

Pastor's Letter

Dear Friends,

May is a month of many celebrations. It is a month for weddings, baptisms, confirmations and graduations. May is the season of white robes, white dresses, white cakes and white altar paraments; the power of Easter flows over us with such force that the new things in life can no longer be kept silent.



Mark Austin and his parents with Confirmation Cake

At Grace Church the month opens with the youth leading the first worship service, Mother's Day follows and a week later we celebrate the baptism of Eric Shoo, a truly fine young man who is well prepared for this special day. GLOW Preschool Graduations follow and the month closes with Confirmation Day, Pentecost Sunday, a day of blessings especially for Mark Austin as he confirms the vows of his baptism.

It is a joyous season and a great time to be the church. May is the month we enjoy the annual Salad Luncheon sponsored by the Women of Grace. We also will gather as a congregation this month to vote on the readiness of the renovation project for the Activity Room adjacent to the Chapel. Then too, this is a big month also for preparations for the summer

Youth Mission Trip.

After the service on May 3rd the youth will be treating the congregation to a "mission lunch." When working on a mission site, lunches are packed as breakfast is finishing. A line is formed and each person with plastic gloves on their hands moves over a table with breads, luncheon meats and cheeses, lettuce and tomato, mayo and mustard, and apples and oranges. Brown bags are colored with crayons to "make your mark" or picture so that when the time finally comes to take a mid-day break, you can find your lunch in the community cooler.

This is the eleventh year that our church has deployed a team of volunteers to serve children and adults on a mission site far from home. Of the fifteen volunteers going in June to the Blackfeet Reservation in Heart Butte, Montana, about one half will be first time volunteers. We partner with an organization called YouthWorks, Inc; the one week we serve on the reservation provides one part of the three month-long service provided by church youth volunteers from all over the United States. Leaders at YouthWorks, Inc. describe the site in this way:

The Blackfeet Nation, traveled by Lewis and Clark in 1806, encompasses approximately 1.5 million acres, and is bordered by the Canadian province of Alberta to the north. The Blackfeet Indian Reservation was established by the Treaty of 1855 and today is home to about 7,000 of the over 15,000 total tribal members. The reservation belongs to the Pikuni branch of the "Blackfoot Confederacy" and members have often been referred to as "The Lords of the Great Plains." The YouthWorks site is located in the reservation community of Heart Butte, a town of about 700 residents. In Heart Butte, nearly 45 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, including 50 percent of those under age 18. While tribal members struggle to maintain their livelihood, your service to and respect for the Blackfeet Nation will most certainly lift their spirits and open your eyes to these wonderful people.

We of course do not know what will be encountered on the reservation. This mission site is not open to junior high school youth. It is a senior high school site only because of the poverty level and the extremely high unemployment rate of 69 percent.

Last year, on the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota we met many wonderful Native-Americans leaders on the reservation. We were honored in late September 2008 when the granddaughter of Chief Red Cloud,

whom we had met and served in mission with on the reservation, came to Westchester to spend the evening with us. Also, the Horjus and Miller families connected with another church mission near the reservation and have facilitated the sending of Christmas gifts over the holidays. In these final seven weeks before leaving for Heart Butte, Montana the youth will continue to sell “Stock in Youth” to help cover the costs of the trip. They will be meeting three more times to do team building and increase their knowledge of life on the reservation. While we cannot know what God will reveal to us this year, we do know that it is important to prepare. Our own world view will undoubtedly be “rocked”, as the saying goes. In my recent studies of Albert Schweitzer I ran across a sermon preached by Schweitzer, a Lutheran Missionary to Africa and 1952 Nobel Prize winner for Peace, on the topic of Christian Mission. The sermon was preached in 1905 at St. Nicolai’s Church in Hamburg and was focused on preparing the listener to defend “the missions” of the church against those who have objections to the missions. “...*I make it a matter of principle never to allow a thoughtless remark about missions to pass in my presence,*” he said. His biographer, James Brabazon, Albert Schweitzer, Essential Writings, pointed out that six months after preaching this sermon, Schweitzer wrote to the Paris Missionary Society and offered himself as a candidate for a post serving in Christian Mission. Here is his defense of missions:

1. “The first objection we always hear is this: Why don’t you leave people to their own religion? To this I reply: for me, missionary work in itself is not primarily a religious matter. Far from it. It is first and foremost a duty of humanity never realized or acted upon by our nations or states. ...to be a disciple of Jesus is the only culture in which a human being is always a human being, always someone who has a right to the assistance and sacrifice of his fellow man.”
2. “People say there is still so much to be done at home that missionary work should wait until everything has been accomplished here.” Schweitzer told this story about a man who challenged him in this way. “A man once said to me, ‘I won’t give a dime for missionary work.’ Knowing him well I asked him whether he gave more for good causes at home, since he did not send anything abroad, and how much he contributed every year to these worthy causes. We

continued to walk, and he remained silent. So did I. But since then, the missions have been getting money from him.”

3. “What should we answer when they say that missionary work doesn’t do any good, that it only squanders money and manpower for nothing? Of course one could tell a long story about the successes of missionary work. One could tell of the accomplishments in the Great Lakes District of Central Africa, what it has done in the South Sea Islands...untroubled villages it has created, how it has put a stop to bloodshed...But no. For missionary work is carried on without thought of success. Ordinary men in everyday life calculate the chances of success; they will undertake a project only if they are confident of reward. But when something is done in Jesus’ name, the only thing to take into account is the “must,” that mysterious must that Jesus keeps insisting on when he talks of the destiny of the Son of Man...His death removed the sting from those painful words ‘in vain’. ...out of his death came strength. All that is done while following in his footsteps, the effort that seems to be done in vain bears sacred fruit a thousandfold.”

A pastor friend of mine often uses the phrase “*I convinced myself through my own preaching.*” This clearly was Schweitzer’s experience because he fell in love with Christian mission and never left it until the day of his death. We too have fallen in love with it and the power it has to teach us; to bring us to new understanding of ourselves, of others and the profound way in which God uses those who love him. I will never forget the day at Ft. Defiance, AZ when three Navajo sisters taught us about the religion of the Navajo people and concluded their presentation by teachings us to sing “Jesus love me, this I know” in the Navajo language. There is no worldly way to measure the success of this encounter. Did we change them? Did they change us? Or did we celebrate the God we hold in common and who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end? This is the thousandfold blessing of which Schweitzer spoke and we have known so well these past years. We are a mission church at home and away. Ask the women who make the quilts, ask the men who cook the pasta and the pancakes, ask the teens who help you pack a mission lunch! May God bless your homes, your hearts and your celebrations this month.

Pastor Roger S. Crum