, the Downtown Welcome Table was added to the mix, drawing more and more to the fellowship hall to enjoy not just a hot, home-cooked meal, but fellowship with those who did not judge.

Then followed excursions led by Combs—bowling nights, Super Bowl parties, backpacking trips and volunteer work in the church garden, with Habitat for Humanity and elsewhere.

“People want to come here because of him,” said Angel Frank, a longtime church member who recently got permanent housing after 18 months of homelessness. “Brian is the most laid-back preacher I’ve ever known, but he’s the real deal.”

Thomas O’Neill, another longtime member who has experienced homelessness, said Combs’ kindness and compassion is “completely real,” and not just in church or at the lunch table on Wednesdays.

“He’s everywhere —he’s always over at WNCAP or Homeward Bound or the parks,” O’Neill said. “He’s not sitting in his office. He’s in the streets getting dirty.”

“This church is faith in motion, and what I really love about Brian is that he moves about the people casually. ...A lot of ministers, their camouflages are pointed out quickly,” said Derrick Baker. “Brian is a great spiritual leader, but he’s also my friend, and I love him.”

Attainable Jesus

Combs’ spiritual leadership is based in his passionate following of an “attainable” Jesus, which leads to his work with “the least of these.”

“Jesus washed feet, he cried, he had to go to the bathroom, he hung out with women —he did all of these things,” Combs said. “Of all the things God could choose to do, he chose to be homeless, to spend God’s time with prostitutes, lepers, everybody the world dismissed. And that tells us something about God’s priorities, that God is always moving toward the place of the greatest suffering.”

Combs said he is bewildered when people who visit the church remark how “novel and unconventional and so far beyond traditional church” they find Haywood Street.

“I kind of scratch my head, because we’re not doing anything new —this is what Jesus did, this is what the early church in Acts did, so in many ways we are as traditional as you can get,” he said.

“The spread of Methodism followed the poor urban centers, and it was that behavior (helping the poor) that defined discipleship —it was what set Christians apart.”

Jesus in the house

Combs believes in “incarnational ministry,” with Jesus showing up when least expected.

“If Jesus made it a priority of being in places with people in greatest suffering, it may very well be Jesus who speaks back to you (in church), and I take that with utter seriousness,” he said, referencing the “least of these” passage in Matthew 25.

“I’ve learned that if you’re awake enough, you’re going to run into Jesus —he’s there,” Combs said. “When you come to church here, you’re here to receive Jesus —you’re here to meet him in a person, a face, a story you’d never expect.”

At Welcome Table lunches, “when we get together around the table, it’s nothing less than communion —Jesus is present. And if that’s true, it ought to be one heck of a feast —it ought to be a homemade meal, with cloth linens, centerpieces on the tables, and seconds and thirds —eat as much as you want.

“What’s commonly said to us is that ‘I didn’t have a good life, I didn’t have a real home, but if I did, this is what I would want it to be like,’” Combs said. “That’s how I know we’re headed in the right direction.”

Culture of hospitality

Cindy Smith, Pathways to Permanent Housing director with Homeward Bound and the wife of a Methodist minister, is one of many who are convinced that’s true.

“Haywood Street’s congregation is accepting of everyone, whether rich, poor, a downtown businessperson or a person who hasn’t worked in years; the abled or disabled, bathed or unbathed ...everyone is equal,” Smith said. “The ultimate congregation has arrived.”

Pat Smith, retired executive director of the Community Foundation of WNC, said Combs “would be the first to say that the work to be done at Haywood Street is not just serving food, but sitting down at a table, asking someone’s name, looking them in the eye and making a new friend.”

“Brian has created a beautiful culture of hospitality,” she said, “where relational fellowship with people from all walks of life is the important thing.”

Steve Noblitt, chairman of the church board since its inception, recalled being told by a church member, who receives services at A-Hope, about a group of “crackheads” who routinely sat at the center with blank looks on their faces, never interacting with others.

“The man told me that when Brian approaches and calls them by name, they get life in their eyes,” Noblitt said.

Combs said his ministry is fortified by his relatively new fellow pastor, whom he called “such a gift to this place and to me.”

“Shannon understands this ministry —it’s on her skin, she breathes it, and it’s wonderful to be able to trust someone with something that you gave birth to, to say, ‘You handle it,’ and I don’t have to worry,” he said. “And she has such a charisma about her that people want to move toward.”

Parenting the church

Combs laughingly refers to his “boring” life outside the church, in which he is remodeling a home in Montford, recently ran the first Asheville Marathon, swims, does triathlons, bicycles on the parkway and has a standing Friday excursion with a minister friend paddling the Green River.

He is a doting first-time uncle and is enchanted with his rescue “church dog,” Penny, who carries out her own pastoral duties.

“My child is Haywood Street; that’s who I parent, that’s who I love —it’s my life in many ways, and there isn’t a lot of time for anything past church,” he said. “But I’ve found that the intensity of work needs to be matched by intensity of exercise, just for mental health.”

Combs said he could never, ever, picture himself pastoring a mainline, suburban church with tons of money flowing into the collection plates, even though it would be easier. He loves the holy chaos, and the children of God who create it.

“How often in life do you get to script out, even with all the consternation, exactly what you feel called to do? I can’t conceive of anything else,” he said.

“Maybe at year 10 or 15 I might go away for a few months and take inventory. But this is just the best thing I’ve ever been a part of.”

