

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

You will find something more in woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters.

— *Bernard of Clairvaux, 12th century*

“Masters” and “books” are hardly our main distraction these days. Instead, we seem to subsist on the knowledge gleaned from computers, televisions and the headlines lining the grocery checkouts. In our concern for education and information, we wall ourselves away from the very source.

The United Methodist camps we work with have a new informal motto, “No child left inside.” The trees and the stones shall have their chance to teach! Part of learning is encountering. Experiences outdoors, comfortable or not, lead to encounters with one's own humanity: to be cold, to be hot, to be afraid, to be lost, to witness exuberance and growth, patterns and interconnection, life and death. A week at camp becomes an escape from the cocoon wrappings of our society, layers of to-do-lists, trivia overload and competing priorities which keep us blind, deaf and dumb to the world around us.

At camp, I once led a group of 3rd and 4th graders up a trail at night. We turned off our flashlights, and lay down on the trail, to look at the sky. The children were absolutely silent. The next day, while we were talking about what it means when the Bible calls God gentle, one of the boys said, “God's gentleness was like last night. When we lay down and looked at the stars. I could feel the gentleness all around me.” The children learned about silence, peace, awe and gentleness, from the stars, the ground, the trees and the darkness. And they learned it much better than any book or TV could have taught.

Another of my favorite camp stories comes from Spencer Parks, the director of Menucha, a spiritual retreat center near Corbett. He was hiking through the woods one day with several campers when one of them suddenly stopped and said, “We need to say a prayer.” “All right,” said Spencer to the 9-year old, “Why don't you pray?” “Dear God,” said the camper, “Thank you for letting us mess around in your woods.” The proper response to the wonder of creation is thanksgiving, and to listen and to learn.

The trees of Oregon grow so fast they amaze me; their ability to thrive is stunning. They persist in the midst of impossible circumstances. I've a maple sapling currently growing from the driver's side door of my car. My first inclination was to pinch it off, but respect for its accomplishment stopped me. The inclination to destroy without reason came from growing up in a society shaped around conquering and consuming nature at a ferocious pace. Rather than learning from stones and trees, we've abused them. We've trapped, squished, ripped out, poisoned, cut down, used up and hacked at nature with abandon. Even the screens of our computers now scream with warning about the impending catastrophes we've laid the groundwork for. We've got all the information we need to start to make changes that will bring healing. It's time to head outside, out of our interior cubicles and our climate controlled environments, and let the woods teach us their silence, patience, economy and power.

The Peace of Jesus Christ Be With You,

Pastor Sarah Lewis

Piedmont Presbyterian, Portland

Presbytery of the Cascades Interim Camp Coordinator