In the name of our one God, by whose grace we were created and have our being. Amen.

There's a legend I heard once about a cowboy. He was a hard worker who spent his nights out on the range reading from his Bible. When this cowboy was out on a rather lengthy assignment to mend the fences that surrounded a large pasture, he lost his Bible. Somehow when he was packing up to move on to the next portion of the land, his Bible had slipped out of his rolled up belongings and became lost in the weeds.

Three weeks after that happened, a sheep walked up to him while he was tending a herd of them. The sheep had the cowboy's missing Bible in his mouth. He could tell it was the missing Bible because he recognized the wear and tear around the edges of it. His Bible was worn from so much use.

The cowboy was astonished. He could not believe what he was seeing. He reached down, took the Bible that he had been longing to find from the sheep's mouth. He looked up to the heavens with tears in his eyes and said, "My God, it's a miracle!"

"Not really," the sheep said to him, "your name is written on the inside cover."

Sometimes when we think about miracles we think about the act that took place. Like when the dam at College Lake did not break, we think that the fact that it managed to remain stable during such a torrential amount of rain was the miracle. But the miracle is not only about the thing that happened, it's about the mystical force that brings the miracle about.

In the story about the cowboy, the miracle was not that the Bible was returned.

After all, the cowboy's name was in it. Anybody could have found it and returned it. The miracle was that it was returned by a talking sheep. How easy it is to focus on what happened and not on what or who made it happen.

And so it is with Jesus. We tend to focus on the bread and the fish that mystically get multiplied, or the water that becomes wine, or the recently deceased Lazarus that emerges from his burial cave. The miracle is really in the mystical union between Jesus and God, the one Jesus calls Abba. It is the relationship between the created and the divine that brings about these atypical, unlikely events.

You know, there is one event that happened with Jesus that scholars and theologians don't classify as a miracle. But I tend to think it is one. It is the event that happened on the road to Damascus. Do you remember that story? A devout Jew named Saul was traveling along that road with some of his equally devout buddies on their way into to town to brutally attack anyone they might find who claimed to be a follower of Jesus. Oh, Saul knew that Jesus had just been put to death by the Romans but he also knew that Jesus' followers would not let his death stop them from spreading his message. They would continue to tear down the faith of his ancestors. Or so he thought. The truth is that Jesus and his followers were never about tearing down anything. They were about building up. But that's another story.

The point of this story is that God apparently saw that Saul was misusing his God given gifts of passionate devotion and powers of persuasion to annihilate when God intended those gifts for building up. So God sent the spirit of Jesus, the risen Lord, to appear to Saul on the road to Damascus that day. Saul saw Jesus that day, and he heard Jesus say, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" The whole dramatic event so surprised Saul that he was blinded by it and knocked to the ground.

But the miracle was not in the blinding of Saul or in the power of the spirit to knock Saul to the ground. The miracle was in the mystical power of the relationship

between Saul and God through the risen Christ. That mystical power worked on Saul for weeks, for months, maybe even a year or two. It would not let him go. After that encounter with Christ, he could not return to business as usual. Not ever. By that mystical power, Saul was able to put all that he knew from his Jewish knowledge and devotion into a new perspective. He was able to understand that God, HIS God, had sent Jesus into the world in order to open the way for all people to realize their access to God's grace.

The effect of Paul's mystical encounter with Jesus is denoted in scripture by Saul's name change to Paul. As Saul, he was a person who represented brutality. As Paul, he was the transformed person who represented agape, that is genuine, generous and generative love. When Paul talks about being a prisoner in Christ, he is talking about being unable to escape the God's call on him. Do you know that feeling, too? It's that feeling I have of knowing that I need to follow but not being sure where I am being led. It's the feeling I had when I agreed to go and then actually ventured out on the recent mission trip. Oh I knew I was going to Tennessee, but I had no idea what experiences awaited me there. I trusted that God would be there with me and just took a deep breath and went.

Paul had no idea what experiences awaited him as he embarked on a new way of being in relationship. He found himself in new relationship with God, with his friends and family and especially with the countless people who had not yet been made aware of the power of God's grace. Paul understood that each person was created with unique gifts, each given by God according to each individual's ability. Paul saw himself as sort of a steward of the mystery of the Gospel, the mystery of God's grace. He saw

that the mystery of the Gospel, the power of God's gift to us in Jesus, will be realized when we all accept that we are each a part of Christ's body right here, right now, in this world. In order tho accomplish that, we need to operate as a body - in cooperation and mutuality with each other. Paul said, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, oneGod and Father of all."

But alas, we live in a world of increasing division... in our communities, our universities, even in our governments. There are divisions among Christians, among Muslims, among Jews. Could it be that these divisions are the results of our own desires? Of our setting our minds and hearts on worldly things, on self-protection and self-satisfaction and not on loving God and our neighbor as ourselves before all else? Do we want to be like Christ and truly listen to and love people who are different from ourselves?

There are far too many examples of people who refuse to work with those who are different than themselves or worship with those who have a different theology or faith practice. But as Paul says, this is a work in progress. Two thousand years after Paul we still struggle to be that agape global community. But God's mysterious power of grace continues to nudge us forward, continues to encourage us to equip the saints. Let me share with you a few places where I see signs of the kind of progress Paul describes. First, Interfaith Outreach of Lynchburg invites congregations of all faiths to come together to work to provide for the most needy among us. Then there is the Appalachian Service Project. It is an organization that operates on the principles of the Apostles Creed and I personally see their work as a fulfillment of our own Episcopal

baptismal covenant.. to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Groups come from all over the country in the name of Christ to serve the most needy among us. And my last example is the local Freedom School Movement. This movement is being spearheaded by a group of people from different denominations, different races, different cultural backgrounds and different levels of social strata who see that there is a need to focus on the youth in our midst who need intensive help to draw them away from a life of crime, substance abuse and violence.

I believe human beings, and especially us right here, can be stewards of the mystery of the gospel of Christ. It might take a miracle for everyone to find their place in creating the world God want for us. But remember, the miracle is not in the end product, it is in the mysterious power that brings it about. Pray that it may be so.