

“The Church of the Toasted Marshmallow”

Luke 10:1-12

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March 17, 2013

Most often when we think of mission, we think of the ways we are called to help others who have a need that we might be able to fill. We've been doing some of that this month in worship during our focus on mission, and our welcoming of some of South Church's mission partners. We have heard about organizations that help students and reach out to people who are living in poverty. We have heard from organizations that make a difference in the world with their work, and ones that have been transformed by the support we give them. Today, our focus on mission is a little different. Today, we are the people called to reach out, but we are also the people who are most in need. We are the givers and the potential receivers. Our mission focus today is on outdoor ministries.

When we talk about outdoor ministries, we talk about the places and the spaces that are outside—in the woods, near a lake, on the beach, and in the desert. It is the ministry that takes place among the pine trees and alongside wildlife like deer and chipmunks and mosquitoes. Outdoor ministry is the sacred sanctuary that can be found next to waterfalls and rivers, the pastoral care that comes during a conversation in a canoe or on a hike, it is catching a glimpse of the Holy in our natural world—the nature that surrounds us but that can still feel too distant at times.

When we talk about outdoor ministries, at South Church we most often talk about Silver Lake Summer Camp, and the amazing community it creates for children and youth in the northwest corner of Connecticut. We might also talk about Boy Scout Troop 156 or the Venturing Troop that South Church supports. Both troops teach the importance of respecting nature and value spending time in the wilderness. But this mission of the church does not stop with outreach to our children. The mission of

outdoor ministry is for anyone who works inside day in and day out, anyone who lives in a private home in a neighborhood with planned landscaping, anyone who spends a part of each day in front of a computer or a smart phone or a television, anyone who has ever felt more connected to *things* than to trees, anyone who has gotten the weather report from a channel instead of the sky...Have I forgotten anyone? Truly, outdoor ministry is for all of us.

I know many of us find our ways into the great outdoors, and there are many of us who do that regularly. Many people are drawn to the world outside our homes and offices—craving fresh air, the sounds of birds, the smells and sights of untamed creation. But just as often, it is seen as something separate from our church life—others would even separate it from faith practices and a life that includes religion.

I just finished Lillian Daniel's new book, "When Spiritual But Religious Is Not Good Enough." In one chapter, she expresses annoyance at a frequent interaction that she has. Often, when she meets someone and tells them that she is a minister, they are quick to tell her, "I don't go to church. I find God in nature. I see God in every sunset." She writes that she wishes she could reply, "Do you think that is unique? Do you think that people who go to church DON'T see God in the sunset??" Some of us might actually suggest that those two are related—that one of the reasons we go to church is because we recognize God is all around us, especially in nature.

Something happens when we leave our regular indoor meeting places, and we encounter one another outside our comfort zones and outside in the world. We notice new things, we ask different questions, and new answers are revealed to us. There are opportunities for friendships and finding kindred spirits. Maybe it is because things seem to move at a slower pace when you are closer to nature, or maybe it is because even with all the amazing aspects of creation surrounding you, there is still less to distract you. No matter how often I go to visit Silver Lake, I am momentarily surprised when my phone loses reception and I can't connect to the internet. Those things don't matter there. The ministry of presence is a value of Silver Lake, and taking away those two little links to the outside

world are a reminder that sometimes the most important place you should be is the place you are in this exact moment.

Realizations like this are one of the core reasons why outdoor ministry is so important for each of us. When we do not create the time and the space to spend in this different kind of life, we are closing ourselves off to the potential for these new connections. When we are distant from nature, and from the communities that form in places deeply connected to nature, there is a part of us that remains distant from God. I believe that outdoor ministry is a gift from God to recharge us and ground us. When we are in a place like a camp or a retreat, we are better able to connect with ourselves, with the people around us, and with God.

Basically, I am saying, get yourself to a campground or a summer camp, because good, unexpected things happen there. And you don't know what you are missing until you arrive.

My own life has been deeply enriched by summer camp. Many of you know that I volunteer at Silver Lake every year and that I spent several summers working at a Girl Scout camp. When I was a kid, I also went to church camp each year, but I have found that my memories are a little different from other people's memories of church camp.

My parents are divorced and I grew up primarily with my mom in California, but I spent many summers in Kansas, where my dad was a minister. Because I was only there during the summer and the focus was on spending time with family, my dad didn't get to experience a lot of regular parenting things like seeing me at school, or watching little league games, or seeing how I developed friendships throughout the years. The exception to this was the one week we spent each summer at a UCC church camp, very similar to Silver Lake. This camp had ministers rotate as the chaplain for the week, and my dad always volunteered, so my half brother James and I came along as campers.

My memories of church camp as a kid are of living in a tight knit community alongside my dad. I was able to spend time with him in a more removed way—doing activities like swimming and hiking with my cabin and hanging out with friends, all the while knowing my dad was nearby, assuming he

was doing the same kinds of things, and knowing I would see him at meals and during all camp worship. We lived together, but also apart, in a way that wasn't possible during the rest of the summer when it was usually just the family together. At camp, we had parallel lives that intersected a few times a day, and I could enjoy those moments while still savoring all the other things I was doing. Looking back, camp gave us the opportunity to live more like other families do the rest of the year—with hobbies and friends and schedules and community weaving in and out of our daily lives.

Summer camp was also the only place I practiced being a rebellious teenager with my dad—I learned how to put on makeup at camp, and I kissed my first boy in the woods behind the baseball field. I taught my brother James how to write his first love letter, addressed to my best friend, using Song of Solomon as a model of romance. After all, it was church camp!

For me, church camp was where I was able to be full, messy kid with my dad—not a visitor on her best manners the way I often was during the rest of summer. It was a heightened family experience, and it was only a week, but I treasure those weeks. My dad and I haven't always had the best of relationships, but I have memories of church camp that remind me that it hasn't always been difficult, either.

I share this story with you because we find God in surprising ways when we leave our regular lives and spend some time in the woods. We might go seeking solace and discover new ways of relating to people. We might go hoping to find community and find ourselves instead. Immersing yourself in the outdoors, especially in summer camps, creates a different rhythm to your day, a rhythm that allows for more reflection, more connection, and more awareness of all that surrounds you, especially God.

Outdoor ministry is an important mission of South Church, one that has the potential to enrich each of our lives in addition to the countless lives of the youth who participate in the outdoor ministries we support like Silver Lake and the Boy Scouts. In our story from Luke, Jesus sends out the disciples into the world and tells them that the harvest is plenty and the laborers are few. God's harvest is ready and waiting for us. If we are the laborers, and I am here to say that there is harvest enough for everyone

out in that great big world—enough to give away and enough to feed our own spirits.

Parents, bring your kids to camp. Kids, tell your parents to take you to a place where there are more stars in the night sky than there are lights on buildings. Everyone, seek out opportunities to find God in nature, and then seek out more opportunities to meet God's people in nature. It's a good place, this world. We limit ourselves when we don't step out beyond our everyday confines and experience all that it has to offer. The invitation this week is to be your own missionary. Find the places that God has created. If you don't know where to begin, drive west on Route 4 for about an hour and a half. When you get to the town of Sharon, listen for singing voices gathered in the wilderness, look for the sparks from the campfire, and follow your nose to the nearest s'more. God has created some sacred places, and they are out there, waiting for you to discover them. Are you ready to find them?