

Kristen Berg, March 3, 2016

Filling our souls

Good morning. I am happy to be here this morning to share with you about Fraser Lake Camp as we enter into a season of new growth and new beginnings after having celebrated the resurrection of Jesus.

This past week I travelled to Laurelville Retreat Centre in Pennsylvania to be part of the Mennonite Camping Association conference. The conference was filled with people who work in various roles in camp ministry, and together we shared ideas, learned from one another, and we were able to slow down and take stock of how we were doing personally. We were fortunate to have an engaging speaker, Leonard Dowe, pastor of a Mennonite Church in Philadelphia. On our very first night Leonard asked us a question. He asked, "How is your soul?" Leonard made it clear that he didn't want to know how we were feeling. Often when we greet each other we say, "How are you?" and we answer that we're feeling fine, or that we're busy, or that we're good. He wanted to know how our souls were doing. Were our souls tired? Or filled with joy? Were they heavy or were they at peace? Leonard reminded us that when our souls are full we are at peace. And that often we think of being at peace as resting, but he suggested that when we're at peace we are energized and ready to do God's work.

Leonard's words really got me thinking. Not only about my own soul and if I felt at peace, but also about the soul of Fraser Lake Camp and its people, and the work that we do there building up children and youth.

Today I want to share about how Fraser Lake fills the souls of the people who attend the camp and are connected to it in some way, and I want us to take stock of the state of our own souls. I also want to reflect on the hurried lives that we often lead, and God's call for us to slow down and be a peaceful presence.

To begin, I want to share a story with you that revolves around a new space that was created at camp this past summer called "the peace garden".

Two years ago we tore down an old dilapidated building at camp, which was replaced with a new, beautiful log building that houses our camp office and staff

lounge – some of you have seen this when dropping off your kids or your grandchildren at camp. We decided to build this building in a new location, leaving the old spot a bit of an eye-sore. In the midst of beautiful trees by our parking lot was a piece of our land that was bare and desolate. For one year, we kind of ignored it and just roped it off. However, last summer Fraser Lake’s spiritual director, David, had a vision to transform the land into something new. During pre-camp he asked me, “Can I make a garden out of this land?” In my head I was skeptical because it was mostly gravel, and soil that likely wouldn’t grow much. But, I wanted to nurture his leadership, and I didn’t have any big plans for that space so I said, “Yes! That would be great.” David spent hours, day and night hauling good soil from one end of our property to what he was calling “the peace garden”. People started to get excited about it. I was excited about it. And soon enough other staff were getting involved to make this into something. Large rocks were brought to line a path through the garden, wheel barrows full of pine needles were brought to create a “learning space” in the garden, and benches were gathered for people to sit on. I was amazed at how this space was transforming. When campers and visitors arrived, this “peace garden” was the first thing they would see. During camp sessions David invited campers to help him plant flowers and vegetables in the garden, and to gather interesting things from the forest to decorate the space. David also used the peace garden for his teaching sessions with campers where they would learn about diversity, peace, and social justice. When there was a conflict at camp, often the neutral ground to work it out would be in the peace garden. I began using this space as a meeting spot with my staff. And often I would see people just sitting on the garden benches enjoying the wonders of nature. The peace garden became the camp hub. By the end of the summer I was completely amazed at how this space had transformed. David saw something in the piece of land that no one else saw. He put time, effort, love, and sweat into it, and the staff and campers followed his lead. When I thanked David at the end of the summer for creating this space he let me know that it brought him joy to work on it and to bring people in to caring about this space. David’s soul was filled, and as a result of that he brought people together to create and use a space where campers were taught about their connection to God and to nature, about being grateful for who they are, and about the responsibility we each have to be kind to one another. A space where people could meet and talk. Looking back, it seems clear to me that God was at work in the Peace Garden. It was a space where God had the opportunity to fill our souls.

I want to share another story with you about someone who lives on Fraser Lake year round. Last year in June a handful of our staff and I had moved up to camp for the summer. This is a time where we fully open the camp and get everything prepared for our campers to come. One evening a woman came onto the property looking for me. I welcomed her and asked how I could help. She said, "I'm wondering when your camp starts and the children come." My first thought was that she wasn't particularly looking forward to that. I do sometimes wonder how people can stand getting woken up by our bell on their vacation! But then she continued, "I love to sit outside in the summer and listen to the children at your camp playing and laughing. They always sound like they're having such a good time. It fills me with joy." When I think of all of the wonderful things Fraser does for people I can come up with a long list. But this is not something I had considered before. This woman, a resident on Fraser Lake, looked forward to our summer camp program just to listen to the laughter. To have her soul filled with Joy.

Now I want to focus on us. Here. Gathered together today. Let me ask you like Leonard asked me last week: How is your soul? Maybe it's weary, or empty. Or maybe it's filled with joy like the woman who listens to our campers play. So, How is your soul? At the conference Leonard Dowe encouraged us to fill our souls so we could be at peace. So we need to ask ourselves, how do we fill our souls? Personally, I fill up my soul by immersing myself in nature and experiencing God, by spending time with friends and family in fellowship, and by meeting new people and making connections. This is how I fill my soul.

Leonard also encouraged us not to be in a hurry. If we want to do God's work and live fulfilling lives, we need to slow down. We hear this a lot in society: slow down. But it's hard isn't it? With family and work responsibilities, appointments, sports teams, extra curricular activities at school, we don't have time to move slowly. But this is what we are called to do. And we're given an example of this in the scripture that was read this morning by _____. In Luke 10 Jesus sends people out before him to the towns and villages he is going to visit. He asks the people to bring peace to the villagers' homes, and he says, "Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house." This instruction to not move from house to house is a call for the people to be a peaceful presence. To stay

and sit and be engaged, and to value people over what needed to get done. Leonard Dowe said something that stuck with me, “Jesus was unhurried but he was not unproductive.”

When I first became the director of Fraser Lake Camp, a veteran camp director gave me a piece of advice. She said, “Whatever you do, don’t run”. At first I didn’t really get what she was saying. But she told me that in my daily life at camp there would often be two different people needing me at once. The temptation would be to solve one problem and then physically run to solve the next problem. And she was right. I would catch myself running from place to place to help, and to problem solve, and to support. But then her words would ring through my head, “Don’t Run”, and I would stop and walk. This may sound trivial or silly, but I realized through this practice that I was more able and capable of helping others when I had walked to get there. During the walk I could process what needed to happen, I could call on God for guidance, and I could arrive with a peaceful presence. I experienced first-hand that it’s amazing what can be accomplished simply by giving ourselves time and being fully present in a calm way. But this is something that for most people, needs to be done intentionally. I do know a few people who can effortlessly walk through life unhurried. But for most of us it takes work, it takes being intentional, and it takes us allowing God to support us.

In today’s society we strive to do things quickly and efficiently, removing as many steps as we can to get more done. Something that helps us do that are our phones, tablets, and hand-held technology. We can send a quick text to get a quick answer, removing a conversation. Instead of asking questions to those around us, we can google it. We don’t need to describe what a person might look like to a friend, we can just pull them up on facebook. These technologies make our lives convenient, but do they allow for community and relationship building or do they hurry us through our daily lives?

At Fraser Lake Camp we give the opportunity to campers and staff to slow their lives down by asking everyone to put away their devices while at camp. The goal is to create a space where campers and staff are present in the moment and conscious of what they are experiencing, allowing for organic friendships to grow and be nourished. When I became the director I thought that getting people to detach from their devices would be a difficult task to accomplish. To be honest, I dreaded it. But the past two summers have proven otherwise. It seems a relief for

people to disconnect from social media and instant knowledge, and instead enjoy each others' company and take in God's beautiful creation. At the end of my first summer I had a staff member thank me for creating an environment free of technology. In their life at home they hadn't given a second thought to the option of not being connected. It was just the culture to always have their phone with them. I think most of us can relate to that. But this staff member felt a sense of peace from being present in the moment and was able to fill their soul with the people and beautiful environment of camp.

God is a loving and encouraging God and wants peace for our souls. We heard _____ read to us from Numbers 6: 24-26 where we are lifted up by these words:

²⁴“The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

²⁶the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

I love these bible verses because they remind us that God wants us to feel God's loving presence. These words give encouragement and hope to everyone, but especially to those of us who struggle to fill our souls and to be present in our everyday lives. God wants to bless us, and wants us to feel the light and warmth of God's peace. I love the image of God's face shining on mine, making me whole, and filling me up.

It is my prayer today that you will uncover what fills your soul, that you will be present and energized in your life, and that you will feel the warmth of God's love giving you a sense of peace.

Amen.