

Rev. Kimberly B. Glenn

I just returned yesterday from a week in Appalachia on a mission to provide home repair for a poor family with needs far greater than our own. It was a week away from the comforts of home and the rigors of daily routine. It was, in a very important way, a time apart; an undeniable and challenging time apart from the world as we know it. But even though we were working hard, we had the luxury of time to reflect on what or who led us there in the first place. We set aside time each day to think about how each of us was sensing our faith at work in us; where we saw the spirit moving in our midst. Our week apart was a faith strengthening experience. In that way, our experience was the opposite of the one described in the gospel reading we just heard.

In the reading we just heard from the gospel of Mark, we hear that Jesus' disciples had been hard at work ministering to the needs of people. The scripture says this, "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." In the disciples' experience there was no time for rest or reflection; in fact they had very little time even to eat. That sounds more like a normal week for me and probably you, too. In a typical day, we tend to have more tasks on our to-do list than we can complete in a day. The disciples life was apparently like that, too. They could barely finish ministering to one person before the next person in need would appear.

Jesus said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Come away, he said. I hear that. Coming away from our busy lives is so important. It was important in the time of Jesus and it is ever important for us today. It is when we step back from the craziness, the total immersion in "doing," that we are able to reflect and see where and how God has been working, and to discern where and how the God's spirit might be leading us.

Unfortunately, “coming away to a deserted place” is not that easy for us. It is extremely hard to create time for intentional reflection, especially *theological* reflection. The opportunity to go to a place outside our local boundaries for mission is ideal for creating space and time to think more deeply about God’s call to us; about how and what we are doing connects with God’s call to us. The work we do locally is most reflective of the disciples experience in our gospel reading, but, like the disciples, the demand on us is so great that we do not have the time to think deeply about the faith connection. We spend all of the spiritual strength we’ve got on others who we encounter in the world each week. Because of that we need all the more to return here to St. John’s, to home base to have our strength restored. This place is our place apart, our “deserted place,” where we can together rest in God and restore our spiritual strength.

I am grateful for this time with you all today where I can restore my spiritual strength before I take the deep dive back into my role as a parish priest. It had been almost ten years since leading my last youth mission trip when I left for this one. My last one was in July 2009. I was amazed at how easily I slipped back into that role. When I climbed into the driver’s seat of a van filled with duffel bags, pillows, tools and lots of teenagers it just felt natural. This time, though, I was a stranger to most of them. Only two of those boys came from among this St. John’s congregation. Not only did they not know me, they did not know each other very well either. Later I would learn that they were kind of dreading going on the trip - expecting horrible living conditions, no friends and hard work. Thankfully, I knew what they did not know. They would end up *loving* it.

Among this mornings readings, we also heard the apostle Paul speak about the difficulties of bringing about a union between the Gentiles and the Jewish people. These were two groups who saw each as “the other.” And just who do people tend to label as “the other?” The other is anyone who does not identify as a member of the same tribe as yourself. The other, then, is a whole lot of people. The Gentiles were defined as anyone who was not born of Hebrew parents. The Gentiles were all those people who were those people left out when God drew a boundary around the descendants of Abraham. That boundary was closed, or so they thought. That boundary helped define them as a people, gave them strength through identity. But it also gave them the courage to know that God was *their* God, *their* shepherd and *their* protector. But the apostle Paul wrote down what he and the other apostles were preaching to everyone about Christ. Christ was the gate through that boundary that the Hebrew people had closed around themselves. Jesus who was inside that boundary had died and risen again in order to open that gate to the world.

When we went to Tennessee this past week, the boys and even Ken Vance, our other adult leader, were brave enough to venture into the challenge of the unknown. We were a group of nine people who barely knew each other about to encounter fifty-five other people who would be joining together as a quasi-community; living and eating together in one place while working as a team to benefit the lives of one family who needed our help. We knew only that we would be installing some dry wall, painting and maybe building a deck. We did not know how the Holy Spirit could make more out of that. But there is no stopping that Holy Spirit.

Our week started out as three separate groups. Nine of us from Lynchburg, ten from Indiana and forty-five from Princeton, New Jersey. The forty-five from Princeton had been on these trips before, so we will call them the Hebrew tribe. The rest of us were new to this type of trip so we will call us the Gentiles. It was obvious that the Princeton group, the Hebrew tribe, knew what was up. They were always the first to get to the circle for group time, the first to line up for food, the first to get to the showers. At first, our group figured we'd just make it through the week. We'd at least have great friendships among ourselves and the family members on our site. But by the end of day two, you could sense that something more was happening.

You see, all sixty-four of us started out each day in a big circle facing each other. Together we considered a different focus of a passage from Isaiah where Isaiah hears God's call and he responds, "Here I am Lord, send me." We grounded each day in God. Sometimes the faith thing made into our conversation on breaks on the work site. We found ourselves laughing a lot, too. And laughing together and praying together makes for a strong bond in any community. But then, we gradually started sharing conversation with those other people at the base camp site. Then we started laughing together with them. Then we started really liking them. It was with hugs all around that we parted yesterday. And it all happened because Christ opened that door. Christ opened it, we entered it and we are now one because God called and we responded.

The apostle Paul put it this way, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple

in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

I couldn't have said it better myself. All sixty-four of us gathered on our last night together and each spoke of their most memorable spiritual moment of the week. Each of us opening up and confessing the presence of God's holy spirit was a huge connector between us all. We all saw and felt God's presence when we were together and when we were apart. That shared experience drew us into one amazing faith community. It is my prayer that each of you will find a way to be drawn together by this shared experience when you worship together. It is my prayer that you enter the door that Christ has opened for you and welcome all others who enter through it.