

Lauren Gustafson Sermon June 18

Second Sunday of Pentecost Proper 6

In the beginning was silence, closed doors, and surface level communication. I came into this year with the expectation that when you put five people in a house together with limited funds and lots of time together a community would follow. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite that easy. We all had some unrealistic expectations about what this year would be and I don't think it turned out the way any of us anticipated but that isn't a bad thing. We ultimately created a community that lifted one another up and supported each other in many different ways.

We had all made a conscious choice to be here. We were all driven by a deep, visceral compassion to help and serve. While our worksite placements at Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School, St. Andrew's School, St. Andrew's Church, and the Diocese of Virginia were a part of fulfilling this compassion, we committed to more than our jobs to fulfill our passion to serve. We got involved in the life of the church, sometimes you'd see a GOTH serving as a chalice bearer, a reader, or the rare times I was thurifer. There was a GOTH in the choir, there were GOTHs in the nursery. We got involved in Oregon Hill, giving finals survival goody bags to our neighbors. Timothy attended the Oregon Hill Neighborhood Association meetings, acting as a liaison and making our presence known each month. Just last week we joined Keep Virginia Cosy for a Belle Isle cleanup day. Here at Grace on the Hill we not only serve through our jobs, we serve through our life here.

There is no way to go into this year partially committed. It was our common ground, we made a choice to be here and postpone our dreams and desires to serve a community. We are all deeply different individuals—some introverted, some extroverted, all opinionated. What we didn't know is that despite the silence and closed doors we were all bonded together by passion.

You have to have deep rooted passion to give up a "real" job and spending a year in service. We chose to sacrifice a salary and some creature comforts (mattresses anyone?) to live into our desire to serve our community. All of us experienced financial challenges...student loans, car expenses, graduate school application fees— to live into a life we're passionate about.

One of the many things we learned this is year is our passion to serve and our compassion wasn't enough to build our community. We were bonded together by events. Doing things with each other made us stronger together. Whether it was realizing the positive difference teamwork made in a game of laser tag or going bowling and heckling (or encouraging...) one another, these things brought us closer together. Erin and I got closer through our monthly treks to Costco, slowly our relationship grew into what it is now. It's the simple things that bring you together most, common ground or not, there's no big shift that says "hey now we're a community" but you could feel it happen gradually, one step at a time.

In our year-end retreat yesterday we talked about the seeds we had sown this year and what fruit had been born within us. This reflection into what we had hoped to get out of this year and what we had actually received was an inspiring way to end. One of the things I really wanted out of this year was a lasting, powerful relationship with the students of Anna Julia Cooper and I received that ten times over. There are so many students I want to keep in touch with, including ones that I didn't spend most my days with. If I could sit down and write a letter to each of the students who I fell completely in love with, I don't think I'd ever stop writing. I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to connect with these students who are so inquisitive and funny. It's all the little moments that add up to create all the love and compassion I feel for these kids. I couldn't walk into the fifth-grade classroom without getting bombarded with hugs or questions or all of the above. Every morning there was a fight over who would get to hug me first and every time it turned into a group hug. These kids loved so fully, you couldn't help but love them back.

One of my favorite students (I know, I'm not supposed to have favorites) loved to cuddle up next to me. If we were sitting in chairs at a table in the cafeteria, she would always scoot closer an inch at a time. And then suddenly I'd look over and we're sharing a seat. At graduation, she blatantly sat as close to me as she could and I would use my elbow to push her chair away but she would always come back and it made my heart feel so full. I felt a compassion similar to what Jesus felt in today's gospel reading.

Jesus was driven by a deep rooted compassion to help those who were sick or in distress. In the Greek, the word for compassion used in the gospel today is not the common one we generally think of but the rare form of the word that

translates to “from the gut or bowels.” He was driven by a kind of compassion that was heart wrenching and unbearable. Jesus’ compassion is the kind that warrants an action. I think we all feel that same internal pull every day. I found myself overwhelmed with love and my desire to make a positive difference for the students at Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School. Every day we commit ourselves to compassion through our worksites. To choose to live in service we make ourselves disciples, to choose compassion makes us ready to fill the needs in the community around us. But we can’t do it alone.

That’s what makes Grace-on-the-Hill so special. We create a community to support us as we give ourselves over to the overwhelming compassion we feel. Our ministries are different and we fulfill different needs within our worksites (which are also very different) but we’re bound together as the disciples were with our desire to love, learn, and serve.

I speak for every corps member when I say we are moved by compassion. That our convictions warrant a move to action. That is why we came here. Grace on the Hill gave us that outlet. It let us live out our convictions in outstanding and appropriate ways. Whether our passions lay in church, outreach, mission, education, social justice, or community, or a mix of all of the above, the corps members and I will be always indebted to this place for helping us along the path.

I do not think our desires are quelled by this year, rather, we are leaving this year encouraged to continue down this path. Although this year was demanding and took a toll on many of us, we are all eager to continue the work we have started. One of us is going to school to earn a masters in education, one of us is going back to work in social work, one of us has been offered a job in the same office they interned. But that in itself is just the tip of it. No matter our paid vocation, or schooling, I have confidence that none of us will waver in our call to compassion, which is at the heart of all we do. After all, the harvest is plenty but the workers are few.

As I leave my time here, I am reminded of those words of Jesus. We have just begun to scratch the surface. Besides our best efforts, the world remains unchanged. Although I know that we have all made a difference in many ways, I am not foolish enough to think that we have accomplished what we set out to do. The harvest is still plenty. There is so much more to be done. We are all leaving this little part of the kingdom with much work yet to be done. Some of us are not leaving at all. But the work remains. So our compassion remains as well. As we move on into our next chapter in life, I hope that we can all learn, grow and make an impact like we were able to do in our time at Grace on the Hill.

I want to end now with a few thank yous. I want to thank our directors, Abbott, Paris, and Maggie. Their commitment to us and to this program and the past and future Goths is what makes this program so incredibly special. I want to thank our worksites for giving us the space and tools to serve and follow our passions. I also want to thank St. Andrew’s community for the love and support. Without which, none of this would be possible. There are many here who have been so eager to invest in our lives, I have felt cared for and loved by this community. And I am glad to have been a part of St. Andrew’s. Thank you for this program that has enabled too many young people to do what Jesus calls us to do...to follow their gut compassion to make the world a better place.