

Youth Sunday, April 13, 2008

Sermon/reflections by Christin Nice-Webb

### Stop Painting over the Problems

First off, I want to say, “Thank you,” for your generosity in giving of your money and your prayers that made our trip to West Virginia possible. It was a great week and one in which I am very grateful for. We scraped, caulked, painted, and drilled a house, and befriended the only dog I’ve ever met whose owners were honest enough to name him Spaz. And it’s true, you do get a certain thrill by scraping a house in below-freezing temperatures with snow coming down around you and your fingers about to fall off, but we also managed to find our excitement in other fun things like experiencing a local band, visiting a waterfall, listening to a historian/singer-songwriter, making nearly all of our own meals and washing our own dishes, and heading down to the Lodge in Pipestem State Park, complete with ping pong table and indoor pool, all that eight teenagers and three adults need to keep themselves occupied for an hour or so. And at the end of each evening, Michael Hester would read a passage from the Bible, and if we were all still awake we’d have a discussion followed by a prayer and then hit the sack.

Towards the end of the week, the question came up as to whether we felt we were making a real difference in these people’s lives or not. I thought back to our work earlier in the week, when we’d been scraping walls and had to be careful not to scrape the ancient wood off with the paint. Pictures flooded my mind of rotting boards, crumbling corners, and all the real problems of the house that, due to our inexperience and lack of time, we really had no way to fix. But then again, we did make the house look really good. Two coats of white paint and green trim around the windows, and that made the family living in the house feel good. We gave them their sense of pride and dignity back. So did we make a real difference for these people? Yes, I thought so, especially acting within our constraints of experience and time, but I couldn’t flush the image

from my mind that we were just painting over the problems, fixing the appearances when what really needed to be addressed was the internal structure of the house. The family is still in poverty. Some of their boards are still in really bad shape, but what more could we possibly have done? No matter how much we wanted, there was no way for us to rid them of their poverty in a week.

I ended up deciding that we *had* done our best for this family and I believe that we *have* had a lasting impact on them if not on their house. And on thinking further, I realized that the situation serves well as a metaphor for our own community, for our country, and our world, where governments and institutions hardly ever get to the root of the problem anymore. And I don't know all the facts and names and research. I just know that it happens, because comprehensive and effective change in areas like health insurance and prison reform, racism issues, immigration rights, and same-sex marriage has yet to be accomplished. But since most of you adults know more about all that than I do, I thought my energy might be better suited looking inward and trying to find what I've been neglecting to address within myself. Maybe I've got my own rotting boards splintering for attention.

Well, to be honest, the question isn't so much whether or not they exist but what are they and what should I do when I find out? I need to not just scrape away at the boards, rotten with envy or anger or self-pity or past pains; I need a whole tree-load of fresh wood, which is the kind of renewal I thought was supposed to happen eight years ago when I accepted Jesus. So why didn't it? Well, I was baptized when I was nine and I think I must have thought this new life thing was going to be somewhat easier. I kind of expected something big to happen like I'd feel this "click" when the Holy Spirit slid into place or something and everything would go swell after that. What I didn't know then is that breaking the habit of pre-Jesus life is like breaking any other habit; it takes conscious effort and focused attention to make it work.

I recently finished a book by Deepak Chopra called *The Spontaneous Fulfillment of Desire* (yes, I am a reader of those cheesily-titled self-help books; only this one actually did help). The book was all about living life from the level of your soul, which is where God is, and the closer that our intentions match God's intentions the more our desires will be spontaneously fulfilled. He also writes that coincidences are not just random happenings but the Almighty One communicating with us his intent for our lives. In other words, if we can reach the deepest part of ourselves, we can reach God, and God's desires for us will manifest in our lives.

Jesus speaks about reaching this level when he talks to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4: 23-24. He tells her, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." For me, getting to the core of myself and really living the life Jesus intended means intensely examining my spirit and evaluating it for truth. If I don't really know all that's in here, how can I worship God in spirit and in truth?

I consider this search an ongoing journey to discover my deepest self and stay true to that self, and I credit the conception of that search to my experiences on our mission trip in West Virginia. I believe, if we can live always from the true level of our spirit and mend our foundations there, if we can remind ourselves and encourage our leaders to stop painting a layer of comfort over the real problems and start, or continue, the hard work of renovating our souls and our society, then not only will we be the kind of worshipers God desires, but we will be one crucial step closer to rebuilding the institutional and governmental structures that support our future.