

July 15, 2018

Camp Diary

Last week, I was privileged to join Christy Williams and 15 youth and children from First Church for six days of camp at Dogwood Acres, Florida Presbytery's Outdoor ministry near Vernon, Florida. I've have served as a camp chaplain at Dogwood Acres for longer than any of the current counselors have been alive, and I have the T-shirts to prove it. Over the years, it has become a tradition for me to offer on my return an account of the week in place of the sermon. A "Camp Diary," I have called it.

I have always held misgivings about this practice. It felt a bit like cheating. So, last year I came back from camp and preached a "regular" sermon. This departure from tradition was not well received. Last Sunday, I was warned by several of you, in a nice Christian way, to come back with a camp diary or suffer the consequences.

The freedom of the pulpit is a Presbyterian fundamental, but I'm no fool. I'm taking your advice.

Camp Diary: Sunday, Day 1

The camp is almost full this week -- almost 60 campers, and most of them middle school boys. One of the most striking things about this year's staff of college-age counselors is their racial diversity. When our delegation from First Church is added to the mix, the opening worship in the camp chapel looks more like the kingdom of God than I'm used to seeing on a Sunday morning.

"They will come north and south, from east and west" proclaims the prophet. There's not much "north" and "south" to Florida Presbytery, but there's a good deal of "east" and "west." I can't help but think that God is looking on this assembly tonight and saying to the heavenly hosts, "Well, they aren't there yet, but at Dogwood Acres, I see progress."

Our text for the evening is the story of Samuel's call to be God's servant. Christy and I draft Ethan and LaKayla to pantomime the story. Ethan plays Eli, the aged priest whose eyesight is failing. LaKayla plays the boy Samuel, who mistakes

God's voice for the voice of his elderly mentor. Giggles can be heard, and there is considerable over-acting, but we get the story across.

Christy calls up each counselor and asks how he or she feels called by God this week. Then the entire camp surrounds them, lays on hands, and prays for them. A Dogwood-style commissioning service.

"Think of ways that God might be calling you to be God's servant in the world," Christy challenges the campers.

After the benediction, Lucas Heiker, one of the co-assistant Directors, goes over the "mandatory opportunities," otherwise known as "rules." Lucas is one of ours. I remember when he was a camper. Here he is, all grown up and doing a masterful job. Talk about responding to God's call!

Of course, he's not perfect. Just before the campers depart for games on Kelly Field, Lucas announces, "Well, we've just had worship. Now we're going to have fun."

And it was evening, and it was morning. The first day.

Monday, Day Two

Today's Bible lesson is the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth after the annunciation to Mary. Tricky territory, that. We probably don't want to get into debates about the doctrine of the Virgin birth. Instead, the camp curriculum encourages us to point to the less-than-miraculous elements of the story. A young woman, frightened and confused, goes to visit her cousin in the hill country. Not only does she receive a hearty welcome and a shoulder to cry on. She also receives confirmation that God is doing great things through her – plain, ordinary Mary from Nazareth.

At chapel, we focus on how God's love turns everything upside down. The rich become poor. The last become first. The hungry are well-fed and the rich have to wait at the end of the line. Each cabin group takes a phrase from Mary's *Magnificat* and pantomimes their interpretation of what Mary sings. I particularly like what Cabins One and Two do with their assignment.

Mary, sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord," I read.

The campers do a little dance in place. I think it's called The Floss. This is very likely the first time in the history of Christendom when Mary's *Magnificat* has begun with rising second-and-third-graders doing The Floss.

Lucas notwithstanding, worship was fun tonight. So was the night swim that followed.

And it was evening and morning, the second day.

Tuesday, Day 3

The text for the day is the story of the paralytic whose friends were so eager for Jesus to heal him, they opened the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching and lowered him down through the hole in the roof. Jesus is amazed, not at the faith of the man who couldn't walk, but at the faith of his friends, who go to such trouble.

Friendships like that are rare indeed, and some of them are formed at camp. Not long ago, a survey of adults in ministry revealed that a significant number of them named their camp counselors as key figures in their faith formation. Not only that, a large percentage of couples in ministry reported that they met their future spouse at a church camp or conference.

In worship tonight, some of the middle school campers recast the Bible story into a contemporary setting. I had explained at morning watch that back in Jesus' day, people tended to think that if you had a handicap like this man or a disease such as leprosy, you were thought to be a sinner. Not only was the paralyzed man unable to make a living. He was also avoided as an outcast.

The middle schoolers perform a skit which sets the story in a typical middle school. It involved a girl who had no friends and the "mean kids" who made her life a misery. Will anyone come to her aid? Christy, acting like a TV reporter, asks the girl how she is feeling.

“Outcast-y,” she replied. Don’t we all know that feeling! Jesus had a special mission to the “outcast-y.” He still does.

And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.

Wednesday, Day Four

The intro campers, who are rising second-and-third-graders, are going home after lunch today. Two of them, Palmer and Clara, are sheep of my own fold. Apart from the first night, when there were pangs of home-sickness amongst some, the intro campers had a wonderful time. I sat with them for breakfast and lunch. I learned important things from those meals.

1. This morning we had gravy and biscuits for breakfast. I learned what happened to the hamburger meat left over from yesterday’s Taco Tuesday. It was in the gravy.
2. I learned that if you find yourself looking at a food you never saw before – meatloaf, for instance -- you can put catsup on it, and it doesn’t taste too bad.
3. I learned that Jesus calls everybody and everybody burps, even adults.

These are good things to know. To such as these the kingdom of heaven belongs.

In worship tonight, we explore the story in John’s Gospel about Jesus feeding the 5,000 with two fishes and five barley loaves. I tell the campers that what we tend to call “miracles” John calls “signs.” For John, the mighty deeds that Jesus performs point not to themselves, but to the Kingdom of God that is present in Jesus. I ask the campers for other signs of God’s Kingdom around us. They are quick to respond.

- My church’s food closet.
- First Food Sunday at my church.
- We bring socks and underwear for the homeless shelter.
- We give money to buy food for hungry people.

At camp, you don’t have to preach a sermon. The campers preach it for you.

And it was evening, and it was morning, the fourth day.

Thursday, Day Five

What does Jesus mean when he tells his disciples that they are “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world?” Those metaphors don’t resonate very well in an age when light is available at the flip of a switch and salt is no longer necessary to keep our food from spoiling. Yet we keep using that language in the church because it still has power to communicate the good news.

At chapel tonight, we considered what it might feel like to be a Jewish Christian thrown out of your synagogue or a Gentile Christian of low social status to hear Jesus say to you, “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” Then Christy asked the campers to name someone this week who has been light and salt for them. As each name is called, Christy lights a candle. The candles form a cross on the floor of the chapel. Leave it to Christy to come up with the perfect symbolic act to convey a truth words cannot express.

And it was evening, and it was morning, the fifth day.

Friday, Day Six

Today is the last day of camp. Andy, the cook, comes up with his best breakfast of the week: scrambled eggs, grits, bacon, toast, and fruit. A feast.

At morning watch, we haven’t much time to explore the text for the day – the story in Luke about Jesus sending out the 70 disciples to bear the good news to the surrounding towns. Jesus tells his followers to pack light, not to go from house to house looking for the best food, and to say to each household, “Peace be upon this house” and “the kingdom of God has come near.”

Christy and I encourage the campers to pack light as they go home. “What memory from camp will you take home with you today?” we ask. “What did you discover about living in Christian community?” “What will you take home not in your suitcase, but in your heart?”

I know what I will take home:

- A deep appreciation for the founders of this camp, and for their vision and sense of mission.
- A firm conviction that camping still has enormous power to shape young hearts and minds, and that Dogwood Acres is a gift of grace to all who enter its front gate.
- A renewed commitment to this low-tech, high-touch ministry in the piney woods of North Florida.

As the campers leave the closing chapel, Christy hands out the cell phones that she has been keeping all week. Think of it: A screen-free Sabbath that lasted six whole days!

A miracle?

No! A *sign*! A sign that points us toward the Kingdom.

Thanks be to God!