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“100 Years”

1 Corinthians 9:19-23
July 13, 2008

I was so privileged to spend the last week in Paradise.
Nestled deep in the Paradise Valley in northern Montana is a United Methodist
Camp called Luccock Park.

Many of you have been there for various work trips and camps
and you know it truly is Heaven on earth.

This was Senior High Church Camp and participating were
four adults from our church: myself, Jim Marshall, Gary Dyer and Amber Johnson
and 15 LUMC youth, 15 youth from Trinity UMC,
and 12 youth from various churches throughout Montana.

It was a wonderful time, and I was thankful that our Youth Minister Jim Marshall
and my daughter Katie voted to once again allow me to participate, although Jim
told me that it was a split decision.

As a youth I loved church camp and my call to Christian service was
deepened by the spiritual experiences I had at camp.
I enthusiastically support our camping ministry because it not only is good for the
soul to connect with nature, and it brings people closer to God,
but for one week of the year it allows kids to be kids.

For one short week they are free from computers, cell phones, responsibilities,
jobs, competitive sports, worries and chores.

For one week they get to jump into a freezing mountain stream, hike, sing
and dance, gather by a roaring campfire every night, reflect upon their lives
and God's purpose for all creation.

It is a gift that our teenagers desperately need—time to just be kids.

I also have an ulterior motive for attending church camp.
It allows me to get to know these wonderful kids in another setting,
in a place outside of church where I am not so preoccupied and busy.
I want to know these kids more deeply, to understand their hopes, dreams, plans
for the future. I want to know what makes them sad and scared.
I want them to feel that I am always here for them and that they can contact me
any hour of the day or night and my heart and door will be open to them.

I remember growing up in a church where my parents were quite involved.
My father sang in the choir and served on many committees.
My mother was President of United Methodist Women.

I was active in the Youth Group and our family was in church every week.

The pastor who had been there for several years called me Melissa.

I was about 13 years old, and the first time he did it, I was sympathetic.

Melanie is an unusual name, and some people are not good with names,
or they don't make the effort to be good with names.

But then the pastor called me Melissa a second time, and a third time.

And I realized that when he called me Melissa, he didn't even look at me.

I knew that he would never, ever take the time to get to know me,
because I was just a kid, and I could be of absolutely no use to him.

I have never forgotten that experience, and I will never be that sort of pastor.

These kids matter to me, because they matter to God,
and it would be irresponsible of me not to get to know them.

So church camp gives me a precious gift, by deepening and enriching my
relationships with these amazing, wise, funny, fabulous kids.

Camp is a gift to them, as well, and I cannot tell you how much they enjoy it.
Camp helps them to really experience God, not just hear someone talk about God.

We all need a personal experience of God, a heartfelt transforming experience.

Attending church and Sunday School does not always facilitate this sort
of spiritual experience for teenagers.

Camp allows them to live it, not just hear about it.

So many churches are losing an entire generation, because they are not trying
to connect in a meaningful way with teenagers and young adults.

A recent study had young adults describe worship services, which they said were:
boring, irrelevant, claustrophobic and outdated.

So many of our mainline churches are dying and not even trying to reach younger
generations with the exciting and transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Our Scripture lesson today gives us a profound insight into how to connect with
people who are not automatically drawn to church.

Paul is writing to a church in conflict. A church that needed to grow and reach
out to people in secular society.

He writes to the fledgling church in Corinth that he learned how to do anything,
absolutely anything in order to bring people to Christ. The Message says:

“I became a servant to reach a wide range of people—the religious and non-
religious, moralists, loose living immoralists, the defeated and the demoralized.

I entered their world and tried to see things from their point of view.”

The more traditional translation says:

“To the Jews I became as a Jew, to those under the law I became bound to the law, to the weak I became weak, I became all things to all people so that I might save some.”

That is revolutionary! Paul would do anything to bring people to Christ. We have to do the same if we are going to attract younger generations to the saving Gospel.

We have to enter a world we may not like or understand. It is a world of tattoos and piercings. A world of Facebook and Text Messaging.

A world of music we would not consider music at all.

A world of uncertainty and fear and overwhelming problems.

A world that simplistic religion cannot address in a meaningful way.

We need to stop criticizing and condemning our young people, and instead listen to them, learn from them, and love them into faith.

When I ask our teenagers what they want from church this is what they say:

“Donuts! Help. Understanding. Friends. Fun. Forgiveness. Peace. Acceptance. A way to make a difference.”

Interestingly enough, they never, ever say:

“Longer sermons! More organ music. Complicated theology and doctrine. More liturgy. Being told we are sinners bound for hell.”

I believe that our church does a very good job of connecting with our young people thanks to Jim Marshall and so many others who enter into their world and love them into faith.

The theme of Church Camp this year was “100 Years.”

That theme is based upon a song by the same name by Five for Fighting.

You are going to hear that song shortly—it is beautiful.

It talks about being 15 years old and having your entire life in front of you.

It talks about seizing the moment, and appreciating every stage of your life.

We expanded upon the theme of the song by organizing our daily activities and small group reflections upon being present in each moment of our lives.

Most of us, particularly adults, do not do that very well at all.

We are either in the past or in the future, rarely fully invested in the present.

Cami Twilling is the Youth Minister at Trinity UMC and during devotions one day she talked about the signs you see at Malls or on Hikes or some Maps that say

“YOU ARE HERE” with a big “X” marking the spot.

Usually when I see where I am it is a long way from where I want to be.

She said that is a message from God to all of us: **YOU ARE HERE.**
This is your life. Don't miss it. Your life may not be exactly what you want,
it may be filled with things you did not choose,
but it dishonors God when we wish we were someone else, somewhere else,
doing something else. **YOU ARE HERE.** And God is here.
This is exactly where you are meant to be, so accept, enjoy and appreciate it.
Do not miss a single moment of this precious life you have been given.

At Camp we also told the kids that they are perfect.
Of course we all have room for improvement, but we wanted them to know
that they are attractive enough, smart enough, popular enough, good enough.
They will grow and mature and change, but right now they are perfect.
God created them in God's perfect image, and in this moment,
they reflect the divine image of their creator.
There is nothing they can do that would make God love them any more,
nothing they can do that would make God love them any less.

Perhaps this is a message you need to hear as well.
I know many of you are struggling with regret and remorse, or a desire to be
someone else or somewhere else. Many of you are dealing with a variety of
situations you did not choose, and you cannot control.
But know that God is there, and that
in this moment God is with you, and loves you more than you will ever know.

God entered into our reality in Jesus Christ, and fully
understands what it is to be human.
And right now, in this moment God is with us, loving us and blessing us.
Today, Tomorrow, and for the next 100 Years. And beyond.

Would you like to see some pictures from Church Camp 2008 at Luccock Park?

After we watch this slide show and hear the song "100 Years"
the 15 youth who attended camp are going to come up and sing a song for you.
Let's watch...