

How Is God Present In This Moment?

A Reflection of the All-Church Retreat at Dwight Mission - April 25-26, 2014

Mark 6:30-32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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It's approaching 3:30 pm on Saturday afternoon, April 26, 2014, and I have quite a task in front of me. I'm journaling this sermon like a blog on my iPad in the shade of the large gazebo in the middle of the grounds at Dwight Mission Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center, about 2 hours SE of Tulsa.

After a fun evening last night as people from the church started to gather, and a remarkable morning of group building, and a lazy afternoon of hiking, exploring, walking the labyrinth (complete with seed ticks), and conversations with others, I realized that the sermon I had already prepared for this Sunday just wasn't going to cut it. It's not that it wasn't a good sermon (one that was going to deal with the story of Doubting Thomas), but it would be totally disjointed and disconnected from the meaningful experiences that around 70 of us from College Hill are currently encountering. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I wanted to get to Dwight Mission a bit early, because Friday is my day off anyway. Leaving home at 3:15 in the afternoon, I wasn't 15 minutes down the road before I realized that I forgot to put any bedding in my car. I wondered, **How is God present in this moment?** Normally quite organized, I actually can find humor in these times when I mess up. My memory, or occasional lack thereof, is leading me into more of these times. So much for arriving at Dwight extra early.

I knew I needed to head into the small town of Sallisaw, about 12 miles further down the road from Dwight, to look for either a sleeping bag or sheets and a blanket. I settled for a lightweight sleeping bag that I found at a Walmart. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

When I arrived at Dwight I found Gary & Linda Watts sitting on lawn chair out in front of the Oxley Center, our gathering spot for our retreat activities, including meals - because there was a quilting conference going on and they needed all the space in the Dining Hall. I asked Gary, who spearheaded the entire organization of this retreat, along with a wonderful and imaginative team, about the sleeping arrangements. I was somewhat dreading the idea of not getting any sleep in a bunk house arrangement with others who probably snore. But Gary mentioned that they had brought an extra tent if I wanted to use it, and that I could just drag one of the twin mattresses from one of the bunks to sleep on. Having just bought a sleeping bag, I figured that this would only add to my retreat experience, and that I'd probably sleep better. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?** Gary helped me set up the tent, or actually I helped him set it up, and I was ready to go.

One of the first things I decided to do was to take a wonderful hike with Stefanie, Evie, and Anders Olson down the path that goes under the railroad bridge to a beautiful pond, which is part of a creek. With geology in my background I never cease

to be amazed by the rock face of a cliff, especially when it reveals so many distinct layers of rock. I once was able to read the geological history of deposition and erosion like a book, but not so much anymore. It's a bit frustrating not knowing things like you used to know them. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

The highlight of the walk back from the pond was hearing a train whistle not too far away. Anders really wanted to see it up close, so we all ran back to the railroad track and arrived just before the train sped by. Anders was thrilled. I got some good pictures. Then Evie, a naturalist at her young age, caught a tiny frog with her mother's help and spent quite some time observing it, before letting it hop away. I sometimes forget the absolute wonder that children experience in even fairly common events. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Well, more folks started arriving, bit by bit, until more than 60 had gathered. There were no organized activities for the evening, so we all just mingled, snacked, and relaxed. I was already getting to know some folks better than I did before.

It was especially awesome being able to tell folks who came up to ask me questions about the agenda for the retreat that I knew nothing. It is really remarkable, as a pastor, to be at a church function and have absolutely no responsibility. I was afforded the opportunity to just sit back and participate like a regular human being. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Though it was starting to get a bit chilly without a coat, most of us ventured outside around 9:30 pm. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the stars were bright. Some of us pointed out constellations. The universe is awesome. We gathered around a campfire and ate s'mores. But it was no ordinary campfire. It was some concoction that Glen Olson learned about called a Swedish Torch. One large round log had an X carved about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way down the log with a chain saw. The log basically burned in the middle cut-out space. It provided excellent heat with a minimum of smoke. And it was great for toasting marshmallows. This event, too, just went with the flow. No speeches, no preaching, just a few folks from time to time breaking out in song. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Around 10:30 pm most of us headed out to bed. Though a light sleeper, I actually got some good sleep out in that tent. After a few late night trains passed by, conversation soon died down and the 13 of us who braved the great outdoors in tents soon nodded off to sleep.

Breakfast was at 8 am and I could hear folks starting to rustle around 7:30. As people started to gather in Oxley Center, those of us addicted to caffeine had to deal with the horror of a broken coffee maker. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Not to worry, the excellent staff at Dwight learned of our plight and was soon shuttling coffee over from the Dining Hall. I can't remember the last time I had French toast and sausage, but I love a hearty breakfast. Again, more meaningful conversations in an informal setting of fellowship around a meal. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Just after 9 am, Glen Olson, our facilitator for the morning activities, called us into order like the drill Sargent he aspires to be. The new program directors at Dwight, along with some of our church adults, took our 12 or so children out for a morning adventure, which included a hike to the pond and painting on large pieces of heavy butcher block paper. Right before our lunch break they came back and gifted the adults with an 'art parade' of their creations. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Gathered in Oxley at round tables of eight, Glen led us through a series of fun exercises that at first seemed to have no point whatsoever. How contrar.

...I pause at this moment of typing on my iPad, because Wyatt Fox and Evie Olson just came running up the field where I'm sitting, screaming my name in excitement and showing me a cute thin green snake that they found down by the railroad track. More amazement and wonder. I'm picking up on a theme here by observing the children of our church. **I wondered, How is God present in this moment?**

Back to Glen and his bag of tricks. Exercise after exercise had us mixing up into different groups and sharing a variety of information, problem solving, working together as a team, and learning more about each other, including each other's names. After getting us all loosened up, we were ready to tackle a discussion of profound importance. In new groups of eight, we had 20 minutes to discuss what it means to each of us to "Be the Church." We were to consider, for example, **"What would draw you to the 'church' or the College Hill community outside of worship (Fellowship/Ministry/Care/Fun/Learning/Service...as opportunities or activities that you would be willing to engage or participate)? Or, 'Going' to church and 'Being' the church - what's the difference? If so, what?"** I wondered, **How is God present in this moment?**

When we were finished with our table discussions, Glen gathered us together again and had one person from each table give a brief report (well, sometimes brief) of what they came up with. A couple of overarching themes soon emerged. First, **College Hill folks would be drawn back together outside of worship in social gatherings in which people could get to know each other better and grow in real, authentic relationships.**

Many shared the historical nature of this congregation's social outreach and commitment to being an accepting, inclusive community, though there is always more work to be done in that area. Others shared how College Hill is like home, not even being able to image being a member of any other church. **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

Interestingly, this fed into another overarching theme that "being" the church was much more than just living out our faith on a daily basis, as important as that is to our church members. Many reflected that we can't really be the church together if we don't also go to church together. **The only way, it was suggested, for us to be the church is to work at building community, which occurs when we gather together. In other words, going to church is intimately involved with being the church.** Why? Because it isn't just about getting a weekly spiritual lift in our own personal lives. It's also very much about other people themselves.

A real highlight for many of us was in a story Gini Fox told that put this all into perspective in a visual manner. Some traditions in old countries had people arrive at church with a candle to help light the sanctuary. Therefore, if some folks didn't attend, there would literally be less light. Gini continued, **"When you are not in church there is less light, because your light is absent and it is missed! We need your light. Your light enhances our light."** I wondered, **How is God present in this moment?**

Just as it was time to break for lunch, Glen... Oops, Evie just ran up to me again, snake still in hand, and asked a provocative question. "Do you ever have a break?" I responded, "Why do you ask that, do I always seem busy?" "Yes, because you've been sitting here for hours without moving." I responded, "Since it's nearly time for our outside cookout dinner, I'll be taking a break real soon. And writing this sermon now in this beautiful place, listening to folks having such a fun time, is way better than

waiting until I get home at 9 pm tonight." **I wondered: How is God present in this moment?**

While others have now gathered around the gazebo, some learning to swing mallets at whiffle balls, I return to Glen's closing comments before we broke for lunch and our completely free afternoon of doing whatever we want. He asked us, "**What we were going to do with all this information we had just shared and experienced together this morning?**"

He began by reminded us (from his own personal experience) of the tendency of how easy it is in our admittedly busy lives that are filled with different priorities, to make excuses (albeit legitimate ones) for not getting involved and staying involved in the life of this congregation. He encouraged us all to **start something we want to see happen at the church, and to join in something that we would enjoy doing. Look for the needed resources, spread the word, and get together.** I wondered: **How is God present in this moment?**

I think I know the answer to all of these questions. **God is with us in all of our moments, and God's presence can especially be experienced in moments of wonder, joy, rest, reflection, gratitude, and particularly in times when a truly caring community comes together.**

Well, it's time for the hamburger and hot dog cookout, and thankfully, more fellowship. God will be present in this moment, as well.

Amen.