

“Why Camp is Awesome”

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Rev. Heather Riggs

Who has spent time at any of our Methodist Camps?

This is kinda scandalous for a United Methodist Pastor, but I had never attended summer camp. I mean, I had visited a few camps, but until the last week of June, I had never participated in one of our week-long summer camps...and they had asked me to help lead.

In the weeks beforehand, as I met with the camp Dean's and emailed with staff, I kept getting frustrated because nobody seemed to be able to give me a clear explanation of what I was supposed to do! I was supposed to help the student council with preparing for morning watch, but nobody could explain what morning watch is supposed to be...

I was supposed to plan a 1 and ½ hour to 2 hour bible study time everyday with games, crafts and other activities, using the VBS-like curriculum provided, except we would be skipping one of the, days curriculum, or maybe not, or maybe we would not be doing program time one day, but they wouldn't tell me which day...

I was supposed to plan a nightly vespers, except maybe the camp staff would do it one night (but we won't tell you which night until you get there!) and one night (but we won't tell you which night!) vespers will be at the beach around the campfire, unless it rains, and God's not telling us which night that might be, either.

In case you couldn't tell, I'm a planner. I like my "i"s dotted, my "t"s crossed, and I am that annoying person who turns in her projects at least a week early! Not knowing what to do, how to do it, when to do it, or even *if* I was supposed to do it, was driving me crazy! But I have learned that sometimes the things that bother us the most, are God's most powerful spiritual teaching tools.

So I prepared the best I could. Made plans for Bible studies and Vespers that I might not lead, and ordered craft supplies, that we might not use, and resolved to practice what I preach and:

Show up

Pay Attention

Cooperate With God

and, most definitely, Release the Outcome

I showed up a day late for Camp. You're supposed to show up on Saturday to meet with the camp staff and other leaders, but I was needed here on Sunday morning, so I showed up with the campers on Sunday afternoon, with no final schedule, no idea what I was supposed to do next, where and when! I showed up anxious, but I showed up.

It was rather like joining an episode of reality TV in progress, except that I was expected to be one of the actors and had no clue what this show was about, except for the name: "We now Join MADDt Camp, in progress!"

"The role of Theologian in Residence, will now be played by Rev. Heather Riggs"

MADDT stands for:

Music

Art

Dance

Drama (and)

Tech

Basically, Highschoolers spend 4 days learning music, creating set pieces, learning dances, learning a drama, and figuring out and learning how to do the Tech stuff - that's audio/visual, for a Production that they put on for their families on Friday...

...while also doing camp stuff, like giant swing, campfire time, and greased watermelon...

...while also exploring faith and spirituality in a way that is both Christ Centered and respectful of the fact that Campers come from a variety of faith backgrounds, including no faith at all.

So I had to **Pay Attention**.

I had to pay attention to who these campers were and discern how God was calling me to be their Camp Pastor.

I am convinced by creation that God loves diversity, and this group of campers was wonderfully diverse! There were campers and camp counselors from as far away as South Africa and as close as Montavilla UMC. There were campers from every racial background, a pretty broad representation of neurodiversity, and a fair number of LGBTQIA+ folks. There were campers who obviously come from supportive families and campers who had experienced foster care. There were campers who are church kids, campers who have experienced church trauma, and campers who had no church experience. That was a lot to pay attention to.

But where it all came together was in the ethos of our United Methodist Camps. To steward a sacred space where all people can experience a little bubble of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

God showed me that my job was not to lead perfect programs, but to help steward this sacred bubble of the Kingdom of God here at Camp.

So I sought to **cooperate with God** in stewarding God's sacred bubble of the Kingdom of God at Camp.

I worked hard at letting go:
of my plans,
Of my desire to do everything well,
Of my discomfort and disorientation

And if you're thinking, "gee Pastor, now you know how we feel, with you coming in with all your new ideas!" That's totally fair. Learning how hard it is to try to be a part of something you've never experienced before, is definitely a good lesson for this revitalization Pastor, because that's exactly what I ask my churches to do!

I ask you to come along and be a part of a new way of doing church that you've never seen before, and I can't give you a firm plan of what is going to happen when, or how, or where and everything keeps changing as we go along!

And it's disorienting and uncomfortable and you constantly feel like you don't know what you're doing...

...And that's exactly how we're supposed to feel.

Because the beautiful people whom God has invited to experience a sacred bubble of the Kingdom of God, don't need a plan or a program. They just need us to love and accept them. Like Zaccheus.

Nobody thought Zaccheus was beautiful, except for Jesus. Zaccheus's height was a much bigger deal in his first century context than it would be here today. You see, as a short Jewish man, Zaccheus would have been considered disabled. Excessive shortness was considered an inheritable ailment, so no Jewish family would have wanted their daughter to marry Zaccheus. It sounds silly to us today, but really, aren't

all the reasons that people exclude one another silly? How is height any less silly of a reason to exclude people than race, gender identity, or immigration status?

I wonder if Zaccheus' exclusion from his Jewish community was part of his reason for being willing to work as a tax collector for the Romans? His own people wouldn't accept him, so why not take their money? Zaccheus was too short to be accepted in the Jewish community so he worked for the Romans. He was probably also too Jewish to be accepted in the Roman community, so basically, nobody wanted him. So Zaccheus had a big house full of wonderful things and nobody to share it with.

Maybe Zaccheus heard that Jesus already had a tax collector on his crew.

Maybe Zaccheus heard some of the other things Jesus was saying about forgiveness and acceptance and neighbor-love.

But Zaccheus was short and nobody wanted to save him a spot in the front of the crowd, so Zaccheus climbed a tree to see Jesus.

And once again, to us in our time, this part seems a little weird, but in Jesus' time this part is the key to the whole story: Jesus invites himself and his disciples over to Zaccheus' house.

Inviting yourself over to somebody's house, in today's world, is just not kosher, right? It might seem, to us, like Jesus is extracting payback for all the taxes by asking Zaccheus to feed everybody! But, in the first century, going over to Zaccheus' house was the ultimate stamp of approval. Jesus, by going to Zaccheus' house, was basically saying to the whole community that Zaccheus was acceptable. Zaccheus was now kosher. This is why there was rumbling in the crowd about going to the house of a sinner, in verse 7.

Zaccheus' extreme shortness was seen as an inheritable curse. His work as a tax collector for the Romans made him a collaborator with the occupation government, and the way that tax collectors made a living was by collecting more money than was actually owed in taxes. The silly reason for excluding Zaccheus was compounded by some legitimate reasons for excluding him.

But Jesus decided to center a little bubble of the love and acceptance of the Kingdom of God on Zaccheus, and invite everyone else to celebrate Zaccheus' salvation.

Camp is awesome because every week is a party for Zaccheus.

Campers come to camp having experienced exclusion for all kinds of silly reasons.

Campers come to camp still behaving in ways that aren't the best choices.

Campers come to camp wanting to climb up and see something different.

And Jesus meets us all there and calls us all holy and beloved.

Jesus loves and accepts us just as we are and that love and acceptance inspires us to love and accept others.

Camp is when we co-create a sacred bubble of the Kingdom of God here on earth where God throws a party at our house and everyone is invited.

Camp is Awesome!

I've heard a lot of United Methodists say that Camp is where they first experienced God, or where they heard their calling, or that Camp is their sacred space.

About half the leaders that I worked with at Camp don't participate in a local church, and they told me why.

They don't participate in a local church because they don't experience the inclusion, love and acceptance of the Kingdom of God in their local churches.

I think you can all think of examples of how our local churches have not been great at inclusion, love and acceptance, so I won't belabor that point.

Instead, I want to tell you what I think makes camp awesome.

You see, everyday at camp, the leadership would gather together to refocus on the mission of stewarding the sacred bubble of the Kingdom of God.

We'd talk about the schedule and the plan, but the schedule and the plan were subservient to the mission of making sure that everyone feels included, loved and accepted.

So every day we would ask:

- Who is being left out?
- Who is having a hard time?
- How can we better meet their needs?

- What do we need to do differently to make sure everyone feels loved and accepted?

The focus was most distinctly NOT about how do we keep the insiders happy. The focus was on identifying who might feel like an outsider and making sure they feel included, loved and accepted.

We kept the focus on the Zaccheus's among us.

And here's the magic.

When campers come back to camp the next time they are invited to be a part of a student council, so that they can start to learn how to lead and be intentional about including others. Then when they age out of camp, they get invited to become leaders.

Just like when Zaccheus felt included he was inspired to include others in his prosperity.

Camp is awesome because the camp culture of discipleship makes space for new leaders with new ways of doing things.

Honestly that's why it was so hard for anybody to explain to me what I was supposed to do at Camp! Because whatever I did was fine as long as I stayed on mission.

We're there to steward the bubble of the Kingdom of God.

Everything else - the plans, the songs, the games... all the "How we do it" is subservient to the mission of inclusion, acceptance and love.

It's all about the mission.

That's why Camp is Awesome.