

10-2018 Sermon “Showing Up”

So at the risk of beginning this with a cliché, I will start by saying that when Pastor Anne and Mary Jane Morrill asked me if I wanted to talk about our recent trip to Houston with the ELCA Youth Gathering, I thought, “Sure, there’s always lots to share from the Youth Gathering.” Then Mary Jane said, “So it’ll be only about about 8 to 10 minutes and I said “8 to 10 minutes? That’s, like, a sermon.” Sure enough, Pastor Anne confirmed my fears by saying “Yes, it is.” Imagining this seemingly insurmountable mountain in front of me, I looked at her and said, “I’ll pray about this.” However, upon reflection about my experience it didn’t take me long to realize that not only could I preach for 8 to 10 minutes but I could probably have a day long conversation about our experience during the Gathering and how it relates to our stewardship theme of “Showing Up”.

Now, my personal experience with these gatherings goes back to 2012 when we first went to New Orleans. Notwithstanding my German Lutheran upbringing, I had never heard of a Youth Gathering and when I first heard about the youth gathering in New Orleans, I thought, “Oh, that sounds like fun. I’ve never been to New Orleans and we’ll be there with teenagers doing good things, doing service work”, and it was all positive.

Little did I know that God opened a door for me that day... and I stepped through...I “showed up”. Now in proper Youth Gathering Fashion this would be the time where you all break out in wild applause. But you can hold it because I didn’t know what an incredible adventure I was embarking upon at that time.

It doesn’t take long to realize that you’re immersed in something that’s much bigger than yourself when you attend an ELCA Youth Gathering. Your first impression with 30,000+ teenagers who all want to be there to do good things is at the very least impressive and at best absolutely awe inspiring.

Generally speaking, when you visit a community during a youth gathering you learn not only about the politics of the area, and about what the citizens have endured over the years that put them in a place where they need assistance but you also discover the microcosm of hundreds and thousands of stories from the people who have lived these stories.

We had the good fortune (and I mean good fortune) to find ourselves in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans for our service project, and even more good fortune when we realized that the city had not supplied us with any of the materials we needed for our project which was to revitalize a park in the area. You may be wondering where is the good fortune in that? However as we quickly learned, often times our greatest impact comes in the most unlikely of circumstances when we least expect it. We decided to roam the neighborhood and look for any opportunity where we could be of help. What we found were ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives in a place that had been stripped of its ordinariness.

In an area where convenience stores, gas stations, schools and most community buildings were no longer in existence, in the vast emptiness of what used to be vibrant neighborhoods what struck me were the stories we heard from people we encountered. The story from the couple who were forced to leave their home with their young son via a small boat during Hurricane Katrina. I could only imagine the fear they must’ve felt for their lives. The stories we heard from people who were unable to rebuild because of federal regulations and the bureaucracy in which they now found themselves. And of course we made our own story when we literally moved a mountain with our bare hands. A mountain that was to be used as fill for

the people of the neighborhood left by the city of New Orleans no less than 5 to 7 years earlier. We were able to help an elderly woman clear her yard from countless years of neglect. There just were no community resources for these people to draw from. It was difficult to hold back the tears when listening to the accounts of real life. I'm a teacher and as I always say to my students when I talk about reading non-fiction, or historical fiction, "You just can't make this stuff up! What happens in real life is often times so much more fantastic than anything we can possibly imagine!"

Fast forward three years to Detroit. We were educated in many of the issues that the people of Detroit faced, but I don't think that prepared us for the numerous boarded up buildings we witnessed on our daily commute from the airport into the city. I think we agreed that some areas looked more like a war zone than any neighborhood in which we could imagine living. In addition, Detroit came with a whole separate set of challenges for the Youth Gathering. Transportation being one of them. Because of our long daily commutes and extremely long participating hours, we were sorely sleep deprived. But this didn't deter us from fully "showing up" for all the experiences Detroit had in store for us.

Although we weren't embedded in the devastated neighborhoods in and around the city during our service work, we were asked to participate in a diaper drive which, as we were aware, was equally as important to the people of Detroit. But what struck the group as a whole, I think, were the opportunities we had to talk to the citizens of Detroit while exploring their city. Numerous people approached us because we weren't easy to miss with all of our bright orange T-shirts. They expressed extreme gratitude at seeing us all there, which was humbling for us as we felt we could do so much more than what we were able to at that moment. We ran into a homeless man who came to look at the fish in the streams on the waterfront on a daily basis. He proudly told a story of how he had found a cell phone and had tracked the owner into Canada to return it. He also offered to us an account of a life that was filled with challenges and many lessons. We offered to buy him a burger at an eatery close by when it opened. He gave us his order but when Noah, one of our awesome teen participants, returned with his food, he was grateful, but admitted that he didn't think we were really going to get it for him. It was surprising to me to imagine that one would have such an absence of hope.

We were honored to have a youth from Palestine accompany us during the whole Detroit Gathering. David not only opened our eyes to a story that we never would have understood through the assistance of ELCA's "Peace, Not Walls" campaign, but he also brought a perspective that enriched and educated us. I often think of David and actually ran into a man in Houston who knew his family. He is doing well, he said.

Now, compare New Orleans and Detroit to Houston, and it's dichotomy of extreme wealth that we experienced in the area of our hotel, and the struggling citizens whom we visited in the outskirts of the city. (I often think of the DeBeers Diamond Jewelry store that we passed every day on the way to the bus, thinking, "I really should have at least gone into that store just to look because I probably won't visit another one anytime soon.")

In our service work there, we helped to clean up a neighborhood and park during which some people called out from passing cars, thanking us. We were then welcomed with open arms into a community church where the congregation sang for us, preached to us, and showed us such hospitality that we were again humbled knowing that they were indeed doing more for us than we could ever do for them.

When we prepared for Houston and all of the youth gatherings, we "showed up", for meetings, for fundraisers, for learning opportunities, for the chance to reflect on why we were going to show up in New Orleans, Detroit, and Houston. We had choices. We had sports and friends and family obligations, but the importance of "showing up" trumped them all. It's a rare

opportunity to be part of something that is so much bigger than yourself. We reflected on our purpose in all the cities. What does it mean for us to be a part of the Youth Gathering? What would it mean to the people of these communities? We talked about the challenges that the region had faced over the past year and through it all we reflected on our own challenges: What would our impact be? How will we face the adversity of some of the situations we will face? We talked about logistics and costs and the hard work that would have to be done before hand that would allow us to go. And when the plans were laid, we “showed up” again and again to bake Nisu, to do restaurant work, to sell things, and to spread the word about what we were doing.

There’s something to be said for doing the same thing that 30,000 other people are doing. You don’t stand out. No one commends you or congratulates you on doing service because we all are. No one points out your accomplishment because they’ve all done it, too. There’s a little room for self proclamation, however the gratification comes in knowing that the collective task you’ve done was monumental and able only to be done by so many. Our experiences weren’t without challenges. In New Orleans, our inexperience with the whole event was probably the biggest challenge, and fire ants.....oh, and the heat. As some of you may know, the Gathering is held mid-summer, obviously to adhere to students’ schedules. As I mentioned, in Detroit, our biggest challenge was sleep-deprivation.....oh, and the heat. And in Houston, it was largely....oh, the heat. When you can’t wait to get off a bus into the 97 plus degrees because the air conditioning has broken and it’s actually **cooler** outside, it’s pretty hot.

So, What does it mean to “show up” for each other? What compels us to take the time out of our busy lives to “show up”? Empathy, obligation, a request from others, guilt, or just the knowledge that we are doing the right thing? Call it self gratification or call it well-being but we do things many times to make ourselves feel good; to gain a feeling of accomplishment, knowing that you’re needed, or the fulfillment of seeing a finished product.

We show up for many reasons but what about when we show up when no one is watching, when no one notices, when we do the right thing because we know it’s the right thing and we’re not doing it because it feels good? Maybe it’s difficult, or darned inconvenient or maybe it even hurts.

Whatever the motivation, I think all of it is the “Showing Up” that God means.

I’m glad I “showed up” that day in 2011. I’ve seen the changes it’s made in me and my hope is that it has perpetuated a change in others’ lives. I’ve seen the effect it has had on my own son, who participated in 2012 and 2015 and the other participants, adults and youth, throughout the years. We may not notice it in our everyday lives, but you cannot be the same person after “Showing Up” for the ELCA Youth Gathering.