

THE FIRST CHURCH CAMP

March 6, 2011

The first time I ever went camping, Phil was my tent mate. We camped at the Shawnee National Forest in Little Egypt...in the southernmost tip of Illinois where the major city is Cairo (*KAY-roh*)...not Cairo (*KI-roh*)...and there we spent our time in a two-man nylon pup tent. Phil had bromhidrosis and halitosis. That means his feet stunk and his breath was terrible! And besides that, he snored!

And then there was this problem with condensation. It was a nylon tent and, when it got cold at night, it rained inside the tent. On the fourth day, it started raining outside the tent, and the rain came in torrents, and by morning I woke up to a stream running right through the tent. That was my first experience with camping.

My second experience was at Pere Marquette Park just north of St. Louis on the Illinois side of the Mississippi. And at a wonderful picnic meal, there was this very friendly honeybee who managed to get inside my can of Coke. And I took a big drink, and his stinger found its way right into the roof of my mouth. That was my second experience with camping.

Then Jeanie and I went camping in the mountains of Colorado outside of Colorado Springs. It was simply gorgeous, but I nearly froze to death! And I learned on that trip that it is just simply not a good idea to try to fry an egg if your only utensil is a plastic fork. It melts!

Back in the summer of 1996, the vacation plans we had made for our family fell apart. And one Sunday here at church, Sandy Steffen suggested to Jeanie that perhaps we might consider going to church camp. I was not thrilled! But my problem was that I could not come up with a better alternative, no matter how hard I tried.

So that summer, the summer of 1996, we retreated together to the northwoods of Wisconsin to Moon Beach. We drove all the way there in the rain. When we got there – late – and walked into a class in the front of the room, we found out that we had been assigned to the cabin that is absolutely the farthest from the lodge. And the first night we were there, it stormed all night so furiously that half a tree fell on the roof of our cabin. Whose crazy idea was this, anyway?

I don't know if it was out of obligation or anticipation, but when Jesus invited Peter, and James and John to go camping with Him, they followed. Surely they had second thoughts when they found out that their camp site was on top of a mountain and they'd have to climb that mountain to get there! But, when they did, they discovered that it was worth the climb. The panorama that spread out before them was absolutely stunning.

Yet what was really spectacular was what they saw up close. Jesus was changed in an instant before them. He was now bright, and white, and shining like the sun. And no longer was He alone. Instead He had been joined by two others – by Moses and by Elijah. There they were, standing with Jesus: Israel's versions of Washington and Lincoln were standing with Him. It was quite a scene. It was like their own living version of Mount Rushmore.

Those three disciples – Peter, and James and John – were star struck in that moment. They were stunned into silence until Peter mumbled, and bumbled, and scraped together some words and said:

Wow, Jesus! This is sensational! Let's set up camp. Let me make three dwellings. Let us build three cabins here for You and Moses and Elijah: Cedar for Moses... Balsam for Elijah...and, of course, for Jesus, Tamarack!

Isn't that right, Glenn?

Who wouldn't want to stay on the mountain? Who wouldn't want to live forever in this extravagant experience of God's magnificence: to be enveloped by God...to be absorbed in God's glory...to experience God in the sweetness of the pines...and in the song of the loon...and in the call of the eagle...and in the shimmering glint of a sunset on the water...and in the animated crackle of a campfire as it roasts marshmallows for that gourmet deliciousness of gooey S'mores? This is the inexpressible epiphany of camp: camp where the canvas of nature and the compassion of Christ are painted together with a transforming palate...a palate of life and love. Here, God is real. Here, Jesus is personal. Here, the Holy Spirit is powerful, and persuasive, and persistent. This, and more, is what those three ancient disciples experienced on that mountain. It's what they found at Transfiguration Point...at the first church camp!

Then, in that place, the voice of God Almighty spoke, and that voice thundered the disciples to the ground. God said:

This is my Son! This is my Beloved! With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!

And, in that instant, the disciples knew that it was all about Jesus...that this whole experience was about God's Son...that it is about God's Beloved...that it is about God's Pride and Joy...that it's about God's Messenger and Messiah.

On that mountain...at the very first church camp...Peter, and James, and John saw...and experienced...and knew Jesus. They knew Jesus for who He truly is in God's heart and our hope. As it was for Moses on a more ancient mountain, they were overwhelmed by God's glory, and by God's goodness, and by God's grace.

Then when the artillery of God's booming words fell silent and it all disappeared — the whiteness...the brightness... the honored guests...and the glory — then it was time to go home. It was Saturday morning at church camp: time to pack up...time to leave the place where life had been renewed...time to go back to the world...time again to engage the challenging realities of life after the refreshment of this too-short retreat.

Now, except for Adele, and Glenn, and Christian, and Sophia, and Luciano, we don't get to stay on that mountain: you do, but we don't. We don't get to stay at church camp. When we go, we have to come back. We can't live always in that reality because you know, friends, it is unreality for too many.

Yet we can...no, we must take the gift that we've been given in that kind of setting at church camp...the gift of church camp...we must take it and share it with the world. It's a gift that is

the *inspiration of God's goodness* that comes as close to us as breathing. It's a gift that is the *vision of God's glory*, more grand than anything we've ever owned or wanted...more grand than anything we've ever seen. And it is the gift of the *promise of God's kingdom*, more just and merciful than any community we've ever belonged to.

At church camp, Peter, and James and John learned that it's all about Jesus: Jesus who for us is life, and health and salvation. Because, you know, when the vision has dimmed, when the mountain is a memory, we still have everything we need when we have Jesus...and when we live in the community of His family.

This is the gift of church camp: the transformation we experience when we're there...*and* the transformation we offer as we leave. In the words of the Apostle Peter:

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Oh how we need the persuasion and the purpose of that kind of a vision of God's glory today...for the Middle East so torn asunder by turmoil: the yearning of freedom and the oppression of dictators...for our own state and its government that has come closer to anarchy than any of us have every seen before...and for those of us who are caught up in the human mill of a mercurial economy: how we need the persuasion and the purpose of that vision today.

Our society literally stands between peril and possibility. We need a vision of God's glory: not our own glory, but of God's glory. And we need to offer that vision to our community...and to our state...and to our nation...and to this world that God loves so much so that, in those arenas, the vision may be caught and shared. That's why JOSHUA invites us to come and pray together this Thursday evening at First United Methodist Church.

That vision...that vision of God's glory and grace...is the gift of church camp because it was the vision of the first church camp – you know, *Transfiguration Point* – the place where Peter, and James and John first saw Jesus for who He truly is when He was transfigured, and they were transformed.

I know that I have been transformed. I've set aside those memories of my tent-mate Phil...and that too-friendly bee in my can of Coke...and my fried egg with plastic parts in it. I don't have the same feelings I once had about camp because I found God at a place like Moon Beach, and Pilgrim Center, and wherever the church gathers us in the majesty of God's creation. I even decided I could say yes to being president of the board of the camps in Wisconsin, and it's still a joy.

Church Camp can transform you, too, because there you also can find God's glory, and God's goodness, and God's grace. And when you do, then you can become beacons of that grace, and that goodness, and that glory...that light that shines in the dark places of this world. And you...and this community that God loves...will never be the same, again!

As Jesus said to Peter and to James and to John: *Let's go camping!* Amen.

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